Talking Back to *El Jefe*: Genre, Polyphony, and Dialogic Resistance in Julia Alvarez’s *In the Time of Butterflies*

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Dominican American author Julia Alvarez’s novel *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994) is based upon the well-known Dominican story of the Mirabal sisters. With the code name of “Las Mariposas” or “The Butterflies,” these three women joined an underground movement in the late 1950s against President Rafael Trujillo’s dictatorship and became well known for their bravery and inspiration to others. However, in 1960 Trujillo’s henchmen killed Patria, Minerva, and Maria Theresa Mirabal by ambushing their car on a mountain road as they returned from visiting their husbands in prison. Although officially reported as a car accident, the murder was exposed, and the sisters consequently gained the status of martyrs, earning a profound respect among the Dominican people that continues today.1 Because Julia Alvarez’s family emigrated from the Dominican Republic to the United States in 1960, when she was ten years old, as a result of her father’s own dangerous involvement in the underground movement against Trujillo, she had long been fascinated by the legend of the Mirabals. When Alvarez discovered in the early 1990s that a fourth Mirabal sister, Dedé, was alive in the Dominican Republic, she interviewed her, and *In the Time of the Butterflies* grew out of that experience.

The sisters’ mythic status in Dominican culture posed a challenge for Alvarez: how to characterize these women in a compelling way by giving insight into their differing personalities and pro-
viding motivation for their choice to become involved in the highly dangerous underground movement against Trujillo. Relying on a technique used in her other works of fiction, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), *¡Yo!* (1997), and *In the Name of Salome* (2000), Alvarez structured the novel with multiple narrators, the first-person voices of Minerva, Patria, and Maria Theresa narrating chapters in each of the work’s three sections. The leading chapter in each section of the novel is narrated in the third person by Dedé through the metafictive frame of her interactions in the present with a writer who, like Alvarez, has come to the Dominican Republic to interview her. In addition to its multiple temporal frames, Alvarez’s text subsumes other genres and extraliterary material. Parts of the novel devoted to one sister are subtitled as if to stand alone as short stories while the portions narrated by another are composed as diaries that include letters, newspaper clippings, drawings, and diagrams.

These techniques succeed in providing an intimate, immediate sense of the lives of these legendary figures, and, as Elizabeth Coonrod Martinez has noted, the novel’s form may be considered to display the antihegemonic qualities of much Latin American feminist writing. However, the formal and narrative strategies of this work also have particular significance in light of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories of the novel. This essay will explore how *In the Time of the Butterflies* coincides strongly with the Russian philosopher’s discussions of the generic characteristics, polyphonic discourse, and dialogism of the novel. This last quality is especially true of Alvarez’s text, for it contains voices that speak back to and engage in dialogue with the “official” language of Trujillo’s regime, which is voiced by various characters, including Trujillo himself, throughout the novel. More significantly, however, this novel’s Bakhtinian form and discourse enact the central themes of Alvarez’s book. *In the Time of the Butterflies* can be seen to resist both a monolithic generic category and a single, authoritative narrative voice in its “centrifugal” or fragmented tendency. These qualities render the form and discourse of the text itself metaphoric of the novel’s central thematic focus: the Mirabal sisters’ work of resistance against a totalizing, “centripetal” force, the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo.
Alvarez’s novel may initially be seen to lend itself to a Bakhtinian reading by its congruence with his concept of that genre. In his essay “Epic and Novel,” Bakhtin cites traits of the novel that distinguish it from other genres, and these characteristics are exemplified by Alvarez’s text. Among the unique qualities of the novel’s form, according to Bakhtin, is a “stylistic three-dimen-sionality, which is linked with a multi-languaged consciousness realized in the novel” (11). The polyglot, or multi-languaged, world that the novel represents can be seen in *In the Time of the Butterflies* on various levels. The most obvious manifestation of polyphonic consciousness in the novel is the differing voices of the sisters, which cumulatively evoke the experience of living under a political dictatorship in a way that transcends the narrative of each individual voice. Though Minerva, Patria, and Maria Theresa eventually all commit themselves to resistance to Trujillo’s regime, they initially represent unique points of view about their leader, and even after becoming involved with the underground movement, they register varied orientations within it. Along with the unique characterizations allowed by this technique, the distinct formal qualities of all three sisters’ narrations add to the text’s heterogeneous effect, as a brief overview of each of the sisters’ parts of the novel will indicate.

The sections of the novel narrated by Minerva, the most educated sister and the most overtly political of the four, reveal an ambitious, brave, and feminist voice. Minerva Mirabal was the first sister to become involved in the underground movement when she and her husband led the forming of an opposition cell in 1957 (Gleijeses 314-16). The charismatic and beautiful Minerva was also the best known of the revolutionary sisters; she is the subject of a biography by a Dominican author (see Galván), and an article in *Time* magazine in 1960 about the sisters’ deaths displays her photograph. Minerva’s chapters in Alvarez’s novel are the longest, each consisting of three titled anecdotes with internal rising and falling action that together form cohesive narratives. Her chapters thus appear like triads of connected short stories, and besides revealing her as an inspiration for her sisters to join the movement, their themes and metaphors also clearly establish Minerva’s own strength of mind and feminism.
For example, Minerva’s chapter in Part I provides glimpses of her life at the ages of twelve, fifteen, and eighteen, tracing her experiences at a convent boarding school when she first learns of the grim realities of Trujillo’s dictatorship. In an anecdote entitled “¡Pobrecita!,” Minerva’s coming of age is thematically conflated with her growing fears about Trujillo. The fifteen-year-old girl describes her admiration for a beautiful and sweet-natured classmate, Lina Lovatón, who also inspires the interest of Trujillo when he sees her at the school. Lina is called out of class to meet the dictator and is then honored with his visits and gifts. For Lina’s birthday, Trujillo gives a party at his home from which she does not return to school; her classmates soon hear that she has become one of his many “girlfriends,” who were set up in houses all over the island. Minerva soon learns that because of his jealous wife, the dictator sent Lina to Miami, where she lives “all alone now, waiting for him to call her up” (23). Lina’s schoolmates chorus, “¡Pobrecita!... like an amen,” seemingly concerned only by the romantic aspects of the story, but Minerva comments:

I could feel my breath coming short again. At first, I had thought it was caused by the cotton bandages I had started tying around my chest so my breasts wouldn’t grow. I wanted to be sure that what had happened to Lina Lovatón would never happen to me. But every time I’d hear one more secret about Trujillo I could feel the tightening in my chest even when I wasn’t wearing bandages. (23)

In the context of this entire chapter narrated by Minerva, the progression in her concerns about Trujillo is telling. She has moved from the naïve disbelief she felt at the age of twelve, first hearing of his wrongdoings, to a very real fear of becoming an unwilling object of sexual conquest by the dictator.

Minerva’s chapter in Part II of the novel further reveals her rebelliousness and feminism, and again, these themes are developed metaphorically in three anecdotes with both indepen-dent and cumulative significance. In a section titled “Discovery Day Dance,” Minerva’s family attends a ball given by Trujillo in honor of Christopher Columbus, who first landed in the Caribbean on their island. The semblance between the conquistador’s appro-priation of the island and Trujillo’s tyranny is not missed by Minerva, who believes that the rainy weather is because the “god of thunder Hura-
can always acts up around the holiday of the Conquistador, who killed off all his Taino devotees” (93). This metaphoric representation of colonization and resistance continues as Minerva is asked to dance with Trujillo. While she tries to tell him of her hope to attend law school, he calls her a “national treasure” that he wishes to possess, reiterating his desire “to conquer this jewel as El Conquistador conquered our island” (99). When the tyrant becomes sexually forceful with her, she slaps his face, but a torrential downpour begins and Minerva escapes. Her father is arrested and imprisoned, but when she is repeatedly offered a “private conference” with El Jefe in exchange for her father’s freedom, Minerva furiously refuses. The family finally obtains the father’s release, and Minerva’s resistant attitude and confident sense of equality with Trujillo are revealed in her impression that she and the dictator are evenly balanced, “his will on one side, mine on the other” (115). Again, this self-contained and thematically unified anecdote has greater meaning in relation to the entire chapter narrated by Minerva, for the latter largely concerns her ambivalent relationship with her father, another patriarchal authority figure with whom she clashes wills. This anecdote also has significance in light of the entire novel, for Minerva continues to be characterized by such defiance, especially when she is imprisoned.

The voice of Patria Mirabal, on the other hand, is quite distinct from that of Minerva, contributing to the mosaic of voices in the novel that together convey the experience of living under Trujillo’s regime. The eldest Mirabal sister, Patria ultimately commits herself to the resistance through realizing the dictatorship’s threat to the most important parts of her life, the church and her family. Also, in formal contrast to the sections of the novel narrated by Minerva, each of Patria’s chapters is temporally unified and highly episodic. Though Alvarez relies on episodic narrative elsewhere in the novel, this technique is particularly indicative of Patria’s life, for the eldest Mirabal daughter constantly thinks of and attends to her children, husband, and sisters, and her confessions of fear and hope for the movement are continuously interwoven with concerns and affectionate comments about her family. Moreover, the many episodes that Patria recounts in each chapter illuminate the nature of her psychological growth; as she reflects at one point, “I got braver like a crab going sideways. I inched towards courage the best way
I could, helping out with the little things” (154). The episodic nature of Patria’s narrative epitomizes her incremental growth from submissiveness and fear to the courage to take part in a movement that she would never have predicted herself as joining.

Portions of the novel devoted to Patria also serve to explain her eventual membership in the underground rebellion for reasons tied to her spiritual faith and devotion to others. Indeed, Patria is initially perhaps the most unlikely of the sisters to become a political rebel, a devotedly religious young woman who married at sixteen and thrives in her domestic, submissive role as a wife and mother in Dominican society of the 1950s. However, after having a stillborn baby, Patria questions her faith, at the same time realizing how others have suffered equally great losses because of their dictator. Seeking solace, Patria goes to the shrine of the Virgencita, and among the pilgrims she experiences a new spiritual affirmation; she now feels the presence of the Virgin in “the coughs and cries and whispers of the crowd” (59). She then grows from a detached spirituality to one grounded in her concern for others. The real catalyst for Patria, however, is during a religious retreat to Constanza when she witnesses the bloodshed of a failed rebellion attempt. As she watches wounded rebels run toward them, seeking shelter, she sees “a boy no older than [my son]. Maybe that’s why I cried out, ‘Get down, son! Get down!’ His eyes found mine just as the shot hit him square in the back. I saw the wonder on his young face as the life drained out of him, and I thought. Oh my God, he’s one of mine!” (162). Now regarding others around her as “my human family” (162), the gentle and devout Patria joins the revolutionary movement, adding gun-running and secret code names to a life previously defined by motherhood and domesticity.

In contrast to Minerva’s and Patria’s narrations, the sections of In the Time of the Butterflies voiced by their younger sister Maria Theresa Mirabal are constructed as diaries, further contributing to the multi-generic and multi-vocal nature of the text. Maria Theresa keeps her first diary as a ten-year-old girl, while another records her college years. The final diary is an account of her six-month imprisonment along with Minerva. This narrative form closely interweaves Maria Theresa’s activism with poignant personal details of her life while it convincingly dramatizes her growing political consciousness. The ten-year-old girl’s diary is initially full of talk
of her first Communion, school events, and descriptions of new clothes. One day she writes, "I am taking these few minutes to wish El Jefe Happy Benefactor’s Day with all my heart. I feel so lucky that we have him for a president" (37). However, Maria Theresa’s initiation into the truths of El Jefe’s regime soon comes through Minerva. After learning of his crimes, she reflects, "Every-thing just looks a little different. I see a guardia and I think, who have you killed... I see the picture of our president with eyes that follow me around the room, and I am thinking he is trying to catch me doing something wrong. Before, I always thought our president was like God, watching over everything I did” (39). While initially equating the dictator with God, just as Trujillo intended his sub-jects to do, Maria Theresa’s childish faith in their leader is soon shattered.

Her diary account of her experiences in prison is the most re-velling glimpse into Maria Theresa’s consciousness, indicating that the youngest Mirabal sister does not endure the incarceration as bravely as appears. Though she tries to maintain courage with thoughts of her family and Minerva’s strong example, Maria Theresa’s prison diary expresses secretly her despair, anger, and terror. The most horrific experience in her imprisonment is one that she is not able to write about for some time; it is later revealed that she was taken to La Cuarenta, an infamous location for tortur-ing political prisoners. The young woman was shocked with electric cattle prods in front of her husband, a fellow revolutionary, to force him to reveal information. This story, its pages ripped out of the diary and included further on, is the omitted center of Maria Theresa’s prison narrative, and its dramatic impact is heightened by gradual, retrospective revelation.

Despite her unspeakable treatment, Maria Theresa’s prison di-ary also reveals that her essential belief in the goodness of others is not destroyed. Minerva wants her sister to give the story of her tor-ture to investigators who are interviewing the prisoners about ru-mored human rights abuses. The youngest Mirabal sister knows that Trujillo will have the prison guards punished or killed if abuse is reported, and she has grown attached to a kind-hearted guard who smuggled in packages from her family and brought her gifts after her suffering in La Cuarenta. When the moment of reckoning comes during her interview, she thinks of the frightened guard
standing outside. Maria Theresa leaves a statement from the revolutionary movement, but she cannot hand over her account of the torture: “Right then and there, I decided not to drop the second note. I just couldn’t take a chance and hurt my friend” (252). The youngest Mirabal sister’s fundamental kindness is shown in her concern for the guard despite the fact that this story could bring about her own release. In portions of the novel whose narrative form and themes recall the diary of Anne Frank, Maria Theresa’s optimistic voice speaks alongside her sisters, creating a polyphony that traces the experience of political oppression from the varied perspectives of those whom such tyranny usually silenced.

In addition to reflecting the three-dimensional, multi-lingualized consciousness of the novelistic genre that Bakhtin described through its use of multiple narrators, Alvarez’s novel likewise represents the world in the stricter Bakhtinian sense of “heteroglossia” through the language of different social classes. Such languages are represented in the novel by characters with whom the sisters, of the upper middle class themselves, interact, before and especially during their involvement in the resistance movement. For example, the sisters borrow folk sayings from the campesinos, the tenant-farmer class the family coexists with on the Mirabal farmlands, and Alvarez often reproduces these sayings in the text (along with many other words) in Spanish, adding yet another layer of linguistic complexity to the novel. For example, when Minerva develops a headache at the Discovery Day Dance, she suggests to one of Trujillo’s flunkies that they “try the country cure”: “I verify that he is not a man to trust when he asks, ‘What cure is that?’ . . . . We dance several sets, and sure enough, as the campesinos say, Un clavo saca otro clavo. One nail takes out another. The excited rhythm . . . overwhelms the pulsing throb of my headache” (97). Similarly, when Dona Mirabal grudgingly agrees to host a dinner for a local Trujillisto in exchange for the release of one of her grandsons from prison, Patria aphoristically notes the revenge her mother may take: “she was resigned to feeding Judas at her table. But there would be more than one stray hair in that sancocho, as the campesinos liked to say” (221).

Such heteroglossia more importantly emerges in the novel when Minerva and Maria Theresa are imprisoned and share their cell with several prostitutes who speak the discourse of a lower social
class. Maria Theresa’s diary often gleefully records the utterances of these women, for example, when they create a crude ditty about one of the female guards: “Valentina, la guardona / stupid bloody fool / went to suck milk from a cow / but got under the bull” (244).

Despite their socioeconomic and often ethnic differences from their cellmates, Maria Theresa and Minerva form powerful, loving bonds with them, as Maria Theresa’s diary reflects on the day of her release: “I tell myself that [this] connection will continue. It does not go away because you leave. And I begin to understand the revolution in a new way” (253). It has been argued that the novel does not adequately treat the Afro-Dominican experience—and its impact on the construction of social class—in Dominican life, in contrast to its representation of the roles of campesino and Taíno (indigenous Indian) culture in Dominican identity. While such treatment may be more uneven than desired, the novel’s inclusion of the voices of various social and ethnic groups nonetheless suggests the diverse reality of Dominican culture that was not accommodated by Trujillo’s regime, which was based on his beliefs in white/European supremacy, and the public spectacles of which attempted to recreate the aura of European royalty. And indeed, though the resistance movement with which the Mirabal sisters were involved was initially a middle-class one, it gained broader appeal as news of it spread throughout the country, and Maria Theresa’s comment here suggests the possibility for collective revolutionary action across class or ethnic lines.

Beyond its heteroglossia, however, *In the Time of the Butterflies* embodies yet another distinctive trait of Bakhtin’s theories about the genre of the novel and one that corresponds to Álvarez’s intentions in writing this book. That quality is the novel’s creation of a sense of temporal immediacy, rather than the effect of events depicted within it belonging to a distant past. Bakhtin illuminates this quality of the novelistic form by contrasting it with another genre, the epic. In epic discourse, Bakhtin writes, “a national epic past... serves as the subject... national tradition (not personal experience) serves as the source,” and “an absolute epic distance separates the epic world from contemporary reality” (“Epic and Novel” 13). Such a discourse, according to Bakhtin, “does not permit an individual, personal point of view or evaluation,” but instead relies on “a commonly held evaluation and points of view—which ex-
cludes any possibility of another approach—and therefore displays a profound piety toward the subject described” (“Epic and Novel” 16-17). Such valorizing, distancing discourse is referenced in Alvarez’s novel when the surviving sister Dedé recalls, in the present, how journalists come each November to their home, which she maintains as a shrine to the Butterflies’ memories. Dedé wryly reflects: “Every year as the 25th rolls around, the television crews drive up. There’s the obligatory interview. Then, the big celebration over at the museum, the delegations from as far away as Peru and Paraguay, an ordeal really” (3). These events, while well-intentioned, have taken on a routine quality of national and even international worship of the memory of these women, but one that disconnects the visitors from the “real” story of the sisters.

This distancing, elevating perspective of the epic is precisely not what Julia Alvarez wanted to create in writing her story of the Mirabal sisters, as she has articulated in her postscript to the novel and in various interviews. In the postscript, acknowledging that she cannot draw upon firsthand knowledge of the sisters, Alvarez nonetheless records her desire to make these women immediate and human:

The actual sisters I never knew, nor did I have access to enough information or the talents and inclinations of a biographer to be able to adequately record them. As for the sisters of legend, wrapped in superlatives and ascended into myth, they were finally also inaccessible to me. I realized, too, that such deification was dangerous, the same god-making impulse that had created our tyrant.

(324)

Though she concedes that her product is a “fictionalized story” and not the truth, Alvarez still hopes that her readers will come to know the story of the Mirabal sisters on a personal level. Likewise, Alvarez maintained in an interview about the book that she wished to make these women human and as close to her readers as possible, for, as icons, the Mirabals “were being robbed of the dignity of being real human beings and . . . the dignity of what that sacrifice meant” (Rosario-Sievert, 35). Thus, Alvarez did not want to describe the sisters with “epic distance,” but rather with the humanizing immediacy that novelistic discourse can allow.
Furthermore, in Bakhtin’s theory of the novel, as opposed to the epic, this literary form has a “special relationship with extraliterary genres, with the genres of everyday life and with ideological genres” (“Epic and Novel” 33). While Bakhtin considers the epic as a “finished” genre, already solidified into a specific formula by a long tradition of precedents, he sees the novel as a more recently arisen, “fluid” form that lends itself to creative innovation. Alvarez’s novel exemplifies this tendency through its mingling of short-story-like, self-contained episodes, diaries, letters, newspaper extracts, and even drawings and diagrams. Maria Theresa’s sections of the novel are particularly indicative of this diversity. When she is a young girl, her diaries contain sketches of clothes and jewelry, but as she becomes involved with the opposition movement, her drawings are instead diagrams of how to construct bombs or maps of prison cells. These graphic representations signify the youngest Mirabal sister’s maturation from childish things to the dangerously serious work of political resistance.

Where In the Time of the Butterflies perhaps best embodies Bakhtin’s theories regarding the novel, however, is in its dialogism, engendering a decentralized or “centrifugal” narrative that allows for multiple points of view, including those that question or challenge authority. In “Discourse in the Novel,” Bakhtin writes that heteroglossia is often “parodic, aimed sharply and polemically against the official languages of its given time” (273). While Alvarez’s novel does not often cross over into the realm of true parody, its resistant voices indeed question or undermine the official language of the dictator’s regime, even anticipating the latter’s responses in doing so.

The authoritarian voice of Trujillo’s government is represented in the novel on several levels. In addition to dialogue literally spoken by the dictator himself, his laws, pronouncements, and methods of punishing resistance are constantly invoked, even in the very first chapter. Dedé remembers an evening in 1943 when her family sat on the porch, bantering lightheartedly about the future. When Minerva, on a more serious note, comments, “It’s about time we women had a voice in running our country” (10), and her father replies, “You and Trujillo,” Dedé recalls:
they all fall silent. Suddenly, the dark fills with spies who are paid to hear things and report them down at Security. *Don Enrique claims Trujillo needs help in running this country. Don Enrique’s daughter says it’s about time women took over the government.* Words repeated, distorted... words stitched to words until they are the winding sheet the family will be buried in when their bodies are found dumped in a ditch, their tongues cut off for speaking too much. (10)

Dédé’s recollection, made prescient by hindsight, indicates the pervasiveness of Trujillo’s mechanisms of control. The voices of imagined informants intercede here in the narrative to silence those of the Mirabal family. The “official language” of the dictator’s regime also appears throughout Alvarez’s narrative in allusions to the slanderous *Foro Público* columns in the newspapers controlled by Trujillo, which was a means he used to besmirch the reputations of those he considered “troublesome,” as well as in references to his various laws, such as curfews, or the stamping of *cedulas* [student identification cards] and signing of loyalty pledges before the Mirabal sisters can enroll as university students.

The voice of the dictatorship is furthermore represented in the novel through the bureaucracy of officials the sisters encounter when trying to release family members who are imprisoned. When Minerva speaks to an officer to plead her father’s release from jail after the Discovery Day dance, the man is a mouthpiece for the paternalistic discourse of the regime in his patronizing expressions toward her: “You must look on me as your protector. Young ladies are the flowers of our country” (109). Later in the novel, Patria goes to see a local administrator to beg her husband’s release from jail, and he echoes the perspective of the dictatorship on the rebellious family, cruelly telling Patria how her husband was offered his freedom on the condition “of divorcing his Mirabal wife” (204).

At the same time, throughout the novel, the voices of those oppressed by Trujillo resist, parody, and subvert this “official” language and the dictator it represents, often anticipating the responses of the regime in a dialogistic manner. Even minor characters in the novel participate in this process. For example, in an early chapter, the *Foro Público* has accused Minerva’s suitor, a young Communist named Virgilio Morales, of belonging to “a party for homosexuals and criminals” (77). Dédé’s husband Jaime-to tells Minerva of his own subversive response, when questioned
by officials whether he ever received “illicit materials” from Virgilio: “I told them he’d given me some girlie magazines. . . . [The guards] all think he’s a queer from what the papers have been saying. If nothing else, he climbed a little in their regard today” (80). Jaimito playfully mocks the official statements of Trujillo’s Foro through his ironic rendering of the false accusations against Virgilio.

The Mirabal sisters’ own voices in the novel reveal many instances of this parody or subversion in response to the official discourse of the regime. In the first part of the novel, when the adolescent Minerva is beginning to realize the ugly realities of Trujillo’s government, she cynically observes activities during their country’s centennial year, in which many celebrations honored the dictator:

It wasn’t just my family putting on a big loyalty performance, but the whole country. When we got to school that fall, we were issued new history textbooks with a picture of you-know-who embossed on the cover so even a blind person could tell who the lies were all about. Our history now followed the plot of the Bible. We Dominicans had been waiting for centuries for the arrival of our Lord Trujillo on the scene. It was pretty disgusting. (24)

To affirm her point, Minerva follows with a quotation from the spurious “history” textbook: “All through nature there is a feeling of ecstasy. A strange otherworldly light suffuses the house smelling of labor and sanctity. The 24th of October 1891. God’s glory made flesh in a miracle. Rafael Leonidas Trujillo has been born!” (24). Thus Minerva’s voice, even when she is yet a teenager, renders sarcastically the public discourses of Trujillo’s regime, double-voicing them in order to expose their inadequacies.

Also, throughout the “Discovery Day Dance” episode, Minerva’s internal narration maintains an irreverent, even parodic commentary on the dictator. She makes sarcastic references to Trujillo’s appearance, noting his wearing of pancake makeup and his periodic shopping trips 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” (96). Her narration likewise mocks his behaviors, as when she alludes to his drinking brujo potions to remain sexually potent, and when she glimpses
him fondling a Dominican senator’s wife (96). Minerva literally talks back to Trujillo in a dialogistic manner as she dances with the dictator. When he threatens to shut down the university because he believes it is becoming “a propaganda camp,” the intellectually inclined Minerva is appalled but carefully responds, “Ay, Jefe, no... Ours is the first university in the New World. It would be such a blow to the country!” (100). She selects the words of her response to foster the dictator’s pride in their university’s long heritage, anticipating his susceptibility to flattery.

Other examples of resistant response to Trujillo’s dictatorship through the voices of the Mirabal sisters pervade the novel. As the sisters become involved in the underground movement, they use its code language in which words such as “tennis shoes” really mean “ammunition,” and Trujillo is referred to as “the goat.” These expressions literally encode language with hidden, subversive meanings, enacting linguistically the larger thematic focus of the novel. Also, while under house arrest, Patria and Minerva con-found the intentions of the spies outside their house at night by acknowledging their presence and speaking directly to them: “All night, we smelled their cigarettes in the yard and heard muffled coughs and sneezes. Sometimes, we would call out, ‘God Bless you!’” (212). When Minerva and Maria Theresa are imprisoned, they join the other prisoners in using uncomplimentary nicknames for the guards, such as “Bloody Juan,” “Little Razor,” and “Tiny,” the last name mocking the sexual endowments (or lack thereof) of one guard (231). These instances illustrate the deliberate rebelliousness of the sisters’ responses to the dictatorship’s harsh responses to them. Such dialogistic exchanges with the regime signify that even imprisonment or house arrest will not stop the Mirabals’ resistance.

Even the gentle Patria, who patiently prays to their “Benefactor” for his goodwill, engages in this subversive back-talk throughout the novel. In one episode, she wryly recalls the captions attached to newspaper photos of her and her daughter thanking El Jefe for releasing Patria’s son from jail: “On the front page of El Caribe, the two photographs were side by side: Noris giving her hand to a smiling Jefe (Young Offender Softens El Jefe’s Heart), and me, kneeling, my hands clutching in prayer (Grateful Madre Thanks Her Benefactor)” (226). Patria is ironically double-voicing
the official utterances of Trujillo’s regime, for she has just recounted the uglier reality of the situation: Jefe’s only interest in Noris was as a sexual predator toward a pretty adolescent girl, and Patria herself, despite noble intentions, felt only disgust and fear for the man: “The more I tried to concentrate on the good side of him, the more I saw a vain, greedy, unredeemed creature. Maybe the evil one had become flesh like Jesus!” (224). Together, these many instances of rebellious response constitute a dialogism that counters the “official” voices of Trujillo’s vast bureaucracy of dictatorship and machine of propaganda throughout the novel.

Alvarez’s text is thus illuminated formally and discursively in the context of Bakhtin’s theories of the novel, but its Bakhtinian qualities carry even greater thematic import. The novel’s generic traits, polyphony, and dialogism are also metaphoric of one of its central themes: resistance to a totalizing, or as Bakhtin calls it, “centripetal” force. As Bakhtin has asserted in his discussion of Tolstoy as a monologic novelist, some literary works are narrated by a unitary, absolute “authority” that allows for no contesting voices (Problems 56). The various voices within Alvarez’s novel challenge such a representation of reality, and in their decentralizing, centrifugal emphasis, they serve both to humanize the mythic Mirabal sisters and to speak subversively in response to the official discourses of Trujillo’s regime. Other formal qualities of the novel coincide with the fragmentary, diverse nature of its polyphony: its mixed genres, from prose to graphic representations, and the chronological disorder of the novel, which moves back and forth between the present and various points in the past.

The cumulative effect of these qualities is a polymorphous, decentralized text in which many voices together evoke the experience of living within a political dictatorship, engaging in resistant dialogue with the official voices of that regime. Alvarez’s text is a representation, through form, narration, and theme, of the act of rebellion against such political oppression. Indeed, even though the three sisters are killed by Trujillo’s secret police at the close of the novel, they can be seen to speak beyond the ending. In the epilogue, Alvarez alters Dedé’s narrative stance from third person to first person, signifying her growth from ambivalence to acceptance of her survivor’s role. While talking with an old friend, Dedé explains that, after years of silent grief, she started telling her sisters’
story when she acknowledged its inspirational power: “After the
fighting was over and we were a broken people. . . . that’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 hap-
pened to us” (313). Later that night, envisioning her parents and
sisters in her memories, Dedé reflects, “I’m thinking that some-
thing is missing now. And I count them all twice before I realize—
it’s me, Dedé, the one who survived to tell the story” (321). These
words suggest Dedé’s realization of the affirmative potential of
speaking out about what her sisters’ rebellion and sacrifice meant.
The Mirabals’ work of inspiring resistance to oppression, of vari-
ous kinds and in various places, can continue through the voice of
their surviving sister.

Though Isabel Zakrzewski Brown has argued that Julia Alvarez
ultimately “fashions stereotypes, rather than real people” in her
portraits of the Mirabal sisters (110), examination of Alvarez’s
multiple-voiced narrative technique in light of Bakhtinian theories
of the novel instead suggests how In the Time of the Butterflies has
brought compelling immediacy and humanity to these historical
figures who are regarded with mythic status in their homeland.
Perhaps it is fitting that Mikhail Bakhtin’s discussions of the novel,
illuminating it as a decentralized, multi-linguaged genre that con-
tains subversive voices, anticipate Alvarez’s telling of the story of
the Mirabal sisters. In 1929, the Russian intellectual was arrested
for alleged activity in the underground Orthodox Church. He was
threatened with imprisonment on the Solovetsky Islands, a death
camp in the north of Russia, but was instead exiled in Kazakhstan
for six years, during which time he wrote his most famous theo-
retical essays on the novel (Holquist xxiv). Just as Bakhtin experi-
enced personally the effects of an oppressive political regime, so
did the Mirabal sisters as they are rendered imaginatively by Julia
Alvarez in In the Time of the Butterflies. Bakhtin’s concepts of
genre, polyphony, and dialogism in the novel provide a key that
elucidates the formal and discursive qualities of Alvarez’s text.
More importantly, however, these traits also enact the novel’s cen-
tral theme: the liberatory power of speaking out in response to a
dictatorship that attempted to silence all resistance.
Notes

1. For biographical information on the Mirabal sisters, see Crassweller 401-403 and Gleijeses 423-24, n. 26, as well as Galván’s biography of Minerva Mirabal and “Dominican Republic.” For historical studies of Trujillo’s regime, in addition to the above texts, see Ornes, as well as Friedrich and Brzezinski.

2. See Martínez, who usefully quotes Castillo: “Latin American feminist writing is antithegemonic and challenges a monumentalizing or totalizing view of literature. It is, therefore, multiply voiced and tends to operate within a field of sinuous and shifting positionalities rather than from a single, fixed position” (xxii).

3. In considering how Alvarez’ novel may also be seen to illustrate the Latin American literary tradition of the falsa cronica, or chronicle, Puléo makes a similar point: “By means of her falsa cronica, the one-dimensional and univocal record of society... opens to an array of personalized events and accounts that reflect the experiences of individuals within a larger community” (11).

4. For further information about La Cuarenta and the various methods of punishing and interrogating prisoners under Trujillo’s regime, see Wiardia 56-59.

5. See McCallum, who observes of the novel that “there are few scenes, and almost no overt textual commentary, illustrating how race influences the construction of class in the Dominican Republic” (111).

6. Historians have noted Trujillo’s desires to “rise above” his own family’s mulatto background; perhaps the most horrific example of his efforts to promote racial “purity” within the Dominican Republic was his ordering of the execution of approximately fifteen thousand black Haitians at the Dominican border in 1937.

7. Alvarez expresses a similar idea in an interview with Ed Morales, hoping that the “patchwork” of historical events and fictional characterization she created in this text is “true to the spirit of the Mirabals” (13).

Works Cited


