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# Decentering the Dictator: 'In the Time of the Butterflies' and the Mirabal Sisters' Outspoken Challenge

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**Decentering the Dictator:  
'In the Time of the Butterflies' and the Mirabal Sisters' Outspoken Challenge**

An honors thesis presented to the  
Department of English,  
University at Albany, State University of New York,  
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## Abstract

Julia Alvarez's portrayal of the Mirabal sisters from *In the Time of the Butterflies* centers the novel around the sisters' speech and humanity. This decenters the dictator, a figure who was often central to Latin American dictator novels. The first chapter will provide background on the dictator's characteristics to demonstrate how the Mirabal sisters' speech draws attention away from his power. The four times the sisters encounter the dictator Rafael Trujillo in the novel, their speech decenters him because Alvarez emphasizes their experience. In the second chapter, I examine the gaps between each encounter, focusing on Minerva's speech development towards resistant speech. I then examine the role of her family's speech, particularly in terms of its protective role, which blurs the lines between the public and private spheres because of the regime's oppression in both spheres. In the final chapter, I analyze the implications of the Mirabal sisters' speech in the Dominican Republic—which resulted in their death—and the implications of their portrayal in Alvarez's novel. By emphasizing their speech and experience, Alvarez demonstrates the significance of women's speech in political participation instead of simply reiterating the violence they faced. This ultimately is more productive as it encourages other women's speech by demonstrating that any woman can exercise her speech politically.

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## Introduction

Nearly 60 years ago, three sisters were killed for speaking against their country's dictator. The Mirabal sisters—real, historical figures—were slain in 1960 by the regime of Rafael Trujillo, dictator of the Dominican Republic, for their resistance to his repressive regime. They were traveling on a dangerous mountain path after visiting their imprisoned husbands when their car was hijacked by Trujillo's secret police. This violence was characteristic of the dictator's regime, which operated by eliminating any dissent. Trujillo routinely imprisoned and tortured those who opposed him, even when he first came to power. After rising through the ranks of the Dominican Republic Constabulary Guard (national police) when the U.S. occupied the country in 1916-1924, he was elected president in 1930. To win the election, Trujillo utilized violence and intimidation to eliminate any opposition. This repression characterized the rest of his regime. Raymond H. Pulley examines the results of that repression, writing, "Trujillo maintained a stable government, but only at the expense of personal liberty and freedom of thought" (31).

Fighting for these freedoms as they responded to this oppression, three of the four Mirabal sisters joined a resistance group, the 14<sup>th</sup> of June Movement, with the goal of assassinating the dictator. Minerva Mirabal, the most outspoken of the sisters, was the first of the sisters to join, and spearheaded the group with her husband. Maria Theresa joined second and Patria joined third. The fourth sister, Dedé, did not join the revolutionary movement. Minerva and Maria Theresa endured imprisonment for their resistance, and eventually, they were killed along with Patria. Dedé survived to tell the story and commemorate her sisters.

The focus on the Mirabal sisters' story is clear in Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies*. Alvarez highlights the sisters' speech and experience by examining their perspectives in the novel. By doing this, Alvarez avoids placing the dictator at the center of the novel and

emphasizing his power. Instead, she emphasizes the power of the sisters' speech as the central part of the novel. The Mirabal sisters' speech takes several forms: spoken words, written diary entries, prayers, and actions. These forms of speech take shape in private among family members at home and in public among regime officials. The most powerful form of speech might appear to be resistant speech, wherein the sisters directly challenge the dictator and his power. However, protective speech is just as important. Protective speech, wherein a family member warns a sister against speaking out in a situation that would be dangerous, is inherently political. At the same time, it decenters the dictator by placing emphasis on the sisters' experience. Protective speech demonstrates how the regime's oppression breaks down the distinctions between the public and private spheres. Ultimately, the blurring of spheres both indicates how easily government oppression can affect private life and warns against speech restrictions that can lead to violence.

## Chapter 1: Centering Speech as the Challenge to the Dictator

Traditional Latin American dictator novels focus on challenging the dictator, who is typically central to the novel. From the 1960s to the 1970s, dictator novels included this emphasis. But in 1994, Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* moved against this model centered on the dictator. Alvarez's novel focuses instead on the four Mirabal sisters, who are real, historical figures who lived under the dictatorial regime of Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic. In her novel, Alvarez recreates Trujillo to some extent. Primarily, she strategically places the dictator in situations where the Mirabals come face-to-face with him, which allows her to recreate the event according to one of the sisters' perspectives. Since Trujillo's regime was so repressive, controlling people's speech and the information that was published, Alvarez's novel helps bring to light conditions people faced that were previously glossed over. Although Alvarez takes some liberties with the characters and events, she nevertheless reveals the essence of oppression in the three decades of Trujillo's regime. That oppression resulted in the Mirabal sisters' death. Their death prompted discontent against Trujillo's regime, which ended when a group of assassins killed the dictator several months after the sisters' murders.

While Alvarez incorporates Trujillo into the novel, she shifts the focus from the dictator to the women who challenged him. Certainly, *In the Time of the Butterflies* includes elements of the dictator novel such as bringing politics into literature. Yet Alvarez's dedication to the Mirabal sisters' story indicates a different political aspect—speech. Instead of centering the novel around a dictator, like a traditional Latin American dictator novel would, Alvarez centers the novel around the Mirabal sisters' speech, which we will later see takes different forms. This highlights their outspoken challenge and the subsequent violence they faced. The dictator's

presence in the novel facilitates the shift toward the focus on speech, because along with his presence, we are, nevertheless, focused on how the Mirabals challenged him.

As she highlights each of the Mirabal sisters' perspectives along with how their speech challenged Trujillo, Alvarez reveals the obstacles and consequences of these women's speech, which Trujillo so heavily suppressed. Though Alvarez's focus is on the sisters, rather than Trujillo, the discourse of the dictator novel can still help us understand the extent of the power the dictator held so that we can see the tremendous impact of women's speech in decentering this power. Using the discourse to demonstrate the dictator's qualities will help us understand the political aspect of their speech. Keeping in mind the dictator's characteristics will also indicate how Trujillo suppressed the Mirabal sisters' speech and the consequences women faced for speaking against his regime. At the same time, we'll see the lasting effects of their outspokenness. Through the consequences of their actions, we'll see how shifting from the dictator's power to the women's speech is more productive than simply reiterating his power. Emphasizing the women's speech demonstrates how the sisters challenged the dictator's dominant, masculine characteristics that were integral to suppressing the country.

## **I. Characteristics of the Latin American Dictator**

The Latin American dictator's characteristics are clearly outlined in Raymond Joseph Gonzales's 1971 dissertation, which makes the connection between politics and literature. Though this dissertation is several decades old, it provides a vital foundation to describe the common characteristics of dictators like Trujillo during the Mirabals' time. The machismo, caudillismo, and personalismo of the Latin American dictator are all elements that contribute to his amplified power. Examining each of these defining aspects will demonstrate the power

Trujillo held that disposed him to restrict speech and exert violence against women while also punishing men.

Machismo, an element that defines the dictator's masculinity, contributes to the violence that women experience. It speaks to the dictator's capacity for dominance, particularly over women and by restricting their speech. Machismo "projects the picture of the aggressive male protagonist...constantly preoccupied with the image he is conveying, constantly concerned to create the impression of masculinity and courage and invulnerability and indifference to the attacks of others" (Vernon, qtd. Gonzales 848). Here, machismo introduces several elements of the dictator's character that apply to Rafael Trujillo. Machismo defines the dictator as ready to exert his power through violence, especially against women because of his amplified masculinity. These elements contribute to the dictator's constant obsession with his appearance, which he'll often bolster by dominating women without concern for how it affects them.

This masculinity intensifies with the political process of caudillismo. After Latin American countries won independence in the 1800s, leaders emerged through caudillismo—the process where a regional leader beat out leaders from other regions to attain power as the national dictator, or caudillo. The caudillo is a man who is never secure in his power because he could be challenged by another man, or in the case of the Mirabals, by women. Here, machismo is tied in with caudillismo, which is clear as Gonzales writes, "Machismo is, with very little doubt, the first attribute of the caudillo" (80). Consequently, the caudillo must dominate his associates. This could also be achieved through violence. Gonzales writes, "[Caudillos] combined the magnetism of their personalities with military violence in the successful, though short-lived acquisition of military power" (32). Trujillo fits this description because of his training by the U.S. Marines and his subsequent rise through the ranks of power.

More importantly, the caudillo, in his insecurity about his power, needed to ensure that he wouldn't be challenged. For Latin American dictators in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this meant controlling the system of communications. Gonzales writes that the dictator "had to become the growing voice of public opinion" (39). For people living under Trujillo's regime, this meant that they were not free to speak against him because he couldn't afford challenges to his power. Opposition from the Mirabal sisters demonstrates that when people spoke against Trujillo, there were dire consequences. He was the one man in control.

He obtained that control through the quality of personalismo. Personalismo, like the ideas of machismo and the caudillo, describes the immense power the dictator holds. Personalismo signifies "the ardent belief in the tradition of one-man control" (Gonzales 48). Here, Gonzales argues that the dictator with his individual power has a monopoly on control. Such a level of domination comes with the power to suppress anyone who speaks against that authority. This suppression can also be tied to violence. For instance, personalismo catered to the dictator's preferences by placing his "personal seal" on all levels of government, which meant that an effective political party system did not develop. Consequently, the military was strengthened. Gonzales indicates that successful dictators in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, like Trujillo, ruled because they managed to control the military or because they came to power through it. Military violence thus accompanies the individual power demonstrated through the dictator's personalismo.

Like caudillismo, personalismo inherently includes the quality of machismo. Gonzales writes, "The quality of personalismo-individualismo is closely related to the concept of machismo" (80). This demonstrates that personalismo and machismo include dominance and control wrapped up in the dictator's masculinity. Moreover, it emphasizes the idea of gender because the dictator's power and qualities are predominantly characterized by his asserting his

masculinity. The interlocking forces of machismo, caudillismo, and personalismo provide the basis for the dictator to assert his power violently against women, just as Trujillo did with the Mirabal sisters. From this background, we can examine the purpose of recreating the dictator in the novel, but through the perspective of how the Mirabal sisters challenged his power.

## **II. Recreating the Dictator Through Fiction**

When an author recreates a dictator along with other historical figures in a novel, it's important to consider the relationship between fact and fiction. Richard Patterson examines this issue through several works that resurrect Trujillo, including Alvarez's. Patterson writes that authors can reanimate real-world individuals, termed *realesmes*, to fill in dark spaces of the historical record as long as they don't contradict the facts recorded on that record. Alvarez does this with Trujillo. In her postscript, Alvarez acknowledges that she took liberties by reconstructing certain events and characters. She writes, "I wanted to immerse my readers in an epoch in the life of the Dominican Republic that I believe can only finally be understood by fiction, only finally redeemed by the imagination" (Alvarez 324). This indicates that, in such a heavily repressive regime, fiction is a way to fill in the gaps and silences. Fiction helps people understand the dictator's true oppression and the Mirabal sisters' true struggle.

Using fiction to understand life in the Dominican Republic under Trujillo's regime ultimately demythologizes the dictator. In her novel, Alvarez chooses to emphasize the Mirabal sisters, allowing us to encounter Trujillo only through their perspectives. This gives the sisters the agency to tell their version of the story, which Patterson calls "displacement of narration" (224). Narrative displacement indicates that we are seeing a reconstruction of the dictator through the people who were repressed, which means Alvarez finds a way to tell the Mirabal sisters' story "without simply rehashing the archives of history" (224). Essentially, the story is no

longer coming from an arm of the regime—it is coming from largely ignored voices. The Mirabal sisters therefore stand as a barrier between the readers and the dictator himself, which cuts away from the dominant narrative of the events. It also decenters the dictator by revealing the sisters' humanity and the real difficulties they faced in opposing Trujillo's regime.

While Alvarez emphasizes the Mirabal sisters, she is wary of mythologizing them. Alvarez acknowledged, "By making them myth, we lost the Mirabal sisters once more, dismissing the challenge of their courage as impossible for us, ordinary men and women" (324). Her concern here is to create the Mirabal sisters in a realistic way that accounts for the struggles they experienced and the obstacles they overcame. This humanizes the sisters and makes their struggle applicable to other women. If Alvarez didn't demonstrate their hardships, we wouldn't see the true extent of the regime's brutality. Seeing the sisters' treatment through their perspectives further demythologizes Trujillo because their humanity takes precedence over Trujillo's power, which decenters him in the novel.

To humanize the Mirabal sisters, Alvarez focuses on their speech. Their speech takes several forms: monologues, written diary entries, prayers, and actions. By compiling these various forms of speech, Alvarez avoids simply reiterating Trujillo's power, emphasizing instead the women's challenge to those characteristics and the all-powerful view of him. This challenge becomes clear in the sisters' four encounters with Trujillo in the novel. Because we see the dictator through one of the sisters' perspectives in each instance, the sisters have the power to shape our conception of him. Throughout these instances, Minerva, appearing in three of the four encounters, is the most outspoken sister. Between most encounters, there are gaps of many years. Therefore, the second chapter will address the times between the four instances to demonstrate how the sisters' speech developed. For now, it is worthwhile to focus on the four encounters with

Trujillo, which Minerva and Patria both tell from the first person. This point of view gives them the agency to decenter the dictator and place the emphasis on their experience.

### **III. Encounters with Trujillo in the Novel**

#### *1. First Impressions and Protective Speech (1944)*

Minerva is the first Mirabal sister to encounter Trujillo in the novel as an 18-year-old. 1944 was the Dominican Republic's centennial year of independence, so performances were taking place across the country in celebration. Minerva and a few of her classmates at Inmaculada Concepción performed a skit for a recitation contest at their school. They won the contest and soon found out that the winners would perform for Trujillo on his birthday. Minerva was especially upset upon learning this and believed they should boycott the performance for Trujillo because the nuns at the school withheld the information from them. In other words, she wouldn't have wanted to do well if she knew she would have to perform for the dictator.

Before delving into their encounter with Trujillo at their second performance, it's pertinent to examine the beginning seeds of resistance that went into the girls' skit. The parameters of the skit are to celebrate the centennial year of independence and glorify Trujillo. However, the girls find ways around this. Instead of simply performing material from a textbook that praised the dictator, they decide to write their own skit. Looking at a textbook passage praising Trujillo, Minerva notes how it was "disgusting," as it credited Trujillo for saving the country though he wasn't even alive when the country won independence (Alvarez 24). So, they write their own skit that celebrates the year of the Dominican Republic's independence but avoids glorifying Trujillo. Minerva prefers this, saying, "We could say what we wanted instead of what the censors said we could say" (25). Essentially, they evade a criterion for the performance by not praising Trujillo. Even so, they are careful not to criticize him, as Minerva

says, “Not that we were stupid enough to say anything bad about the government” (25). Minerva and the girls take what actions they could to avoid explicit praise toward the dictator—they don’t believe he deserves it. Through these small actions, the girls begin to show resistance through their agency. With Minerva, we see how she begins to develop her speech as a form of resistance.

Through her perspective, Minerva possesses the power to speak to readers and form their first impression of Trujillo in the novel. For instance, Minerva is surprised at how much smaller he is from his portrait that Dominican households were mandated to display. Here Minerva molds our conception of Trujillo as she explains, “In his big gold armchair, he looked much smaller than I had imagined him, looming as he always was from some wall or other” (27). Through Minerva’s perspective, we see the difference between expectation and reality. She realizes that Trujillo isn’t as strong or powerful a figure as she had been told all her life. Because Minerva’s first encounter with Trujillo is also our first encounter with Trujillo in the novel, we immediately view him in a diminished capacity. Early on, this influences readers to recognize that while the pictures portray Trujillo as grander than he is, the novel will diminish him through the sisters’ perspectives.

Despite Minerva’s power to influence our view of Trujillo and her small actions of resistance in creating the skit, her speech when she encounters the dictator is more protective than resistant. We see this first when she suggests to the girls that they dress as boys in their performance for Trujillo. This is significant because when they first performed at their school, they were excited to wear makeup and show off their beauty. However, learning they would have to appear before Trujillo in a second performance, Minerva grows concerned. Lina Lovatón, a girl at their school, had fallen prey to Trujillo, left school, and was now locked away in a

mansion for his pleasure. Noting a portrait of Lina in their gymnasium, hung across the required portrait of Trujillo, Minerva says, “The specter of Lina haunted us” (26). To avoid Trujillo’s pursuit, Minerva stipulates that they will only go through with the performance for him if they dressed as boys. That way, they can protect themselves from any sexual advances.

This protection continues during their performance. Sinita, one of the girls in the group, is more audacious than Minerva; she views the performance as a “hidden protest,” in that their skit emphasizing the country’s independence could point toward the need for them to be free again, but this time from Trujillo’s regime (26). Minerva goes along with this, but we see in the performance how she reverts to a protective stance. At the end of the skit, Sinita is supposed to aim her bow at pretend enemies, but instead, she aims it at Trujillo in protest, mimicking an assassination. Trujillo’s son, sitting next to him, is outraged. Noting a present danger to her friend, Minerva steps in to finish the play crying out, “¡Viva Trujillo! ¡Viva Trujillo! ¡Viva Trujillo!” (28). Here, Minerva in her first encounter with the dictator is more worried to protect herself and her friends. While her behind-the-scenes work for the skit indicates opposition to Trujillo, her speech in confronting and opposing him has yet to develop.

Although Minerva does not yet entirely exhibit resistant public speech, Alvarez’s portrayal of her still decenters the dictator by not showing his reaction. All we know is that he doesn’t defend himself. Instead, Ramfis, his son, intervenes on his behalf. Alvarez’s refusal to include Trujillo’s reaction through Minerva’s perspective demonstrates her intention to avoid reproducing Trujillo’s power. Minerva’s experience takes precedence. Ultimately, this shows readers how little space Trujillo will take in the novel—he will be overridden by the sisters’ speech.

## *2. Actions Develop as a Form of Resistance and Speech (1949)*

Five years later, when Minerva is 23, she has her second encounter with Trujillo. Now, she has developed such that her speech, including her actions, are more resistant. She finds an invitation among her Papá's things to one of Trujillo's private parties specifically requesting her attendance. She had caught Trujillo's eye at a previous function, and one of his officials was now following up on that interest. Mamá was scared at this note and immediately considered securing Minerva a doctor's note to excuse her from attending. But Papá is against this, citing, "Trujillo is the law" (90). This indicates the fear of not obeying Trujillo and his desires.

Papá acts upon this fear when he arrives at the party with Minerva, her oldest sister Patria along with her husband, Pedrito, and her sister Dedé along with her husband, Jaimito. Papá immediately instructs Minerva to stay quiet. Already, it's clear that Papá is worried about what Minerva might say to get herself in trouble with Trujillo, given her increasing outspokenness in the last few years. When they are ushered in, Minerva is separated from her family as she is brought to Trujillo's table. Patria and Dedé are concerned at this, knowing that Trujillo is trying to prey upon Minerva. Yet Papá simply goes along with the plan, coaxing Minerva into sitting at that table. Minerva was furious: "I gave Papá an angry look. Has he lost *all* his principles?" (95).

But Minerva uses this anger to fuel her speech. When it comes time for her to dance with Trujillo, she cleverly uses her speech to pit her father against Trujillo and get what she wants. As she dances with the dictator, she indicates that she feels "a dangerous sense" of her power growing (98). Minerva begins to exercise that power with her speech when she tells Trujillo that she wants to study law at the capital, but Papá won't let her. She reveals, "I play on his vanity, and so, perhaps, become his creature like all the others" (98). Yet Minerva is not only playing on Trujillo's vanity. She is also toying with his machismo by giving him a sense of dominance and

pride as she cites good things he has done like giving women the right to vote. While Minerva may be like other women Trujillo seduced by playing on his vanity, she has a useful purpose for that—it's all to secure her place at the university to study law. So here, she is beginning to combat Trujillo's tricks and manipulation with her own speech to further her goals. Her ability to contend with the dictator thus functions to decenter his power.

Their conversation escalates as Minerva continues to try to get him to acquiesce to her going to law school. But Trujillo doesn't seem to take her seriously, teasing her that she is "A woman with a mind of her own" (99). He also indicates his opposition to women studying: "The university is no place for a woman these days" (99). The university, in the dictator's mind, is full of people who want to challenge his government. Trujillo even indicates to Minerva that he is considering closing it. When Minerva expresses her adamant opposition to this, Trujillo becomes lewd. Insinuating that he could keep the university open to draw Minerva to him, he begins to thrust himself at Minerva, and despite her resistance to this, he continues to pull her to him. This prompts Minerva to slap his face. She recounts, "I can see my hand in an endless slow motion rise—a mind all its own—and come down on the astonished, made-up face" (100). Here, Minerva's audacity comes through in an action that expresses her feelings more than her speech. Speaking her mind and acting by slapping Trujillo demonstrates a tremendous affront to Trujillo's pride and power. The force of Minerva's audacity ultimately decenters the dictator by foregrounding her resistance.

With Minerva's resistance made prominent, Trujillo's reaction again takes a backseat. Minerva tells us that Trujillo "studies" her, appears "annoyed," and then turns attention back to the party as people flock inside to escape the sudden pouring rain (100). Trujillo plays off the incident with a smirk, saying, "A mind of her own, this little cibaena!" (101). Publicly, Trujillo

cannot reveal that Minerva has wounded him, so he attempts to characterize the situation as insignificant. But the fact that Trujillo even acknowledges Minerva will think—and act—for herself indicates the effect she has in challenging his power. Then, the Mirabals leave without Trujillo's permission, though Papá is uneasy doing this for fear of the consequences. This is another affront to the dictator. Trujillo doesn't publicly acknowledge the damage the situation has done to his pride, but privately he takes retaliation by imprisoning Papá, supposedly under the pretense that his family left the party early. Really, it seems this consequence was because the dictator was wounded by Minerva's challenge to his power and masculinity. Through her speech, slap, and departure, we see that Minerva's challenge to Trujillo has strengthened over the last five years. Her initial reaction is now different—no longer will she submit to praising his regime. In resisting Trujillo's sexual pursuit, Minerva protects herself but also challenges his power, demonstrating that he cannot have a hold over her.

### *3. Consequences of Resistant Speech (1949)*

By punishing Papá instead of Minerva after the party, Trujillo frames things in terms of masculinity to avoid the implication that his masculinity was wounded. Despite sending a telegram apologizing for their early departure, Papá is taken in for questioning, but ends up in prison. Mamá and Minerva aren't given details about where Papá is being held, so they travel to the National Police Headquarters, where they are directed to the Office of Missing Persons—Papá's case is being treated as a disappearance. Because they ventured after Papá, Mamá and Minerva are forced to stay in their hotel until Trujillo can see them. Trujillo's retaliation is seen in how long he makes the Mirabals wait. Minerva indicates, "Because I am not bedding down with him, it is three more weeks before El Jefe can see us" (112). Minerva's refusal to sleep with Trujillo is a further challenge—she refuses to give him what he wants.

With this resistance, Minerva negates the effect of Trujillo's retaliation and further acts against him by outwitting him. In his office with Mamá and Papá, Minerva brings up their conversation at the dance where she indicated her desire to go to law school. Trujillo comes up with a bargain: Minerva will toss dice for the privilege. Right before they entered on this subject, Trujillo had revealed he was acquainted with the Mirabals' uncle, who had given him a set of dice that rested on his desk. After Mamá and Papá comment that the uncle was a gambler and cheater, Minerva observes that the scales on which the dice rest don't balance. She realizes that one set is loaded. As Trujillo and Minerva resolve to toss for the privilege, the dictator obviously intends to manipulate Minerva with the loaded dice so that he can secure her for his pleasure.

Yet Trujillo fails to perceive Minerva's intelligence. She quickly reaches for the heavier set of dice and rolls a double, as desired. Trujillo's response to this indicates that he is still brooding over her previous affront to his masculinity when she slapped him. Minerva recounts, "He stares at me with his cold, hard eyes. 'You have a strong hand, that I know.' He strokes the check I slapped, smiling a razor-sharp smile that cuts me down to size" (115). Here, Trujillo clearly tries to avoid an embarrassing affront by compensating with attempts to diminish Minerva. However, Minerva has already made her point: she can outwit him. Trujillo, wanting to avoid a loss, picks up the same dice Minerva used so that he won't lose to her. He too rolls a double and they call it even. Trujillo releases Papá.

#### *4. Humanizing as a Consequence of Outspoken Resistance (1960)*

It is eleven years before we see another encounter with Trujillo, and this time, it is through Patria. This offers a stark contrast to Minerva's encounters with the dictator, which I will return to in the second chapter. Patria's encounter with Trujillo is at the beginning of the year Trujillo orders the sisters killed. At this point, she has joined the revolutionary cause as Mariposa

#3 (Butterfly #3, after Minerva and Mate, who are #1 and #2, named after the order in which they joined the revolutionary movement). Patria is left to care for the children as both Minerva and Mate are imprisoned, along with all three of the sisters' husbands and Patria's son, Nelson. In her distress at having so much of her family imprisoned, we see Patria's humanity come through. While we've previously seen Minerva as a strong figure, Alvarez's centering Patria in this last encounter with the dictator indicates the hardships they faced as consequences of their resistance. Leading up to this encounter, Patria had been in contact with Captain Peña, the leader of the SIM, the military intelligence service. Peña visits the Mirabal house periodically to send along news of the family members imprisoned and to hand out visitor passes. In one of his visits, he comes with news that Trujillo has been pardoning minors, and Patria's son could be in the next round pardoned. Patria's reaction demonstrates her humanity amid the distress of having family members imprisoned, which we'll see also plays a role in decentering the dictator. She says, "My first born, my little ram. The tears began to flow" (220). We see the impact that the regime's repression through this emotion that Patria allows to emerge.

At the same time, Patria does not demonstrate the same outspokenness that Minerva does in her encounters with Trujillo. She is emotional at finally being able to see her son free again, yet she is composed as she appears before the dictator. The fact that we see the experience through Patria's perspective gives her the power to decenter the dictator by portraying her truth about the encounter.

For instance, Patria's perspective is different from that portrayed in the newspapers. The next day, the newspapers print the headline, "Grateful Madre Thanks Her Benefactor" (226). Patria was in fact kneeling, but not to Trujillo; she was praying to God. This obvious contradiction demonstrates the insecurity of Trujillo's regime and its subsequent necessity to

mislead the public to shape it to think positively of it. This misleading headline and Patria's display of humanity don't decenter the dictator in the same way that Minerva's actions did—they don't directly challenge Trujillo. However, Patria's display of humanity emphasizes that Trujillo is not a figure to glorify, especially in the distress he placed on women like the Mirabal sisters.

Because these instances shed light on how the Mirabal sisters interacted with Trujillo, we see the power of their perspectives in molding how we view the dictator. With the emphasis on their experience and their challenge to his power, they become the central figures. The next chapter will look at the gaps between these four encounters and will examine the development of the sisters' speech, which is significant in recognizing its function.

## Chapter 2: Protective and Resistant Speech between the Public and Private Spheres

If the Mirabal sisters are the focus of the scenes with Trujillo, they are also the focus of the novel itself. The sizeable gaps between each encounter are filled with the Mirabal sisters' perspectives and histories, meaning they take the vast majority of space in the novel, whereas Trujillo only appears briefly four times. Between each encounter, Alvarez shifts the reader's attention from one sister's perspective to another. These perspectives, taken together, give us a more complete view than a single perspective would. Alvarez begins with the surviving sister, Dedé, but then shifts back in time to the other three sisters' perspectives. Each chapter includes a different sister and progresses through the years such that the reader shifts between sisters and time periods. Daynali Flores-Rodriguez addresses this type of fragmentation in her analysis of fiction that reinterprets Caribbean dictatorial regimes. She argues that Alvarez's novels exemplify fragmentation, especially how the text is divided into sections which shift in time. Flores-Rodriguez writes, "Fragmentation poetics consists of profane or demystifying stories that lack a center and provide, instead, a constant displacement of meaning" (42). Fragmentation is here used in the context of shifting meaning such that what was previously emphasized—like the Latin American dictator—is no longer the focal point because there isn't one single focal point, or center.

But with Alvarez, there *is* an organizing center to her novel: the Mirabal sisters' speech. This becomes clear through the narrative displacement as readers encounter the dictator only through the sisters' perspectives. These perspectives thus function to decenter the dictator, as the sisters shift the focus to themselves and their speech. To further understand how this fragmentation highlights the sisters' overlooked speech, it is useful to examine their perspectives and the causes for how their speech develops. Examining the causes along with the purpose of

their speech will demonstrate how those facets influenced how their speech operated in different contexts, such as in public and privately within the home.

The point of view Alvarez gives each sister is integral to their speech's function. The three sisters that died from their resistance—Minerva, Maria Theresa, and Patria—all speak in the first person for their respective sections of the novel. However, Alvarez does not initially give a first-person perspective to Dedé, the surviving sister who did not join the revolutionary movement. Dedé's perspective is instead shown in third person throughout the novel. Only in the epilogue, set in 1994, does Dedé speak in the first person. In that last section, Dedé pieces together the story of her sisters' death from the account of witnesses who saw them that day. Giving the three sisters first person perspectives, Alvarez grants them the agency to reveal what they want to say during the regime. However, Dedé's lack of a first person perspective in that period indicates her lack of resistance based on her inclination to protect herself and her family.

The sisters' point of view in part reflects the degree of their outspokenness during the time of Trujillo's regime. Throughout the novel, we see stark contrasts between speech resisting Trujillo's regime and speech that seems subservient to his regime, but which is, nevertheless, intended to mitigate the damage of speaking against it. These two types of speech can be identified as resistant speech and protective speech. Both kinds of speech play a role in decentering the dictator. While resistant speech is a more direct challenge to the dictator, protective speech is cognizant of oppression in both the public and private spheres. In responding to this oppression, protective speech decenters the dictator to an extent, but furthermore asserts itself as political speech while also demonstrating the sisters' humanity. Protective speech mostly appears through Dedé and Mamá, whom Alvarez seems to give less agency as she chooses a third-person perspective for Dedé and only includes Mamá through the sisters' perspectives.

Nevertheless, protective speech demonstrates in part the gendered obligation of women to care for and protect their families, which during Trujillo's regime meant speaking in a way that would mitigate or avoid punishment. In this way, Alvarez proves both resistant and protective speech to be significant through its political function.

### **I. Minerva's Development: Gendered Resistance as Propelling Resistant Speech**

As the first sister to join the revolutionary cause, Minerva provides a solid foundation from which to examine the formation and purpose of both resistant and protective speech, as well as the circumstances under which they arise. We see the influence of gender roles on Minerva's speech development as her speech transforms from timid and protective to resistant and demonstrated even through physical actions. While ultimately a leader in resistant speech, Minerva also engages with jokes and sarcasm to relieve the gravity of the situation and speaks in ways that pose less of an immediate danger to both the regime and her family. Yet throughout the novel, members of her family—particularly Dedé and Mamá—jump in with protective speech to mitigate the damage that Minerva's outspokenness poses. Nonetheless, both types of speech, resistant and protective, serve to decenter the dictator in that they both function to center the women and their speech.

In looking back to Minerva's encounters with Trujillo, we see that she first exercises protective speech. Leading up to this encounter, Minerva learns from her classmate at Inmaculada Concepcion, Sinita, that Trujillo's regime killed people who spoke against it. After all, it happened with Sinita's family. Although Minerva learns the truth about the brutality of Trujillo's regime before their performance, when it comes time for her to perform, she succumbs to protection. When Sinita audaciously raises her bow against the dictator, Minerva speaks protectively, praising the dictator. This praise keeps the young performers safe from any

retaliation. Minerva recalls, “I saved the day...I began the chant that grew into a shouting chorus *Viva Trujillo! Viva Trujillo! Viva Trujillo!*” (28). Minerva doesn’t yet have the gendered resistance to speak out against the dictator—her view of Trujillo has only just started to break down. More factors are necessary for her to actively oppose him.

In the five years between her first and second encounters with the dictator, Minerva develops resistant speech through obstacles she faces from her parents at home, especially Papá. Papá’s infidelity to her family seems to have the greatest impact on her, as she becomes a sort of mediator or safety net between him and Mamá. When Minerva pleads with her father to allow her to go to the university to study law, Papá discourages her. “We need you around,” Papá tells Minerva, alluding to difficulties between him and Mamá (85). To conjure a feeling of freedom while she is trapped at home, Minerva drives on “getaway rampages” to pretend she’s running away (85). On one of these, she sees Papá’s car parked in front of a house near their home, which raises her suspicions. She learns Papá has a mistress with several children, whom he has kept hidden from their family. Nearly concurrently, she learns Papá hid letters from a revolutionary man who was also her friend, Virgilio Morales (Lio).

Just as learning the truth about Trujillo broke down Minerva’s deified view of him, learning of her father’s infidelity breaks down her view of her father. Minerva says, “I blamed Papá for everything: his young woman, his hurting Mamá, his cooping me up while he went gallivanting along” (88). Papá essentially confines Minerva to the private sphere, quashing her hopes of leaving home to gain independence and a law degree. Yet this idea is also gendered in that Papá is free to wander around while he has the power to constrain Minerva from doing so herself. It might seem that sequestering Minerva to the home would stifle her speech, but it

instead plants the seeds of gendered resistance, helping to bring her resistance from the private sphere into the public sphere, and in doing so, blurring the boundaries between the two.

Initially, her father's actions conjure a sense of injustice in Minerva and prompt her to speak up and concurrently, to act. In her anger after discovering Papá hid the letters from Lio, she drives to his mistress's house, sees Papá's Ford outside, and crashes into it before driving away without a word. Here, her anger at Papá's censoring Lio's letters is so great that her action speaks more forcefully than her words. Minerva's action presents an affront to Papá's masculinity by demonstrating her disapproval in front of his second family. Wounded by Minerva's action, Papá walks her outside later that day when they are at home. Recalling the incident when they are standing still, Papá slaps her without warning. He exclaims, "That's to remind you that you owe your father some respect!" (89). Despite displaying infidelity to his wife and family, Papá commands that people respect him, which is something that Minerva refuses to do. She responds, "I don't owe you a thing. You've lost my respect" (89). Here, Minerva gains her voice and resistance first through her father's unfaithfulness to their family.

Minerva repurposes this situation to develop her resistance when she later responds to an encounter with the dictator. When Trujillo thrusts himself sexually at her, she slaps him without warning. Just as Papá slaps Minerva because he believes she isn't giving him the respect he deserves, Minerva slaps the dictator because she believes he isn't giving her the respect she deserves. Minerva therefore uses the lesson she learned from Papá for her own ends, which highlights her resistance. Essentially, her slap is speech. Minerva's slap, physically demonstrating her resistance to his oppression, speaks louder than simply demanding that the dictator respect her. In that way, the speech is gendered; it presents an affront to Trujillo's masculinity. From the parallel between the two slaps, we see that Alvarez likens Papá's

hypocrisy of demanding respect when he is tearing their family apart to the hypocrisy of Trujillo's regime in claiming to protect women and progress their rights when he is acting to the contrary by abusing them. Minerva's gendered resistance formulated by Papá's hypocrisy thus makes the link to Trujillo's hypocrisy, which further develops her resistant speech.

This mirroring between both men's hypocrisy and the gendered resistance that emerges from it can be further understood by examining the family, which is included in the private sphere. The regime posited the importance of family, yet tore it apart through imprisonment, torture, and disappearances. Trujillo once said, "The foundation of social order, the primary essence and basic nucleus of every political organization, rests in the family, without whose stable and healthy development, the prosperity of the nation is impossible" (Manley 61).

Here Trujillo claims the important role family plays in the nation's success. However, the dictator directly contradicted his statement by holding several mistresses while he was married. On that level, Papá is similar as he has created a divide in his family with his mistress. Lauren Derby indicates the societal expectations for men at the time, writing, "The Dominican male is expected to be an honorable father to his public family which shares his *apellido* (surname), as well as to secretly maintain his unofficial wives and offspring, his *casa chica* (small house" (1116). Papá exhibits these traits, holding his family and a successful business while hiding his other family for several years.

This link between Papá and Trujillo in their private lives allows for an examination of how Trujillo's actions as a public official tear apart relations in the private sphere, prompting gendered resistance. Not only was Trujillo unfaithful to his family, but also he used his power as a public official to tear apart the homes of those who resisted him. We see Trujillo's hypocrisy immediately as he tries to violate Minerva and subsequently imprisons Papá, further tearing apart

the Mirabal family after Papá created a divide with his infidelity. With this in mind, we can further understand how Minerva's resistant speech is gendered. Manley writes that female activism arose in response to Trujillo's regime as women became "a moralizing force of the nation" (67). In this role, women sought to protect their families and viewed the violation of families as immoral.

Yet framing women's role merely as moralizing forces is detrimental because it confines them to the private sphere without accounting for their political speech and participation. Manley explains an added dimension of women's moralizing role by demonstrating that their political speech and stance against violence gave them entry into the public sphere. In terms of resistance movements, "Bringing the 'private' into the 'public' was central" (67). This demonstrates that women's role as mothers and their desire to protect the family from violence prompted their political activism outside the home. In this sense, even protective speech is political speech by trying to achieve a certain end.

However, the idea behind protective speech and its association with a duty in the private sphere appears confining, and Minerva often acts against this in ways that place her family in danger. At the same time, she considers her family in her resistance, but in a bolder rather than protective manner. Minerva's outspokenness is based on the hope that they'll eventually be free from the regime, as her younger sister, Maria Theresa, writes in her diary about when Minerva first began attending revolutionary meetings, "I asked Minerva why she was doing such a dangerous thing. And then, she said the strangest thing. She wanted me to grow up in a free country" (39). Minerva views resistance as a means of independence, which entails protecting the rights of those younger than her, whether that be a younger sister or children. The protection of people's independence would therefore come after a time of resistance, showing the

link between resistance and protection. This idea of independence is reflected in her desire to leave home, but her father restricted her from doing so. Minerva's subsequent speech and resistance against this is therefore gendered because she rejects being confined within the private sphere as her father wishes.

The extension of Minerva's speech from the private to the public sphere demonstrates how the gendered oppression of attempting to confine her to the private sphere shapes her gendered resistance. Minerva exemplifies this resistance by slapping Trujillo, which was a public affront to the dictator. She continues this resistant speech with her gendered resistance to his sexual pursuits. After Papá is imprisoned, Minerva and Mamá meet with officials at the National Police Headquarters in hopes of obtaining an audience with Trujillo to secure Papá's freedom. Minerva is again presented with a challenge to her body. Manuel de Moya, Trujillo's secretary of state who also arranges women for him, offers to bring Minerva to the dictator's suite to "bypass all this red tape" (111). Essentially, he proposes that if Minerva satisfies Trujillo's sexual appetites, Papá will be free and her family won't be in danger. Minerva resists: "I'd sooner jump out that window than be forced to do something against my honor" (111). Here, Minerva invokes morality as well as the protection of her body in her resistance to the dictator.

This gendered resistance wounds Trujillo and therefore continues to challenge and decenter him. Primarily, Minerva presents an affront to his machismo by not succumbing to his desires. Of machismo, Gonzales writes, "The man who exhibits the most masculinity by becoming the dictator has theoretically defeated other men in the competition for women. In other words, he can have any woman he wants" (Gonzales 81). But he can't have Minerva. Expecting his control to apply in this situation, Trujillo doesn't anticipate that Minerva can refuse, especially when sleeping with him might free one of her family members. Here

Minerva's resistant speech is more effective than protective speech. If Minerva were to only consider the private sphere, she likely wouldn't be able to resist the dictator as she does—she would be more concerned with freeing her father. Therefore, the resistance Minerva develops within the private sphere and brings into the public sphere allows her to articulate speech that challenges the dictator and encourages other women's speech and political participation, as we'll see in the third chapter.

## **II. Maria Theresa: Writing as a Weapon**

Minerva's resistance rubs off on Maria Theresa (Mate), her little sister, which is most prominent when the two sisters are imprisoned. Alvarez reveals the conditions of their imprisonment through Mate's perspective, which demonstrates how Minerva's resistance influences her speech and writing. While Minerva demonstrates her resistance through spoken and acted speech, Mate's resistance is evident mainly through her writing. We first learn of the sisters' experience in prison once Mamá and Patria deliver a notebook for Mate to use. Mate writes, "It feels good to write things down. Like there will be a record" (227). This illustrates the importance of first-hand accounts during the regime, as it provides stories that never came to light in the national press. Mate's inclination to write and make her experience known is first prompted by Minerva, who gave her a diary when she was 10 years old. Leading up to her imprisonment, Mate had written about her relationship with Minerva, including when Minerva told her the truth about Trujillo. Therefore, it is because of the information Mate learns from Minerva that she becomes involved with the resistance movement and begins to develop speech of her own, which she displays through her writing.

Yet Mate's writing is most clearly seen as political speech through her record of her treatment in prison, where she and Minerva face the consequences of their resistance. When

Minerva is in solitary confinement for singing the national anthem, which the guards view as disruptive, Mate is faced with a traumatic situation. She realizes she is pregnant, but the SIM—the military intelligence agency—soon takes her to La 40, where much of the regime’s torture occurred. The SIM brings in a male prisoner, likely Mate’s husband, and tries to get him to give up information. When they electrocute Mate, he gives in. While Mate is in intense pain after the torture, she refuses to let the guards drag her out of the building.

Mate later writes about this experience in her notebook, which functions as a weapon. During their time in prison, the sisters and other female prisoners have collected a hidden stockpile of materials such as a knife, sewing scissors, and nails, which Mate terms an “arsenal” (243). Most importantly, Mate lists her *diario*, the notebook where she has been writing her account in prison. By including her notebook with this arsenal, Mate recognizes that her writing—a form of speech—is a weapon against the regime. Mate shares her traumatic experience with Minerva through her writing. Mate recalls, “She read what I wrote, and she wants me to tell the OAS” (243). This emerges from buzz within the prison about the Organization of American States sending its Peace Committee to hear from prisoners of the regime.

Having read Mate’s entry, Minerva wants to capitalize on the incident by using the writing as a weapon against Trujillo’s regime. Minerva wants Mate to deliver a note to the OAS representative that will come to their prison to describe the torture she endured. In this instance, Minerva conceives of Mate’s writing as a form of resistant speech to expose the brutality of Trujillo’s regime. Gendered resistance is an integral element to this, because Minerva sees the opportunity through Mate’s experience of violence to voice the regime’s abuse of women to the OAS. Minerva intends for Mate to rip out the pages from her notebook where she recounts her

torture. Her plan is for Mate to give this “personal statement” to the OAS along with a statement from their resistance group, the Fourteenth of June Movement (250). However, Mate doesn’t feel comfortable sharing this private, painful experience. Instead she responds to Minerva’s pleas saying, “I promise you this, I’ll be true to what I think is right” (251). Serving as the designated person from the cell to meet with the OAS, Mate declines to release her personal statement.

Mate’s decision to hold back her personal statement demonstrates a protective form of gendered resistance, which is different from the resistance we’ve seen through Minerva. To deliver the statements without the prison guards knowing, Mate folds them into small pieces, lodges them in her thick braid, and secures them with a ribbon. When meeting with the OAS representative, her plan is to unravel the ribbon slightly to release the statements. However, Mate purposely lodges her personal statement farther up in her braid than the movement’s statement. This gives her the choice to release the movement’s statement without releasing her personal statement. Ultimately, she only releases the statement prepared by Sinita and Minerva—her personal statement remains intact.

This conscious decision demonstrates Mate’s protective way of resisting. She thinks of the kind prison guard, Santicló, who delivered packages to them against protocol and even gave her the ribbon she wears in her hair to hold her braid together. If she were to hand in her personal statement, and the OAS took action against the regime, the guard might be punished. Mate thus thinks protectively, citing her reasoning for not releasing the statement: “I just couldn’t take a chance and hurt my friend” (252). Here, Mate doesn’t want to act in a way that would hurt someone who had helped her and the other female prisoners through the punishment they faced from their speech. The guard resists the regime by looking out for the women and delivering their packages, including the notebook. This element of speech is important to focus on: Santicló

isn't supposed to allow Mate to have her notebook or the other materials in their arsenal.

Referring to materials in the arsenal, Mate writes, "Santicl6 is supposed to collect them, but he's pretty lenient with us" (243). By enabling them to have these materials, he both protects and enables the women's speech. Mate therefore doesn't want someone who encouraged her speech to be punished by the regime.

Mate's perspective during their time in prison also humanizes Minerva, which foreshadows Minerva's mindset after prison. Towards the end of their imprisonment, Mate notices the toll their punishment has taken on Minerva. The day before their release, Mate writes, "I think Minerva is close to her breaking point" (252). Mate reveals Minerva's humanity by indicating how her punishment—including solitary confinement—has put her on edge.

Minerva's behavior is unusual; she believes people said something to her when no one did and randomly flutters her hand up to her chest. But unlike Mate, Minerva fixates on maintaining an appearance of strength in the prison, never showing weakness to the guards or interrogators. Mate struggles with this and feels embarrassed for breaking down in their cell. Nevertheless, Mate relays the advice Minerva gave her, which shows that, in the interests of acting as a strong figure for the other women in prison, Minerva neglects her own advice. Mate writes, "Minerva says it's better letting yourself go—not that *she* ever does" (231, emphasis original). This indicates how Minerva puts on a brave face during their imprisonment to be an example for the other women. However, when Alvarez focuses on Minerva's perspective in the ensuing chapter, her humanity emerges even further as we see the interiority of her struggles with the punishment for her speech.

### **III. Humanizing: Minerva After Prison**

By demonstrating Minerva's humanity through her perspective after prison, Alvarez portrays Minerva as possessing realistic qualities, indicating that there is more to her than her heroic status. For instance, Minerva finds it necessary to hide the anxiety that she has brought home with her from prison when people glorify her resistance. At Holy Communion, Minerva feels distressed in the crowd of people wanting to wish her well. Minerva says, "My months in prison had elevated me to superhuman status," suggesting that people view her as a hero because of her resistance and strength (259). As a result, Minerva feels that she has to continue putting on a brave face as she did in prison. She continues, "It would hardly have been seemly for someone who had challenged our dictator to suddenly succumb to a nervous attack at the communion rail" (259). Here, Minerva recognizes the importance of elevating people's belief in her capability and strength to resist Trujillo and his regime. She realizes this when Father Gabriel whispers to her at communion, "Viva la Mariposa!" (259). This play on the traditional phrase of reverence for Trujillo demonstrates how people look to Minerva and praise her resistance.

This reverence culminates in Minerva hiding her humanity from people to not detract from their hope. For instance, when she meets with Elsa, her childhood friend from Inmaculada Concepcion, she learns that the OAS has imposed sanctions on the surrounding countries. As Elsa tells Minerva this information, she cites Minerva's resistant nature—believing that this is information Minerva will want to know—to explain why she is telling her these things. Viewing Minerva as a hero, Elsa then mistakenly recalls that it was Minerva years ago who aimed the arrow at Trujillo in their performance, instead of Sinita. This reveals that Elsa's praise for Minerva as a heroine has distorted her memory, causing her to reconstruct events in a way she believes fit for the current situation. However, Elsa's praise also prohibits Minerva from

confessing to her friend that she doesn't feel like she did before prison—that she doesn't feel as strong. Before Minerva can open a discussion, Elsa exclaims, “Viva la Mariposa!” effectively barring any confession (265).

By revealing Elsa's ignorance on Minerva's inward state, Alvarez demonstrates how misconceiving the outspoken sister as a heroine without acknowledging her humanity prevents people from seeing the suffering she—and the other sisters—underwent as a consequence of their speech. In the situation with Elsa, Minerva keeps with her earlier resolution at the Holy Communion. There, Minerva makes her resolution clear: “I hid my anxieties and gave everyone a bright smile. If they had only known how frail was their iron-will heroine. How much it took to put on that hardest of all performances, being my old self again” (259). Alvarez therefore demonstrates how Minerva's speech reflects these conditions.

Emerging from prison, Minerva struggles to balance her resistance and performance of courage with protecting her family and not speaking in ways that would further jeopardize them. The impact of her imprisonment is therefore clear through her changed mindset arriving home. Previously, she had been eager to get out of the house, but now she is glad to be at home with her family. Minerva acknowledges, “I couldn't think of anything I wanted more than to stay home with my sisters at Mamá's, raising our children” (257). While before we've seen Minerva's resistance as gendered, here we see that her lack of resistance when she first comes home from prison is also gendered. Minerva, as a mother who has been torn apart from her family for months, feels the inclination to spend time at home with them. After her degrading and trying imprisonment, she is relieved to rest within the comfort of her family. It takes time for her to pick up more of her old resistance, and we see her struggle to do so amid her mission of saving her and her sisters' husbands.

Minerva's gendered resistance therefore takes on a new form after prison as she must balance considerations of the private and public spheres. She continues to oppose the regime, but she guards her speech more closely to protect the men. Gaining strength after her initial period at home, Minerva opposes a letter that Captain Peña wants the Mirabal sisters to write thanking Trujillo for his leniency with their punishment. While outraged at the suggestion, Minerva nevertheless finds it more difficult to find the strength to resist. Despite her staunch opposition, Minerva acknowledges, "My old self was putting on quite a show" (261). This reveals how Minerva continues to feel a disconnect between the strength she used to have and the state she's in after prison. By referring to her resistance as a "show," Minerva acknowledges that her strength isn't what it used to be. The reason for this is her concern for reuniting her family. Minerva says, "What convinced me was Patria's argument that the letter might help free the men" (261). Minerva's concern for the husbands and their safety thus overrides the old resistance that she attempts to conjure. Her gendered resistance now balances resisting the regime with protecting her family—she realizes she can't speak in a way that would jeopardize their safety.

Minerva's concern for protecting her family consequently influences her speech and prevents her from acting out in harmful ways; she is more astute at censoring herself. While she may not always speak protectively, in many instances she refrains from resistant speech. For instance, when she and the sisters attend a required visit to Captain Peña regarding the status of their husbands, she restrains herself, acting more protectively than she used to. Suspecting that he knows about something detrimental happening to her and her sisters' husbands, she becomes outraged and asks what happened to them. Minerva says, "I leapt up—and thank God, Peña's desk was in the way, for I could have slapped the fat, smug look off his face" (282). Starkly, this contrasts her previous action of slapping the dictator without hesitation. Minerva holds herself

back, recognizing that she must be more guarded here; an uncensored action on her part could further endanger members of her family.

Her gendered resistance again comes into play because Minerva demonstrates how she must consider that what she says in the private sphere can influence what she says in the public sphere, and vice versa. In this situation, Minerva's lack of action reflects her concern for the unity and safety of her family. This concern is clear through her sense of foreboding. After learning from Captain Peña that the men are being moved to a different prison, Minerva is suspicious about both that shift in location and Peña's willingness to grant visiting passes. She concludes, "Not only was there nothing in the world we could do to save the men, there was nothing in the world we could do to save ourselves either" (283). At this point, we see how the punishment Trujillo has inflicted in the public sphere has impacted Minerva's thinking. While she desires to resist publicly, she also must weigh the effect this resistance will have privately on her family. This mindset opens the door to examine how the sisters dealt with their situation.

To cope with these ominous feelings, the Mirabals' speech includes jokes that make light of the gravity of their experience with the regime. Minerva acknowledges the mindset behind this humor when she describes how she departs from visiting the men in prison for the last time. When the guards come to end their visit, Minerva acknowledges, "I laugh to lighten the difficult moment" (294). It was difficult for her to say goodbye to her husband just like it is difficult for her to quell his worries about her traveling over the mountain path so late at night. Dedé exhibits similar fears about her sisters' safety in traveling to visit the men, believing that they're putting themselves in danger of an accident by going. She tries to dissuade them by reminding them that if something happened, their children would be orphans. Yet the sisters brush off her concerns. Referring to herself, Mate, and Patria, Minerva says, "I don't know if it was nerves or what, but

all three of us burst out laughing” (265-266). Admitting their laughter could have stemmed from nervousness, Minerva indicates the sense of uneasiness that the sisters share.

The sisters handle this uneasiness by transforming their speech where appropriate to try erasing the regime’s brutality. When Minerva and Mate come home from prison, they struggle with terrifying memories from their punishment. Finding ways to handle this and adjust to life at home, Minerva says, “Mate and I kept the house entertained for hours, telling and retelling the horrors until the sting was out of them” (259). Essentially, Minerva and Mate adapt their speech to deal with their experiences from prison. This continues when Minerva approaches the security agents stationed at the Mirabal house to tell them they are too loud. They respond with the words “Viva Trujillo!” expecting that Minerva would echo the phrase (262). However, Dedé steps in with the exclamation, and then other members of the Mirabal family pick it up as well. Minerva doesn’t want to say it, but she acquiesces. In this instance, Minerva is not resisting; rather, she thinks of her compliance as a joke. She describes the situation after Dedé responds to the men’s call: “And then a couple more voices added their good wishes to our dictator, until what had been a scared compliance became, by exaggeration of repetition, a joke” (263). This moment is the clearest illustration of how the Mirabals’ jokes allowed them to put on a façade of compliance with the regime, when inwardly they were resisting it. Minerva’s opposition to the regime thus clearly continues after her time in prison, even as she was more careful about how her speech would affect her and her family.

#### **IV. Protective Speech**

From this we see that Minerva’s opposition and resistance included elements protective speech. While by its name protective speech appears less powerful than resistant speech, we see through the Mirabal sisters’ interaction with protective speech that it *is* political and powerful

because it too decenters the dictator. At the same time, protective speech humanizes the sisters by demonstrating the state of fear and suffering they experienced from the regime. Protective speech operates on both the private and public level. In the private sphere, it is often spoken to serve as a warning against dangerous resistant speech. In the public sphere, protective speech corrects the effects of resistant speech in the hopes of mitigating the damage it might do to the family. This demonstrates that speech in the private sphere is just as important as what happens in the public sphere.

Within the Mirabal family, protective speech most often emerges in response to Minerva's speech. To mitigate the damage of Minerva's resistance, family members warn her about her public speech, but do so in the private sphere. One instance of this is when Papá is imprisoned and Mamá and Minerva follow along to free him. When guards begin to take away Minerva from their hotel for questioning, Mamá warns her, "Watch your you-know-what!" to which Minerva thinks, "I realize she no longer means just my mouth" (108). It is important to note that this is after Minerva slaps the dictator. Mamá, remembering Minerva's physical resistance, wants to protect Minerva from doing something that could further aggravate their position. So even while this moment happens in the presence of a guard, it is still protective speech in the private sphere because it warns Minerva of the effects of her speech *before* she goes into the presence of a regime official.

Yet the distinction between the public and private sphere blurs when a public, regime official enters the Mirabals' private home. Protective speech still emerges in this context, but it demonstrates that such speech results from a heightened awareness of the integration of the public and private spheres. In such a repressive regime where speech was heavily surveilled, speech in the private sphere isn't truly private. After Minerva and Mate's imprisonment when

they are placed on house arrest, Captain Peña frequently visits to monitor them, ensuring they don't overstep their bounds and rejoin political activism. To protect her sisters, Dedé often jumps in to alleviate any speech or lack thereof that would heighten their disfavor in the regime's eyes.

When Captain Peña comes to suggest that the Mirabal sisters write a letter encouraging Trujillo to visit their province, Dedé jumps in to protect their lack of response. This moment is told from Minerva's perspective, so we can see how she views Dedé's speech. Minerva recounts, "Dedé had appeared with her shears to work on the hedge and keep her eye on 'things.' Whenever she didn't like my tone, she would clip the crown of thorns violently" (260). From this, Minerva sees Dedé's action as a warning for her to alter even the way she speaks. Moments later, Captain Peña suggests that the Mirabal sisters join in with the rest of the residents in their city, Salcedo, and writes asking Trujillo to come visit. Minerva continues the thread of her observation with Dedé: "Clip-clip went Dedé's shears, as if to drown out anything I might be thinking" (261). Minerva views Dedé as even trying to protect her from thinking any harmful thoughts that she could potentially vocalize, or act out.

However, Dedé's protective speech shifts from providing a warning to correcting the effect of her sisters' speech, or lack thereof. This demonstrates a shift from protective speech expected in private to protective speech expected in public. Effectively, this blurs the distinction between the private sphere and the public sphere. After Captain Peña makes his suggestion, he looks towards the three sisters. Obviously, they oppose his suggestion. Minerva is silent. Patria and Mate are silent. Minerva says, "We gave him nothing with our faces" (261). The effect of Dedé's warning is here evident as her three sisters betray no sentiment. If they were to give an expression, it would likely be one of disapproval that could get them in trouble. Because of their lack of response in front of Captain Peña, Dedé feels the need to correct this. Essentially, she

speaks for them out of protection. Recounting Dedé's response to Peña, Minerva says, "Poor nervous Dedé ...said that yes, that would be wise. 'I mean nice,' she corrected herself quickly" (261). By stepping in to correct the effect of her sisters' lack of speech, Dedé exhibits a protective reaction seen mostly in the public sphere. Yet because a public, regime official is present in her home, she must extend her protective speech from simply conveying a warning.

Protective speech in this respect demonstrates the sisters' humanity amid the punishment they face from the regime. Minerva, in the aftermath of the treatment she faced in prison, is more cognizant of the role her speech plays between the private and public spheres. Her humanity appears as she attempts to protect her family, yet she struggles with her desire to further resist the regime. At the same time, her family also plays a role in this speech, protecting her from speaking in each sphere in ways that would provoke further danger. With this background, the final chapter will examine the lasting impact and significance of the Mirabal sisters' speech.

### **Chapter 3: Re-centering Women's Speech**

The Mirabal sisters' political speech, both public and private, protective and resistant, demonstrates the lasting impact that women's speech can have first on a nation and then the world. Literature like Alvarez's novel makes this impact more prominent, as it "has made that history more accessible to a wider audience in a fictionalized version of their lives" (Robinson, "Origins" 151). Essentially, the novel extends the sphere of knowledge of those who know the Mirabal sisters' struggle outside the Dominican Republic. Even though women's political participation at the international level increased after the Mirabal sisters' death, particularly in terms of advocacy against violence, Alvarez's depiction of the sisters draws attention to their speech and its effects.

#### **I. Impacts of the Mirabal Sisters' Speech**

The sisters' speech, resulting in their death, undoubtedly contributed to the regime's downfall. Though Trujillo faced sanctions from the OAS, which put further pressure on the regime, their speech was a catalyst for future political resistance. Nancy Robinson writes, "No one doubted for a moment who the intellectual author of the crime was and popular indignation against the dictator spread like wildfire" (179). Essentially, people knew the crime was perpetrated by Trujillo; the Mirabal sisters' deaths further increased awareness about the regime's brutality, prompting men to continue the resistance and avenge the sisters. As Robinson makes clear, Trujillo's regime couldn't withstand the pressure that continued to mount after the Mirabal sisters' death. Trujillo's assassins represent the final part of this pressure. As seen through Mario Vargas Llosa's novel, *The Feast of the Goat*, the male assassins were indignant that Trujillo had ordered the slaying of such respectable, courageous women. From this novel, it's clear that male outrage about what Trujillo had done played a part in the dictator's

assassination. Vargas Llosa describes the assassins' sentiment about the Mirabal sisters: "What happened to the Mirabal sisters set their teeth on edge, it turned their stomachs as they discussed the deaths of the three incredible women" (137). The men here conceive of violence against women as sickening—especially because it was a consequence of their outspokenness through which Dominicans found comfort.

Vargas Llosa also demonstrates how men opposing the dictator, partaking in the same struggle of resistance, lauded the Mirabal sisters' speech and courage. One of the male assassins, Antonio de la Maza, had even spent time with the Mirabal sisters. Writing on de la Maza's mindset, Vargas Llosa describes his high view of Minerva. Importantly, his praise of Minerva is tailored in terms of her speech: "Her firm convictions and eloquence gave her words a strength that was contagious" (Vargas Llosa 138). Here, Vargas Llosa seems to imply that Minerva's strength in her resistant speech spread to the assassins—her speech was impactful. This means that it wasn't simply a consideration of violence against women that prompted the men to act; it was also a consideration of the women's speech, which was stifled through their death. Literature like Vargas Llosa's novel functions to demonstrate how women's speech matters by revealing the lasting effect on Minerva's speech on men within the movement.

Not only did the Mirabal sisters' speech impact the downfall of Trujillo's regime, but also it was a driving force for women's political participation. The sisters demonstrate how speech and political participation go hand in hand. Robinson writes, "Women participated for the first time in significant numbers in the 14<sup>th</sup> June Movement headed by Minerva and her husband, inspired by the possibilities for change that the Cuban Revolution had awakened" ("Women's Political Participation" 180). The 14<sup>th</sup> June Movement, named from the defeated effort on June 14, 1959 to overthrow Trujillo's regime, was the revolutionary force that frequently met to plan

further opposition that might be successful. Minerva's leadership in this group shows how effectual she was in drawing other women to the resistance movement, where they too exercised political speech against the regime. Essentially, the Mirabal sisters "Legitimized women's political participation...as political activists in their own right" (180).

In the years after their death, this impact that began in the Dominican Republic expanded to the international level, as Dominican women raised awareness at United Nations conferences. Initially, Latin American feminists proclaimed November 25 as the Day for Non-Violence Against Women during the first Feminist Encounter of Latin America and the Caribbean. By selecting the date the Mirabals died, the emerging feminists recognized the importance of women's speech and political participation while indicating the immense effect the death had on the country and surrounding area. These encuentros—encounters—began to form a network within Latin America and the Caribbean to discuss strategies for overcoming women's oppression in the region and creating networks for change. Substantially, this indicates the female political participation that emerged after the years of Trujillo's regime and during the military violence happening in other Latin American countries. Women at the first encuentro "denounced...violence against women perpetrated by the State, including torture and disappearances of women political prisoners" (Robinson, "Origins" 150). This sentiment exhibited by the early Latin American and Caribbean feminists made its way to the international level through the United Nations, which is best seen in the fact that the General Assembly designated November 25 as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women in 1999.

This recognition demonstrates how the denunciation of violence from Latin American and Caribbean activists reached the international level through the United Nations. Several

conferences confirmed this, including the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna. Participants at this conference adopted the framework “women’s rights are human rights” (144). Specifically, the delegates needed to frame their advocacy explicitly in terms of women for their rights to be recognized. This asserted that violence against women is a violation of their human rights. Developing this idea, the United Nations adopted the slogan “A life free of violence: it’s our right!” for its 1997 Campaign for Women’s Human Rights (147). The significant time and effort the United Nations spent developing and promoting this recognition for women increased attention to the violence women faced.

## **II. The Public and Private Spheres: From Violence to Speech**

Significantly, the conferences recognized the blurring between the public and private spheres in terms of violence. Violence permeated both spheres, particularly given the military violence in Latin America. The conferences sought to make governments responsible for punishing violence in both spheres. To this end, the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights determined that violence against girls and women was a severe violation of women’s rights “whether perpetrated within the private (within the home) or public sphere” (144). But the conference went beyond merely recognizing that violence existed in both spheres. It placed responsibility on the government to take action and end this violence. Robinson writes, “Responsibilities for state vigilance thus extended into the previously off-limits ‘private sphere’ where most violence against women was practiced, with obligations to prosecute individuals involved in its perpetration” (147). This development is significant because in the Mirabals’ situation, the state was the perpetrator of violence and therefore did nothing to punish it.

Indeed, Trujillo and his regime, comprising the state, were directly responsible for the violence against the Mirabal sisters in both the public and the private spheres. Robinson

recognizes this through her analysis of violence and the international activism against it. Through the United Nations conferences, violence against women was no longer seen as a matter “confined to the home or limited to criminal justice”; rather, “It is now understood in the context of...a gender ordered established by society and the relations of power between the sexes” (157). The implication of this is that violence against women is a result of the inequality women experience, particularly from men asserting power over them. This brings us back to the dictator’s characteristics previously discussed in Chapter 1. As his power-hungry characteristics framed his actions, Trujillo acted to dominate in both the public and private spheres. Trujillo’s dictatorial characteristics not only restricted speech and perpetrated violence publicly, but also instilled fear, which affected speech privately within the home.

While the United Nations conferences have brought international attention to violence against women in the public and private spheres, shifting the focus to women’s speech in both spheres sheds new light on the relationship between the regime’s restrictions and women’s speech. Applying the concept of the public and private spheres from the international level to Alvarez’s novel demonstrates how the Mirabal sisters’ speech operated in different ways in both spheres. Speech isn’t necessarily public or private. Rather, the purpose of the speech depends on the sphere within which it is spoken. In Alvarez’s novel, this purpose is directly related to the regime in that speech either resists or protects against it. However, because there is an overlap between the purpose and effect of speech in both spheres, the public and private are blurred. The ultimate effect of the Mirabals’ speech against the dictator was their death. Their speech presented such an affront to Trujillo that he even declared publicly how much it wounded him, in words that also appear in the novel. Robinson writes, “Trujillo publicly observed that he had only two problems left: the Catholic Church and the Mirabal sisters. This was interpreted as a death

sentence for the Mirabal sisters by those who knew him” (“Women’s Political Participation” 179). At this time, Trujillo’s regime was under pressure from the OAS and felt a lack of support from the United States. The Catholic Church also had publicly denounced Trujillo in a letter read at churches throughout the country. Dissent was growing. Yet Trujillo pinpointed the Mirabal sisters as the source of the pressure the regime faced. This is because they wounded his machismo. Essentially, he punished their speech with violence because their speech made him feel a lack of power.

In the novel, we see the effect of the sisters’ speech on the dictator when Tio Pepe, Minerva’s uncle, approaches her at home to warn her of what action the dictator might take against her. Tio Pepe had been called to attend a gathering honoring Trujillo. Minerva’s uncle tells her that at that gathering, Trujillo was speaking to men gathered around him, including Tio Pepe. Trujillo had told them, “Well, boys, I’ve really only got two problems left. If I could only find the man to resolve them” (281). The dictator’s insinuation here echoes his real-life proclamation that the Mirabal sisters and the Catholic Church were the two problems he faced. He then turns to Tio Pepe purposely to say, “My only two problems are the damn church and the Mirabal sisters” (281). Tio Pepe recognizes this as a message he must give to Minerva: “He was giving me a warning to deliver back to you,” he tells her (281). Trujillo here pins the responsibility on a man to control a woman and her speech for him.

Trujillo’s insinuation that consequences would come from not controlling the sisters demonstrates how the public and private spheres are blurred. Tio Pepe is delivering a warning from the public sphere into the private sphere. While previously we’ve seen how concerns from the private sphere have emerged into the public sphere—like with Minerva’s gendered resistance—we see here that concerns from the public sphere can also enter the private sphere.

When the speech went from private to public, the effect was both resistant and protective. With Minerva, her gendered resistance prompted her to resistant speech, but members of her family also spoke protectively in the public sphere in front of the dictator or a regime official to protect against any consequences of Minerva's speech. This overlap between speech in both spheres indicates that they are blurred as a result of the environment Trujillo created in restricting speech and perpetrating violence. In this way, violence against women happens both privately and publicly, as the UN conferences examined. Speech restrictions too demonstrate that oppression impacts both public and private spheres.

### **III. Sisters as Symbols of Speech**

The impact of the Mirabal sisters and their speech was so significant that they have essentially become symbols today. Robinson writes that the Mirabal sisters "came to symbolize one of the most important of women's human rights: the right to a life free of violence" ("Women's Political Participation" 182). While this refers to the sisters' impact on advocacy for protections against violence, it's important to think of them as symbols of women's right to speech, as seen through Alvarez's novel. By centering the sisters' speech rather than the violence Trujillo perpetrated against them, the novel recognizes speech that has been largely overlooked. At the same time, it draws attention away from the dictator.

Recognizing violence against women is significant in protecting women's rights, yet the role of women's speech deserves emphasis as it has largely taken a backseat to considerations of violence. Robinson further describes the Mirabal sisters as "national icons," which points toward the role the surviving sister, Dedé had after their death (181). This view of the Mirabal sisters as symbols is in part due to Dedé's speech and actions after Trujillo died. Dedé created the Mirabal Sisters Foundation to commemorate them and the effect of their speech. With this effort to

preserve the memory of their speech, Dedé contributes to the view of the Mirabal sisters as symbols of speech.

Viewing the sisters as symbols of speech, rather than victims of violence, encourages the political speech of other women and men. This is seen even in recent years as Dedé and Minerva's daughter, Minou gave a lecture at Middlebury College in 2006 to discuss the example the three Mirabal sisters set. Significantly, this demonstrates the lasting impact of their political activism and speech. It also shows the importance of remembering their speech. Their speech and example serve as a warning, which if taken seriously and remembered, can protect us from speech restrictions that would lead to new instances of violence.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout Alvarez's novel, we see the humanity that comes forth in each Mirabal sisters' perspective. This focus on the sisters' experience takes emphasis away from the dictator and his power. Instead, we see the numerous forms of the women's speech. While recognizing the violence the sisters faced is certainly important, focusing also on their speech is a powerful way to decenter the dictator. The sisters thus have the power shape our view of the dictator while bringing attention to their experiences and consequences of their speech. This is more productive than simply reiterating the ruler's power because it shows how oppression can impact both private and public life. Yet the ruler's power serves as a warning against other rulers who might restrict or demonize speech that opposes his power. In the case of the Mirabal sisters, such oppressive restrictions lead to their death. To prevent similar instances in the future, we must recognize the importance of free speech, because speech restrictions and an environment where speech is discouraged can often lead to more violence.

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