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## Debate

### Who is exotic?

#### Local Knowledge and the Problem of Translation

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I wish to thank Pedro San Miguel for his thoughtful and close reading of my book *The Dictator's Seduction*, especially since he is one of the pioneers of Dominican agrarian history, as well as Caribbean historiography—one whose work has guided me in my own research for decades. Yet I want to take issue with the particular charges at hand: that my rendition of the Trujillato suffers from exoticism, as does much of the anthropological work I draw upon. Moreover, that my rendition of the regime is postmodernist, as per the title of his essay.

First of all, I want to clarify that I don't believe that my treatment of the Trujillo regime diverts as stridently from the Subaltern Studies school of thought as San Miguel believes. Their signature move was to bring questions of power into the study of the history, society and culture of the popular classes via Antonio Gramsci's work on hegemony. And my argument that the state under Trujillo worked through the sinews of

popular culture certainly offers a study of regime hegemony, one with important comparative dimensions. I underscore this in the introduction and conclusion where I explicitly consider features of the Trujillo regime's populism in relation to other regimes better studied in English such as that of Juan Perón and Getulio Vargas. In this sense, I am trying to part ways with a literature on the Trujillato that portrays it as uniquely despotic and despicable by stressing the singularity of the regime in all respects.

Certainly this comparative approach can only be seen as veering away from a literature with a strong exoticist dimension—a case in point is the very term *sultanistic* regimes used by political scientists to characterize personalist dictatorships of this kind, a term which would make Edward Said turn over in his grave.<sup>1</sup> I hope my rendition also diverges from other forms of exoticism such as the extremist gothic sensationalism found in works on the regime of François Duvalier and Haiti more generally; or the demeaning imperialist gaze of much contemporary journalism on Trujillo, which ridiculed him as a “tin pot” dictator, the regime as a “comic opera;” as if strongmen from Europe such as Mussolini or Hitler were truly frightening, while dictators from poor underdeveloped nations were a joke.

In arguing that through its mobilization of popular cultural forms the regime had a strong populist dimension, I am also seeking to understand how the marginal poor understood state power and read Trujillo's particular form of sovereignty. I am thus trying to move beyond Ernesto Laclau's work on populist discursive forms to reveal how the regime was received and understood by the marginal poor.<sup>2</sup> And it does not surprise me that one might not have heard the rumor that Trujillo had a *muchachito* or diabolical spirit double because it did not circulate in the elite barrios of the colonial zone of the capital city of Santo Domingo or Gascue, but rather in places where the urban poor congregated, such as Luperón, Capotillo, María Auxiliadora and La Ciénaga, the latter of which is so thoroughly stigmatized as rough, poor and black that during my fieldwork residents often dissembled that they actually lived there.

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<sup>1</sup> H. E. Chehabi and Juan J. Linz, *Sultanistic Regimes* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism, Populism* (New York: Verso, 1987).

Trujillo's ability to amass extraordinary wealth and avoid his enemies for three decades was a mystery of his rule; the *muchachito* rumor was an attempt at explaining this seemingly inexplicable fact. As Jean-Noel Kapferer has said, "rumors do not take off from the truth but rather seek out the truth."<sup>3</sup> This narrative also reveals a desire that there be a moral to the story of Trujillo's violent usurpation of the nation since as a devil pact, the *muchachito* portends his immanent demise; because in this logic wealth and power secured via illicit means only come at a great cost—in this case ultimately his assassination. And given the ferocity of this police state, this was the only kind of symbolic resistance that many people could muster.

Certainly, I was drawn to this story because it confounded me, but I also wrote about it as an important political exercise—to explain the core rationality of people who have been cast as irrational in a literature which divides the world into heroes and villains, modes of subjectivity more available to the educated middle class, and thus elucidate the perspective on the ground by those who supported the regime at times but most often just got by. In this sense, I was driven by the long-standing commitment of oral history to bring into the historical record social actors and subject positions that have remained on the margins of historical writing due to their illiteracy and powerlessness. But if one decides to venture out of the archives onto the street, one perforce will encounter modes of historical narration that challenge one's own, and that require translation, and interpretation.

Yet how exotic really is Trujillo's *muchachito* story? It conforms to the genre of pan-Latin American devil-pact narratives collected in research by Michael Taussig, Marc Edelman and Mary Crain, and found in Colombia, Ecuador, Costa Rica and the Andes; a view which seeks to explain capital accumulation from the perspective of an economy of scarcity, one prototypical of subsistence peasants and the urban poor, and one which is expanding given new levels of marginality under

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<sup>3</sup> Jean-Noel Kapferer, *Rumors: Uses, Interpretations, and Images* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1990).

neoliberalism.<sup>4</sup> Nor is there anything pre- or postmodern about these beliefs; rather, as Taussig has said, they reflect a specific experience of combined and uneven development, one in which technology, capital and labor have been frequently imported, and often agro-export enterprises occur in capitalist enclaves surrounded by subsistence agriculture. This is why Ricardo Salvatore, in the pages of this journal, has referred to Latin American nations as having a “third modernity,” one which defies European developmental teleologies.<sup>5</sup> For the book I relied upon a close analysis of a few narratives of Trujillo’s spirit double, which emerged when I asked what the secret was to Trujillo’s longevity in office. Yet in my current research I have found that *bacá* narratives are a stock feature of popular discourse on the island, and I have since collected more than eighty hours of such witchcraft testimony over the past two years in Santo Domingo, the central frontier, and in Haiti.

The problems of thinking about temporality in a context in which modernization did not bring secularization, and magic and modernity coexist, became clear to me quite forcefully last year when I was present at a suicide in a poor rural community in the Dominican frontier province of Elias Piña, an event which was claimed by many to have resulted from sorcery. What was surprising about this case was the context, since the sorcery accusation emerged within a contest for political power between a sitting *alcalde* and his political rival, thus between political parties; it was said that the mayor sent a spell (in Dominican popular parlance a *bacá*) which killed his opponent. While this event occurred in a thoroughly modern context, to understand this logic of sorcery I would say the best place to look to interpret it would be the classic British social-structuralist anthropologists such as E. Evans Pritchard and Mary Douglas who sought to understand how the vectors of accusation within sorcery allegations map

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<sup>4</sup> Marc Edelman, “Landlords and the Devil: Class, Ethnic and Gender Dimensions of Central American Peasant Narratives,” *Cultural Anthropology* 9, No. 1 (Feb., 1994): 670-689; Mary Crain, “Poetics and Politics in the Ecuadorian Andes: Women’s Narratives of Death and Devil Possession,” *American Ethnologist* 18, No. 1 (Feb., 1991): 67-89; Michael Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

<sup>5</sup> Ricardo Salvatore, “The Postcolonial in Latin America and the Concept of Coloniality: A Historian’s Point of View,” *A Contracorriente: A Journal on Social History and Literature in Latin America*, 8, No. 1 (Fall, 2010): 332-348.

onto sociological instabilities (they would not have been surprised that these two rivals happened to be cross-cousins, and from opposed parties).<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that this approach is very different than postmodern theorists who examine public discourse without any sociological grounding.

Why draw upon African anthropology to understand the Caribbean? One must look to research on Africa to find close readings of social structure in relation to idioms of symbolic violence because Africa has inspired some of the classic work in British social anthropology. I have also been inspired by Luise White's work on vampire narratives as a form of popular historicity due to her pathbreaking approach to popular narrative forms and how they can be read as historical evidence; she happens to study Africa, but her approach can be fruitfully applied to other contexts with vibrant oral cultures.<sup>7</sup> Debates on how to interpret oral narrative genres have flourished in Africa because archival evidence is scarce. While Latin America pioneered the *testimonio*, it was approached by literary scholars as a form of narrative and not contextualized as anthropologists would.

While a common feature of Latin America, the articulation of politics with witchcraft idioms has yet not been sufficiently explored for the Dominican Republic, although it is mentioned, for example, in Christian Krohn-Hansen's book.<sup>8</sup> Nor is witchcraft found solely in Africa and Latin America; let us not forget that the most virulent and violent witch hunts occurred in early modern Europe, and I also have drawn upon classic work on this subject by Robin Briggs and others.<sup>9</sup> In an increasingly global world, African research may not seem all that exotic and distant, especially when Cuban *babalawos* travel to Nigeria for initiations and vice versa. Evidence from Africa is not ipso facto exotic unless one continues to misperceive the "dark continent" on the margins of human history.

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<sup>6</sup> Mary Douglas, ed., *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations* (London: Tavistock, 1980).

<sup>7</sup> Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Christian Krohn-Hansen, *Political Authoritarianism in the Dominican Republic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (New York: Viking, 1996).

Sorcery has been explored with great rigor among anthropologists of Amazonia such as Neil Whitehead, but African research may bear a stronger family resemblance to the logic of sorcery accusations in the Dominican Republic because, after all, it is a former slave society (of course there may be traces of Amerindian cultural residue as well).<sup>10</sup> Even if slavery was small-scale and familial, and the Dominican Republic never had a slave majority the way its more prosperous neighbors Cuba and Haiti did at the peak of their sugar booms, the fact is that many slaves trickled into the country over time via contraband purchase and flight from the rigors of Haitian plantation labor across the border. Notwithstanding the fact that the Dominican Republic did not receive the sheer number of slaves of other countries, the intimacy of contact between freedmen and creoles in agricultural enterprises such as extensive cattle ranching or small tobacco or cacao farms created more extensive miscegenation than elsewhere, and as Carlos Esteban Deive has forcefully argued, this feature may have diffused African cultural features more extensively throughout society than plantation societies where Africans were physically confined to an enclave, their *barracones*.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, while the Dominican Republic did not have the strongly Yoruba (West Africa) inflected Catholic brotherhoods called *cabildos* which developed into Afro-Cuban religious formations such as Palo Monte, it does have a popular religious culture of *cofradías* which are deeply embossed with Kikongo beliefs from Central Africa. As John Thornton and Linda Heywood have demonstrated, this early slave stream was distinctive because much of it was already Christianized before its arrival in the Americas, unlike later imports from West Africa; thus possibly reinforcing the highly syncretic form of Dominican folk religion which is nominally Catholic but whose signature features, such as the cult

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<sup>10</sup> Neil L. Whitehead and Robin White, eds., *In Darkness and in Secrecy: The Anthropology of Assault Sorcery and Witchcraft in Amazonia* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Carlos Esteban Deive, *La esclavitud del negro en Santo Domingo*, 2 vols. (Santo Domingo: Museo del Hombre Dominicano, 1980).

of the dead, spirit possession and the harnessing of spiritual power in charms and amulets, evince a strong link to Central African culture.<sup>12</sup>

All historical research involves selection. Historians of Columbus chose to portray him as a child of the enlightenment by editing out the mermaids, shapeshifters and Amazons from his account, but one could use them to alternatively cast him as a child of the Middle Ages who believed in monsters and marvels. I did not go looking for the *muchachito* or the *bacá*, but when they appeared I took on the historiographic challenge to understand them, even if that meant some interpretive work to figure out what they signified since their meaning was not immediately apparent. I am reminded of a CNN interview with Raoul Cedras, the Haitian leader who ousted Jean-Bertrand Aristide in a coup and then refused to leave office in 1994. In response to the interviewers' question—whether he intended to follow the Governors Island agreement and step down—he answered with a parable about a chicken and a fox, which the reporter found very irritating, but was very much in keeping with the Haitian tradition of throwing a *pwen*, or parrying a direct challenge when you cannot answer in the affirmative to a higher status interlocutor; an oblique speech style honed over the course of many decades of imperial intervention. She did not have the poetic imagination to grasp his point, but I would hope that we as historians would have the patience to try. Otherwise we will not be able to make sense of discursive “weapons of the weak;” and the subaltern are indeed speaking if only we are ready and willing to listen to them.

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<sup>12</sup> John Thornton and Linda Heywood, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585-1660* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).