“La Poesía Sorprendida”; or the Surrealist Poetic Imagination Against Neocolonial Dictatorship in the Dominican Republic, 1943–1947

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"La Poesía Sorprendida"; or the Surrealist Poetic Imagination Against Neocolonial Dictatorship in the Dominican Republic, 1943–1947

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> "Surprise must be sought for itself, unconditionally."
>
> André Breton, *Mad Love*

> "'The Surprised Poetry' is a poetry that surprises our eyes at each moment of life . . ."
>
> Domingo Moreno Jimenes, "Conversacion al aire libre"

SINCE ITS INCEPTION SURREALISM HAS BEEN an international movement, yet only recently have we have begun to appreciate better its history in the Caribbean, especially in Cuba, Haiti, and Martinique. Wifredo Lam, Aimé Césaire, Alejo Carpentier, Jacques Roumain, *Légitime Défense*, and *Tropiques* are now, for example, familiar names in the history of Caribbean surrealism. Oddly, like-minded and highly talented writers and painters of the Dominican Republic have received only scant attention, especially in Anglophone histories.

This oversight is unfortunate, since it skips over an important chapter in the history of surrealism. Specifically, the neglect of Dominican surrealist movements has kept La Poesía Sorprendida a little kept secret on the development of Caribbean surrealism. La Poesía Sorprendida was a literary movement and journal that flourished in the Dominican Republic between 1943 and 1947. The editors of the journal, Alberto Baeza Flores, Franklin Mieses Burgos, Mariano Lebrón Saviñón, Freddy Gatón Arce, and Eugenio Granell, defined the movement in primarily surrealist terms and published many of the major modernists of the period. The journal also featured the drawings of Granell, a Spanish surrealist and left-wing exile from fascist Spain. *La poesía sorprendida* published a total of 21 numbers (at 500 copies per edition), as well as 14 books of poetry. In its time, writers from Latin American, Europe, and the United States recognized La Poesía Sorprendida as an important literary movement. André Breton, who visited the *sorprendistas* on two separate trips to the Dominican Republic, hailed the literary movement's journal as possess-

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ing the most "noble quality" of all journals published in Latin America.[1]

The movement's acclamation by notable international writers, many who also contributed to its journal, as well as its ability to flourish for several years under Trujillo's dictatorship, is itself worth studying. Yet the La Poesía Sorprendida's greatest significance resides in its attempt to rescue the Dominican imagination from the ideological confines of the neocolonial dictatorship. By necessity, the *sorprendistas*' project was clandestine, and they found in surrealist literary techniques and forms a means to evade the cultural censors for a time. For the *sorprendistas*, interior life, a realm of imagination, constituted a kind of free zone in the otherwise totalitarian social space of the island of La Hispaniola. The surprise or shock generated from manifesting poetically an unfettered inner psychic life had the potential to dislodge the minds of the colonized from an adherence to an oppressive regulation of life under the neocolonial dictatorship. La Poesía Sorprendida can rightly be understood as part of the broad European and Caribbean surrealist movement that, in an era of colonialism and fascism, found in art a refuge they hoped would become a home.

I.

Before we can understand the literary movement's particular contributions to a clandestine struggle against the regime, we must preliminarily conceptualize some of the salient features of the repressive Trujillo regime that held power from 1930 to 1961. It is not enough to say that Trujillo was a brutal Latin American dictator in the tradition of *caudillos* or patrons before him. While this is partly true, his rule is more usefully understood as occurring during an era of fascism. By 1938, as Eric Hobsbawm notes, only approximately seventeen constitutional and elected governments existed worldwide, down from about thirty-five in 1920; by 1944, "perhaps twelve out of a global total of sixty four" remained.[2] Like Italy by 1922, Germany by 1933, and Spain by 1939, the Dominican Republic cannot be counted as one of the twelve remaining in 1944. And like these and other such societies of the time, Dominican fascism was a form of bourgeois rule in an advanced stage of capitalist development. The noted Dominican literary historian José Alcántara Almánzar rightly concludes that Trujillo consolidated the modern capitalist State in the Dominican Republic.[3]

U.S. imperialism had a major influence on the consolidation of capitalist state power in its fascistic form on the island. It laid out a blueprint of

political and economic rule, so to speak, for the Dominican bourgeoisie to follow, even if reluctantly at first. For the U.S. ruling class, capital accumulation was the primary motivation of its domestic and foreign policy. Consequently, since the late nineteenth century it has had an interventionist policy in the country, since the Dominican Republic provided a lucrative source of profits, mainly in sugar production and as a market for the sale of U.S. commodities. When political opposition and instability within the Caribbean country threatened profits, the U.S. ruling class opted for direct political intervention by militarily occupying the country in 1916. The U.S. government quickly established Military Law; disarmed the population; enforced a strict censorship of the press; created a National Guard under command of the U.S. military; suspended the island's trade with Germany and its allies; enacted laws to destroy the last vestiges of the communal lands through land privatization and registration; took control of the customs houses, declaring hundreds of U.S. commodities duty-free while reducing tariffs on other U.S. imports; and unified the island through a transportation system.[4] In short, by the time the U.S. military withdrew from the island in 1924, U.S. imperialism had turned the Dominican Republic into a Protectorate whose state interests were beholden to the needs of American capital.

Significantly, Trujillo got his start in politics by joining the U.S. trained and controlled Dominican National Police (formerly the National Guard) and soon became Chief of the police. As U.S. First Secretary John Moors Cabot noted in a memo to the State Department at the time, "Trujillo was raised from the gutter by the Marine Corps and started toward this present position."[5] Once he became President in 1930 in sham elections sanctioned by the U.S Government, he continued to consolidate state power and to modernize the island according to the dictates of capitalist development and accumulation. Economically, he monopolized basic industries, resources, and services. Moya Pons notes that by the end of his life, Trujillo "controlled nearly 80 percent of the country's industrial production and his firms employed 45 percent of the country's active labor force."[6] Politically, except for the ruling party, El Partido Dominicano (PD), all parties were outlawed or marginalized. Trujillo eliminated the opposition and continued to stage mock elections where he or one of his party or family was guaranteed victory. The Dominican state was unambiguously the servant of the PD, drawing into its power the judiciary, the police, and the armed forces in order to exercise its hegemony over the Dominican population and political opponents. Trujillo appointed "all senators, deputies, judges and public employees."[7] The increasing political power of the fascist state is also reflected in the increase of the

armed forces during Trujillo's rule and an infamous system of surveillance and punishment of political opponents. "His regime," as Michael R. Hall writes, "was bolstered by seven intelligence agencies that infiltrated all levels of Dominican society. A vigilant and unremitting surveillance system was maintained over every aspect of Dominican life."[8] Between 1938 and 1948, 1000 police officers were added to the armed forces (bringing the total to 1,622 police officers)[9] in an island that only had a population of less than 2,000,0000 people at the time.[10]

The dictatorship attempted to unify the country ideologically by controlling the media, the schools, and the churches, i.e., the ideological state apparatuses Louis Althusser theorizes as crucial to class domination.[11] The state owned the only television station, many radio stations, and the two major newspapers.[12] School textbooks were rewritten to justify the regime, and the Catholic Church bestowed its blessings on the regime in weekly sermons. The bourgeois dictatorship followed their German Nazi counterparts by holding mass rallies or "revistas cívicas" in defense of the Dominican-styled fuehrer and fatherland. It also persuaded and employed major merengueros, such as Ñico Lora, Toño Abreu, Joseíto Mateo, and Pedro Reynoso, to produce the highly popular meringues that "embodied Trujillo's strategy of centralization and the integration of his propaganda, cultural, and economic programs."[13] Every home was required to hang pictures of the Pope and Trujillo or else come under suspicion as disloyal to the state.

Typical of twentieth-century capitalist states, the dictatorship promoted racist, nationalist, and anticommunist ideologies to conceal the class contradictions in society. Alcántara Almánzar notes that the ideology of the regime rested upon the three pillars of hispanophilia, anti-haitianism, and anticommunism.[14] These three ideological pillars are the clear equivalents of the Aryanism, anti-Semitism, and anticommunism integral to Nazi ideology of the same period. Both Trujillo's racism/nationalism and anticommunism are well documented. He claimed that Dominicans were not black or of African descent, even though the Spanish and French colonists had populated the island with African slaves to labor in the sugar cane fields after they had exterminated the indigenous population through overwork, punishment, and disease by the first quarter of the sixteenth century. By 1546, "there were already some 12,000 slaves compared to the white population of less than 5,000. By 1568, the number of slaves had increased to around 20,000."[15] Confronted with a brown-skinned population whose origins could not be traced to the "white" colonists, Trujillo officially defined the population as "indio."[16] His anti-black racism went so far as to create a program of "dominicanization" that culminated in

1937 with the Dominican army's massacre of approximately 18,000 Haitians along the Dominican-Haitian border.[17]

The U.S. imperialists' and Trujillo's subsequent acceleration of capitalist development and dictatorship on the island resulted in what Fredric Jameson identifies as "the constriction of space, of tendential exclusion, of the obliteration of possibility and creative novelty by intensive repetition and sameness" within advanced capitalism.[18] To be sure, the Dominican Republic by the 1940s, the period of La Poesía Sorprendida, had become totalitarian in a uniquely capitalist form. As István Mészáros insightfully writes about capitalism, "One cannot think of a more inexorably all-engulfing—and in that important sense '*totalitarian*'—system of control than the globally dominant capital system."[19] He continues:

> For the latter blindly subjects to the same imperatives health care no less than commerce, education no less than agriculture, art no less than manufacturing industry, ruthlessly superimposing its own criteria of viability on everything, from the smallest units of its 'microcosm' to the most gigantic transnational enterprises, and from the most intimate personal relations to the most complex decision making processes of industry-wide monopolies, favouring always the strong over the weak.[20]

The island of 46,759 square kilometers became even smaller in the thirty plus years that Trujillo helped to knit up the Dominican populace through regimented systems of work, surveillance, discipline, punishment, and a nationalized culture. The *trujillista* class fraction of capital was largely successful at mediating all aspects of Dominican life by its repressive, interlocking system of power. Indeed, how could one escape the rule of a dictator that inserted himself into daily life by renaming Santo Domingo, the capital, Cuidad Trujillo in 1936?

II.

The island's "constriction of space" presented anti-fascist writers with few options. Aside from exile, as in the case of the famed Dominican poet Pedro Mir, or surrendering one's talents to the service of the state, as in the case of the writers associated with *Cuadernos Dominicanos de Cultura*,[21] writers needed to devise ways of establishing a legitimacy within the regime yet maintain a critical autonomy from the state. They needed to find ways to confront the bourgeois-fascistic society. For the founders of La Poesía Sorprendida, the answer lay in founding a

journal that foregrounded aesthetic issues and ideologies that, in truth, were inseparable from their own progressive political values. And it was primarily the politically engaged surrealists who provided them with the model to subvert a debased society through art.

One way the *sorprendistas* attempted to challenge the fascist status quo was by developing an anti-realist aesthetic. For these modernists, realism was a worn out literary convention and ideology incapable of transforming perception into a critical gaze of the world. Breton had earlier encapsulated such a critique in his "Manifesto" when he rejects the genre of realism as being tied too closely to the immediacy and facticity of a restrictive present. Breton argues that we live under "the reign" of a rationalistic and positivist logic that "allows us to consider only facts relating directly to our experience."[22] He continues: "It is pointless to add that experience itself has found itself increasingly circumscribed. It paces back and forth in a cage from which it is more and more difficult to make it emerge."[23] Breton's identification of the "circumscription" of experience comments, in other words, on the "constriction" of experience within an increasingly encompassing capitalism that Breton's friend, Louis Aragon, likewise protested in his surrealist masterpiece *Paris Peasant*, although here in its incarnation in the Haussmann building project of Paris.[24] It is this world that Breton and other avant-garde writers and artists sought to contest by fashioning literary forms that ideally could free the modern subject from capital's totality. Both automatic writing and montage were means of opening a space somehow outside of the quotidian experience of a life constrained by conformity to the dictates of capital accumulation. We can say that modernists, as Ernst Bloch characterizes their project, attempt to "exploit the *real* fissures in surface inter-relations and to discover the new in the crevices"; they attempt to "shatter" the prevailing image of the world.[25] Or, to use a somewhat different analogy, since the typography of capitalism became increasingly privatized, surrealists mined the depths of their psyches in search of a realm of freedom that could explode the constraints of their experience.

For the *sorprendistas*, the "facts" of experience were no less offensive than they were for the French surrealists or their North American and British modernist counterparts. The *sorprendistas*' critique of realism as uncritically replicating the oppressive facts of experience is evident in one of the first issues of *La poesía sorprendida*. In his essay "Art, Artists, and Accountants," Eugenio Granell, the Spanish artist and writer on the journal's editorial board, echoes Breton by arguing that the abstraction of modern art rejects historical situatedness, which for him as well is nothing other than capitalist society. Modernist art is "not for those who

tally nor Saturn's hourglass nor the extra-smooth die of the best Swiss factory. Art is the only thing that the *business-men* [English in original] have not managed to subject to the tyranny of the clock."[26] The realist writer is not unlike the accountant, the figure of the capitalist, since both relish "taking stock" of what exists. Thus, like the accountant, the realist artist mimetically reproduces the present in all of its limitations without offering a critical vision. He writes: "it is not the mission of music to reproduce in the orchestra the confused and moody sounds that fill daily life. Those sounds are already produced without the need of orchestras." Those "confused and moody sounds" are the product of "a world governed by accountants."[27] In short, the artist's role, for Granell, is not to imitate a specifically bourgeois-governed reality, but, rather, to create its antithesis.

Granell's critique of reality and realism thus articulates a keynote of the surrealist-inspired *sorprendistas*: invention is a negation of the facticity of the oppressive present. Modernist abstraction is able to peel itself away from present reality, or as Breton noted of surrealist painting, it is a "particular means of expression to prevent the domination of the symbol by the thing signified [. . .]"[28] In terms almost Philip Sydneyian, minus the theological devaluation of the secular world, for the surrealist *sorprendistas*, the imagination invents a world aesthetically and ethically superior to the debased world of Dominican fascism and its "desert of petty days," in the words of another *sorprendista* poet.[29] To be sure, the ethical concept of beauty they employ derives from Breton's "convulsive beauty," the only kind worth having.[30] Breton's defamiliarizing "convulsive beauty," and its link to the supreme ethic of freedom, is the element of surprise in the *sorprendistas*' poetry.

Baeza Flores reflects on the meaning of this surprising and subversive beauty in the first issue of the journal and wonders whether poetry will surprise them and the world with its beauty.[31] Significantly, the "shock" effect crucial to this conception of modernist poetry is here linked explicitly with political aims. Baeza Flores goes on to write:

> We need her [poetry] in a deaf world, because she is the star of surprise and its unexpected light. Poetry is, then, a weapon, although less evident, graphic or corporeal, but with a power capable of destroying real arms, because its being corresponds to the hunger of people for a beautiful world and a true inner life or mind.[32]

Baeza Flores' combative conception of poetry, here linked to creating not only a free but also a peaceful world, is suggestively critical of the

increasing use of political violence in the Dominican Republic; the "deaf world" is deaf to the political crimes of Trujillo. In a larger register, the "deaf world," the world at war, is deaf to the poets' own call for "a beautiful world," and, by implication, a world without imperialist war and fascism. The passage also reveals that they conceived of their surprising poetry as visual rather than aural, since the "deaf world" needs to be *focused* on the "unexpected light" of the surprising star-like poetry. Like Granell, Baeza Flores suggests that the sounds of the present are too "confused and moody" to be useful for a poetry that surprises.

In this sense, too, Baeza Flores' use of the visual and astral metaphors evokes Breton's metaphorization of the "beautiful image" produced by the surrealist poem and, more precisely, its juxtaposition of images that produce an illuminating "spark."[33] "It is," Breton writes, "[. . .] from the fortuitous juxtaposition of the two terms that a particular light has sprung, *the light of the image*, to which we are infinitely sensitive."[34] In both cases, surrealist poetry is conceived as a "profane illumination"[35] that has the capacity to "shed light" not only on what is socially and politically abject in the world, but, more importantly, to illuminate the glimmerings and potential for world beauty in all of its politicized connotations for these writers. Another *sorprendista* poet writes, "The 'Surprised Poetry' is a poetry that surprises our eyes at each instant of life: a flying insect, an iridescent drop in the twilight, God, the sea, the infinite anguish of man . . ."[36] In other words, the *sorprendistas* do not in any way call for an art-for-art's sake that revels in a Kantian notion of the beautiful. Beauty, for them, should shock or awaken the reader from an ideological stupor that accepts the way things are, the so-called "facts." It is fitting, then, that in a letter to the editors of *La poesía sorprendida* a Cuban poet, Emilio Ballagas, claimed that there could not be a better title for their journal to save them from "la poesía acostumbrada" or a customary and accommodationist poetry.[37] Poetic beauty, or rather, the ability of poetry to shock the reader into recognizing beauty would, ideally, throw into relief its opposite, abject oppression. Thus, in the February 1944 issue commemorating the Dominican Republic's first centennial, the only issue in which the editors buckle under political pressure to "salute" Trujillo, the editorial proclaims the *sorprendistas*' hope for "the creation of a world more beautiful, more free and more deep."[38]

The *sorprendistas*' emphasis on surprise, then, is the antithesis of the rationalized and regulated society of Dominican fascism. Surprise, for the fascists, is unwanted precisely because it may upset their unrealizable desire for total control. Of course, the greatest surprises for the dictatorship were the various attempts to depose Trujillo and his lackeys from

government. In 1949, Dominican exiles unsuccessfully staged such a coup in an invasion at Luperón; ten years later another group of anti-fascist fighters from the Dominican Republic and other parts of Latin America similarly failed in their invasions at Constanza, Maimón, and Estero Hondo.[39] Surprise, in other words, is the manifestation of contradictions that the regime tried to conceal. The Dominican poets, conversely, foregoing military opposition, staged what we might call ideological surprise attacks on the regime: they meant to win people's minds away from the regime's ideology and glorification of "El Jefe" by opening up a world of love, imagination, and the natural world whose beauty would diminish the pseudo-stature of the "Benefactor." One could say a surrealist sublime would itself be a shock to the narcissism of the regime that wished to see the face of the Benefactor shine through all of its works.

III.

The *sorprendistas*' aspirations for poetry and society are unthinkable except within the framework of an international political and literary left of the period. This approach makes sense when one considers the widespread influence Marxism had on artists in the interwar and post-war period. While there are too many leftist writers to mention here, suffice it to say that most of the French surrealists were leftists of some stripe. A few of the most popular left-modernist writers and artists of the period include Chile's Pablo Neruda; Germany's Bertolt Brecht; Spain's Federico Garcia Lorca; North America's Langston Hughes, Muriel Rukeyser, and John Dos Passos; Mexico's David Siqueros, Diego Rivera, and Frida Kahlo; and numerous figures from the Caribbean, including Haiti's Jacques Roumain, Martinque's Aime Cesaire, and Cuba's Alejo Carpentier and Wifredo Lam. One should also recall that one of the most innovative and influential modernist painters of the period, Pablo Picasso, had demonstrated left leanings early in his career and joined the French Communist Party (FCP) in 1944 and remained a member until his death in 1973. Shortly after joining the FCP, Picasso declared, "No, painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war for attack and defense against the enemy."[40] In short, by the time the *sorprendistas* enter the literary scene, left modernism was firmly established as a major political and aesthetic movement.

Ironically, the main source of left modernist influence in the Dominican Republic was the result of Trujillo's racist policies. Beginning in 1939, Trujillo granted citizenship to European refugees from fascist Spain and Nazi-occupied territories as a way to appease the international criticism

of the Haitian massacre. Opportunistically, he also granted refuge because he wanted to "whiten" the mulatto population and bring it optically closer to his hispanophilic ideal of the nation. Consequently, 4,000 Spaniards emigrated from Spain. While most did not remain, "those who stayed contributed to Dominican society in a variety of ways [. . .] There were the beginnings of a night life, with meetings of artistic clubs and gatherings at private homes. Restaurants and cafés grew in number, as did theatricals, art exhibits and concerts."[41] Those who stayed included the influential painters José Gausachs, Manolo Pascual, José Vela Zanetti, and Granell, as well as the musical composer Enrique Casal Chapí who directed the Dominican Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional. Other longtime residents include the famous poet Pedro Salinas and Vicente Llorens Castillo, a literary professor who organized a conference at the Universidad de Santo Domingo in 1944 entitled "Cultura y colonización" on French and Spanish colonization on la Hispaniola.[42] It is important to note that these and other Spanish exiles were in exile precisely because they opposed fascism and Franco's victory. The majority was Spanish Republicans,[43] and Granell was a member of the Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista.[44] It is no wonder the *sorprendistas* frequently paid homage in their magazine to the Spanish Loyalists.

Moreover, major leftist surrealists visited the island on several occasions in the 1940s. In 1941, while fleeing Marseilles en route to safer havens in the Americas, Breton, the artist Jacqueline Lamba, Victor Serge, and the Cuban surrealist painter Lam visited the country. In Granell's interview of Breton for the Dominican newspaper *La Nacion*, Breton does not hesitate to discuss in Marxist terminology the goals of surrealism to "dialectically resolve all antinomies that oppose the progress of mankind," as well as the problems for writers in Vichy France.[45] Returning to Cuba from his three-year stay in Paris, where he was befriended by left modernist painters and writers, from Picasso to Paul Eluard,[46] Wifredo Lam ended up staying for three months in Santo Domingo "painting and establishing a dialogue with the then intellectual establishment."[47] In 1946, as announced in *La poesía sorprendida*, Breton returned to Santo Domingo and met with the *sorprendistas* on several occasions.[48]

The solidarity the Dominican writers and artists felt with other left modernists is clearly evident in the literary canon, or, more accurately, the community of writers they assembled in their journal. The breadth of notable progressive writers they published is remarkable and enlightening to this day, especially given our own institutional propensity to segment literary study according to race, nation, or period. They published progressive writers from Argentina, Brazil, China, Columbia, Costa Rica,

Cuba, Chile, Ecuador, Egypt, El Salvador, England, France, Germany, Guatemala, Haiti, Ireland, Italy, Nicaragua, Peru, Puerto Rico, Spain, Turkey, Uruguay, and the U.S. As one may imagine, they published a good number of the French surrealist and modernist writers, such as Breton, Paul Eluard, Robert Desnos, Antonin Artaud, and André Gide. They also published major writers such as William Blake, Horace Gregory, Jorge Cáceres, Jorge Guillén, Francisco Matos Paoli, Charles Henri Ford, Archibald McLeisch, Jules Supervielle, Li Po, Tufu, Jorge Carrera Andrade, Hart Crane, Stephen Spender, Ramón Guirao, José Lezama Lima, C. Day Lewis, and James Joyce, as well as their own Mieses Burgos, Freddy Garton Arce, Domingo Moreno Jimenes, Aída Cartagena Portalatín, Antonio Fernández Spencer, and Manuel Rueda.

While they did not simply publish most of these writers because of their progressive politics, as they were concerned with literary quality, it is undeniable that they were guided by their political sympathies. In the first number of *La poesía sorprendida* they published a selection of William Blake's "Milton," a poem in which Blake criticizes (among other things) capitalist industrialization as "dark Satanic mills" and expresses his desire to fight "Till we have built Jerusalem / In England's green and pleasant land."[49] Similarly, they published Stephen Spender's "Us" (translated "Oh Joven Oh Camarada") which begins: "Oh young men oh comrades / it is too late now to stay in those houses / your fathers built where they built you to breed / money on money it is too late / to make or to count what was made."[50] Indeed, the poem ends by calling on young comrades to "advance to rebel." One can also point to the excerpts the journal published from Charles Henri Ford's "ABC," one that reads "M is the muse of murder: / money: melancholy: mirth: / masks for gas police the power / that anagrams your date of birth."[51] One can also cite their enthusiastic publication of Jorge Carrera Andrade, a renowned Guatemalan poet, whose political and poetic career was tied to progressive social causes of Guatemala's indigenous peoples and workers. While the *sorprendistas* published a few of his less incendiary poems, those who knew or were subsequently inspired to read Carrera may well have known his "Poems of the Day After Tomorrow," which reads in part: "Only the right to die, comrades of the world! / A hundred hands share the offerings of the earth. / It is time to hurl ourselves into the streets and squares / To redeem the Work that we ourselves constructed."[52] It is also noteworthy that in the mid 1940s Carrera published *Lugar de Origen*, which contains poems about the expropriation of farmers' lands, as in "Juan Sin Cielo." Yet even his "Cuaderno del Paracaidista," published in the June 1944 issue of *La poesía sorprendida*, suggests a better, post-

war, post-tragic world without "cities in rubble, / mutilated families, scattered over the earth [. . .]"[53]

It is also significant that the magazine published Haitian poets in the centennial issue that commemorated the establishment of the Dominican Republic as a republic independent of Haiti, which had occupied the country from 1809 to 1843. After the liberation, led by Juan Pablo Duarte, Francisco del Rosario Sánchez, and Matías Ramón Mella, Dominican leaders had consistently worked to inculcate within the Dominican population its difference from and superiority to Haitians which, as noted earlier, culminated in the Haitian massacre in 1937 and exists to this day in a racist division of labor, especially in the bateys of the sugar industries. By publishing poems by Roussan Camille, Clement Magloire-Fills, and Herard C. L. Roy, the *sorprendistas* symbolically asserted their rejection of Trujillo's attempt to demonize Haitians.[54] They imply their antiracist solidarity with Haitians, who, after all, shared similar histories with Dominicans, from colonization, slavery, dictatorship, and more recently a U.S. military occupation that lasted in Haiti from 1915 to 1934.

The literary community the *sorprendistas* assembled in *La poesía sorprendida* was a sort of microcosm of the kind of world they wanted. It also was the negation of the world in which they lived, a world governed by profiteering, racism, nationalism, and war—a kind of critical fissure in the architecture of the regime. And it was consonant with the ideals of the world communist movement of the time. Their first issue clearly signals the internationalist orientation of their journal and the principle that would guide their own radical project of "canonization." Baeza Flores writes:

> We are for a national poetry nourished in the universal [. . .] for creation without limits, without borders, and permanent; and with the mysterious world of man, universal, secret, solitary and intimate, the creator, always.
>
> We are against all limitations of man, life, and poetry; against all false insularisms that are not born from a universal nationality in the deep eternity of all cultures; against the permanent treachery against poetry and its permanent traitors of shortsighted vision.[55]

This rather ambiguous notion of a "universal nationality," or of a "national poetry nourished in the universal," echoes the Leninist view that informed the Communist position on colonial peoples of the time, namely, that they are subject nations whose struggles are part of an international struggle against colonialism and imperialism; therefore, one needed to

recognize simultaneously the national "form" and the universally/proletarian "content" of their lives and struggles.[56]

Thus, like other Caribbean surrealists such as Wifredo Lam, Dominican writers incorporated the national culture and the flora and fauna of the Caribbean island into their poetry, while maintaining the universal significance of their subject matter. The most obvious example of a surrealist national and universal poem is Franklin Mieses Burgos' poem "View with 'Merengue' in the Background." The poem reads in part:

> Inside your solitary night of tears four hundred years long.
> Inside your night fallen on this island like hurricane stricken skies
> between bitter sugarcane and a black man who doesn't sow,
> because the water's strands of hair aren't long enough.
> Immediately next to the mahogany shadow of your flesh tamarind grown—among sour lemons.
> Near your coconut heart laughter,
> Face to face with your violet wounded lips where your
> words bleed drops by drop like from a dark river,
> Like two firm coiled *bejucos*
> let us dance an endless merengue till dawn,
> among Caribbean peppers of stolen caresses,
> there is room for skies of rum,
> under a white cassava moon.
> I am already tempted by the real routes
> of cinnamon medlar trees
> from your own bunch!
> And I do not know what tropical sun has induced in me these violent visceral desires
> to seek delicate slaves in the shadows.
> .....
> Let us dance merengue with our backs facing the shadows of our previous sorrows![57]

Contradicting Trujillo's elevation of merengue to the national music and dance of the country and as a recurrent occasion of national pride, Mieses Burgos uses merengue to highlight a shameful history of slavery and colonialism on the island. The poem's speaker uses the trope of the dance as an expression to embrace the "delicate Maroons," fugitive slaves, who live "in the shadows" of the official, celebratory stories of the regime. And, in case we missed the significance of his usage of the word "cimarronas" or Maroons, he writes that those embraced slaves in the "bitter" (and not sweet) sugarcane fields are clearly "black" and not the white washed "indios" of Trujillo's hispanophilic imagination. To

be sure, his reference to "the mahogany shadow" of his partner's flesh as "tamarind grown" signifies the *beauty* of his dance partner, who, like the tamarind, originated in Africa. Mieses Burgos preserves the locality of the island and people in his surrealist metaphors such as "Caribbean peppers of stolen caresses," "coconut heart laughter," "skies of rum," and "white cassava moon," while emphasizing the universality of the slave's sorrow "[b]eyond your never-ending night!" His use of the word *bejucos* is particularly important in this regard, since it is a word of Caribbean origin meaning "vines." That is, personifying the subject of exploitation and oppression as a dance partner, he "nationalizes" his tight embrace of this "universal" history of slavery and colonialism and as well as its "deep river of tears [that] / Will have to flow forever [. . .]" It is difficult not to recall here Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, published three years after Mieses Burgos' poem, that also explores a local Antillean culture and people caught up in a universal history of class oppression, racism, and resistance.[58]

One may speculate that the ambiguity of the concept of a "universal nationality" was a protective political measure for the editors; in any case, the *sorprendistas*' work emphasized the creation of universal culture that did not obliterate the distinctiveness of their Caribbean experience. This internationalist sentiment finds strong confirmation in *Clima de Eternidad* (1944), where Mieses Burgos urges a young comrade from Spain that "One has to say goodbye to all flags!"[59] It is no wonder that the review printed on its masthead the implicit theme of every issue: "Poetry of the universal man." Baeza Flores retrospectively notes in his history of twentieth-century Dominican poetry that the movement's slogan expressed the *sorprendistas*' "goodwill for the future, to make a better world with liberty and justice, exempt from terror and tyranny."[60]

IV.

The revolutionary tradition and community La Poesía Sorprendida assembled was symptomatic of the relative absence of a progressive literary and political community in the Dominican Republic in the 1940s. It was, in other words, symptomatic of the "constriction of space" or the overdetermination of all aspects of life by capital-driven fascism. One can view La Poesía Sorprendida as a utopian space in the heart of Dominican fascism. To be sure, the social vacuum of the regime called forth from the surprised poets the creation of an interior zone—a "free zone"—conceptually far removed from those industrial zones that international

capital has created of late on the island. In the history of twentieth-century political movements against various forms of oppression, such interior zones designated liberated territories that leftist *guerrilleros* establish, as in the revolutions of China, Cuba, or Nicaragua.

While we cannot equate the *sorprendistas*' literary movement with these overtly political movements, it is important to note that they insisted on the importance of liberated "interiors" to their own project of creating a beautiful world. Their focus on interior spaces is evident in their many references in essays and poems on the importance of "solitude." In the earlier numbers of their journal, they tend to view solitude as necessary to creation. Like other modernists before them influenced by modern psychology, and especially by psychoanalysis, solitude reveals the depths of an inner psychological world that does not conform to the social world and is, in fact, much richer in possibility for both life and poetry. Mariano Lebrón Saviñon writes, "When man is alone he wants to create. Solitude is an attribute of love and creation [. . .]"[61] The editors note in their centennial issue that only by attending to one's interior life can one hear a "quiet" or "silent love," an "amor callado."[62] Hence, akin to their endeavor to create a poetic community inside the fascist community of the regime, their insistence on the interior world of the poet confirms their essentially antagonistic relationship with an outwardly fascistic society.

However, once they realized that their excursions into the inner world did nothing to enrich public life, they lost their reason for existence. In his essay "Poeta y Soledad," published in the final issue of *La poesía sorprendida*, Antonio Fernandez Spencer angrily expresses this loss of confidence in the movement. To be sure, Fernandez Spencer's essay comes at a time when the regime solidifies its power by cracking down on dissident movements and organizations after a brief period of political liberalization in 1946. His essay can be read as a kind of parting shot at the Trujillo regime and the capitalist world order in general for having neglected the interior life of human beings and the poets who extend and defend such interiority:

> The man of today—worker, merchant, politician—has simply forgotten his nature: he has ceased to be a man. This outer man, savage, is an enemy, a bitter enemy of that inner man that works, creates, and is saved by his creation. This society is sustained by that savage, indifferent enemy: the business-minded man; the man who trades even with the shades of the air.[63]

Importantly, for Fernandez Spencer, this reduction of human beings to exteriority or to bourgeois practices—especially the salesman—propels the poets to love their solitude and a "saving hermeticism" or "hermetismo salvador" even more.[64] The poets' retreat into solitude is, therefore, itself an indicator of the intellectual poverty of the *bourgeois-trujillista* regime. The apparently anti-social gesture of the *sorprendistas*' retreat into the solitary self is itself political—a fall back position once official society presents itself as irredeemably deaf, dumb, and blind to its own malaise. In fact, Fernandez Spencer makes it clear that the poet is tired of suffering in solitude and "now wants to enjoy the joy of the crowds."[65] Or, if we translate the Spanish word for "crowd," *muchedumbres*, according to its politically charged connotations, we could say Fernandez Spencer longs to be a part of the "masses" but cannot since *trujillista* society confines the masses to the "desert of petty days."[66] He even goes so far as to describe the poets as "outcasts" in such a misanthropic society. One can say that Spencer turns a necessity—the "saving hermeticism"—into a virtue, since the "outward man" or public sphere of action is circumscribed by the myriad acts of fealty to the Dominican *patria* supervised like a huge bureaucratic corporation. In a matter of four years, the *sorprendistas*' hope to surprise and awaken "the deaf world" seems to have turned into pessimism, for, as Fernandez Spencer writes, "The poet is alone and will be, at a minimum, until the end of this century."[67] Indeed, according to their own standard—"that the work of art and life should be united"[68]—the movement had failed to transform Dominican society in the short run.

Retrospect allows us to give more credit to the movement than Fernandez Spencer granted. While the *sorprendistas*' hope to fuse life and art (as they conceived it) has yet to be realized in the Dominican Republic, their impact can be felt in the literary and art movements they subsequently inspired. They are largely responsible for making surrealism a culturally dominant movement on their two thirds of La Hispaniola and for cultivating a number of major Dominican poets, such as Manuel Rueda, Aida Portalatin, and Spencer, who went on to shape Dominican poetry and literary discourses for the remainder of the twentieth-century.

Yet, one must also acknowledge that La Poesía Sorprendida was a movement subject to the philosophical idealism characteristic of much twentieth-century modernism. Their belief that poetry could strengthen the imagination and inner life as a way to transform outer life expressed their over-estimation of the power of ideas to transform human identity and social relations. The power of capital to command life in the Dominican Republic through its *trujillista* personifications required organized

political activity to deal it its deathblow. Yet, even then, capital has found a series of new personifications, from Joaquín Balaguer's multiple presidencies up through his successors beholden to largely foreign banks, local and multinational corporations, and the IMF, to carry out the dictates of capital accumulation, condemning Dominican workers and farmers to exploitation and poverty. In short, La Poesía Sorprendida's legacy may very well be that the literary-ideological component of anti-capitalist, anti-fascist, and anti-colonial struggle will remain ineffective as long as the ruling classes and their institutions are not surprised by more than poetry.

NOTES

1. André Breton, quoted in Eugenio Granell. "André Breton con 'la poesía sorprendida,'" *La poesía sorprendida* 17 (Jan–April 1946); reprint, in *Publicaciones y opiniones de la poesía sorprendida* (San Pedro de Macoris, R.D.: Universidad Central Del Este, 1988), 292. All translations of quotes from *La poesía sorprendida* are mine.

2. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The History of the World, 1914–1991* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 112.

3. José Alcántara Almánzar, "Los escritores dominicanos bajos la dictadura de Trujillo," *Revista/Review Interamericana* 21 (1991): 97–109. 99.

4. Frank Moya Pons, *The Dominican Republic: A National History* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, Inc., 1998), 321–339.

5. John Moors Cabot, quoted in Eric Paul Roorda, *The Dictator Next Door: The Good Neighbor Policy and the Trujillo Regime in the Dominican Republic, 1930–1945* (Durham and London, 1998), 60.

6. Moya Pons, *The Dominican Republic*, 365.

7. Ibid., 375.

8. Michael R. Hall, *Sugar and Power in the Dominican Republic: Eisenhower, Kennedy, and the Trujillos* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), 21.

9. Jonathan Hartlyn, *The Struggle of Democratic Politics in the Dominican Republic* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 47.

10. Jeannette Miller, "An Approach to Dominican Art: 1920–1970," in *Modern and Contemporary Art of the Dominican Republic*, ed. Suzanne Stratton (New York: Americas Society and The Spanish Institute, 1996), 33–51. 37.

11. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 127–188. 184.

12. Moya Pons, *The Dominican Republic*, 375.

13. Paul Austerlitz, *Merengue: Dominican Music and Dominican Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 61.

14. Alcántara Almánzar, "Los escritores dominicanos," 101.

15. Moya Pons, *The Dominican Republic*, 368.

16. David Howard, *Coloring the Nation: Race and Ethnicity in the Dominican Republic* (Oxford and Boulder, CO: Signal Books, 2001), 41.

17. Moya Pons, *The Dominican Republic*, 368.

18. Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London and New York: Verso, 1990), 71.

19. István Mészáros, *Beyond Capital: Towards a Theory of Transition* (London: Merlin Press, 1995), 41.

20. Ibid.

21. Alcántara Almánzar, "Los escritores dominicanos," 107.

22. André Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism," in *Manifestos of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1972), 3–47. 9.

23. Ibid., 10.

24. Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (1926; reprint, Boston: Exact Change, 1994).

25. Ernst Bloch, "Discussing Expressionism," in *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (New York and London: Verso Press, 1986), 16–27. 22.

26. Eugenio Granell, "Art, Artists, and Accountants," *La poesía Sorprendida* 3 (Dec. 1943); reprint, in *Publicaciones y opiniones de la poesía sorprendida* (San Pedro de Macoris, R.D.: Universidad Central Del Este, 1988), 28.

27. Ibid.

28. André Breton, "Surrealism and Painting," in *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Taylor Watson (Boston: MFA publications, 2002), 1–48, 8.

29. Antonio Fernández Spencer, "Poeta y Soledad," *La poesía Sorprendida* 21 (April–May 1947); reprint, in *Publicaciones y opiniones de la poesía sorprendida* (San Pedro de Macoris, R.D.: Universidad Central Del Este, 1988), 347–348. 347.

30. André Breton, *Nadia*, trans. Richard Howard (1928; reprint, New York: Dover Press, 1960), 160.

31. Alberto Baeza Flores, "Apasionado Destino," *La poesía sorprendida* 1 (Oct. 1943); reprint, in *Publicaciones y opiniones de la poesía sorprendida* (San Pedro de Macoris, R.D.: Universidad Central Del Este, 1988), 1.

32. Ibid.

33. André Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism," 37.

34. Ibid.

35. Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," in *Selected Writings, 1927–1934*, Vol. 2, trans. Rodney Livingston et al. (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 209.

36. Domingo Moreno Jimenes, "Conversacion al aire libre," *La poesía sorprendida* 21 (Nov. 1943); reprint, in *Publicaciones y opiniones de la poesía sorprendida* (San Pedro de Macoris, R.D.: Universidad Central Del Este, 1988), 13.

37. Emilio Ballagas, quoted in Freddy Gatón Arce, "La poesía sorprendida: Numeros, Citas y Etceteras," in *Publicaciones y opiniones de la poesía sorprendida* (San Pedro de Macoris, R.D.: Universidad Central Del Este, 1988), III–XIV. VII.

38. Franklin Mieses Burgos et al, "Tiempo de Cien Años," *La poesía sorprendida* 5 (Feb. 1944); reprint, in *Publicaciones y opiniones de la poesía sorprendida* (San Pedro de Macoris, R.D.: Universidad Central Del Este, 1988), 45–46. 46.

39. Moya Pons, *The Dominican Republic*, 371.

40. Pablo Picasso, quoted in Gertje R. Utley, *Picasso: The Communist Years* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 209.

41. Miller, "An Approach to Dominican Art," 37.

42. Mieses Burgos et al, "Mundo Mas Amplio," *La poesía sorprendida* 9 (June 1944); reprint, in *Publicaciones y opiniones de la poesía sorprendida* (San Pedro de Macoris, R.D.: Universidad Central Del Este, 1988), 132.

43. Miller, "An Approach to Dominican Art," 37.

44. Elena Pellegrini, "BiografÍas de los artistos," in *Modern and Contemporary Art of the Dominican Republic*, ed. Suzanne Stratton (New York: Americas Society and The Spanish Institute, 1996), 168–176. 169.

45. André Breton, interview by Eugenio Granell, in *La Nacion (*May 28, 1941); reprint in *Eugenio Granell: Exposición antológica, 1940–1990: octubre 1990–enero 1991, Sala de Exposiciones de la Comunidad de Madrid* (Madrid: Comunidad de Madrid, Consejeria de Cultura, 1990), 423–429. 425.

46. Jacques Leenhard et al, *Wifredo Lam and His Contemporaries, 1938–1952* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1992), 92.

47. Miller, "An Approach to Dominican Art," 40.

48. Franklin Mieses Burgos, "André Breton Con 'La poesía sorprendida," *La poesía sorprendida* 17 (Jan.–April 1946); reprint, in *Publicaciones y opiniones de la poesía sorprendida* (San Pedro de Macoris, R.D.: Universidad Central Del Este, 1988), 292.

49. William Blake, "Milton," in *The Poems of William Blake*, ed. W. H. Stevenson (London: Longman, 1971), 487–576. 489; "De Milton," in *La poesía sorprendida* 1 (Oct. 1943); reprint, in *Publicaciones y opiniones de la poesía sorprendida* (San Pedro de Macoris, R.D.: Universidad Central Del Este, 1988), 7.

50. Stephen Spender, "Us," in *Collected Poems, 1928–1985* (New York: Random House, 1986), 32; *La poesía sorprendida*, 4 (January 1944); reprint, in *Publicaciones y opiniones de la poesía sorprendida* (San Pedro de Macoris, R.D.: Universidad Central Del Este, 1988), 43.

51. Charles Henri Ford, "ABC," in *Out of the Labyrinth: Selected Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1991), 38–42. 40; *La poesía sorprendida*, 8 (May 1944); reprint, in *Publicaciones y opiniones de la poesía sorprendida* (San Pedro de Macoris, R.D.: Universidad Central Del Este, 1988), 115.

52. Jorge Carrera Andrade, "Poems of the Day After Tomorrow," in *Selected Poems*, trans. H. R. Hays (New York: Suny Press, 1972), 65–71. 69.

53. Jorge Carrera Andrade, "Cuaderno del Paracaidista," *La poesía sorprendida* 8 (May 1944); reprint, in *Publicaciones y opiniones de la poesía sorprendida* (San Pedro de Macoris, R.D.: Universidad Central Del Este, 1988), 124.

54. See Roussan Camille, "Marina"; Clement Magloire-Fils, "Lamento"; and Herard C.L. Roy "Variaciones Tropicales," *La poesía sorprendida* 5 (Feb. 1944); reprint, in *Publicaciones y opiniones de la poesía sorprendida* (San Pedro de Macoris, R.D.: Universidad Central Del Este, 1988), 56–57.

55. Alberto Baeza Flores, "Apasionado Destino," *La poesía sorprendida* 1 (Oct. 1943); reprint, in *Publicaciones y opiniones de la poesía sorprendida* (San Pedro de Macoris, R.D.: Universidad Central Del Este, 1988), 1.

56. V. I. Lenin. "The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination," in *Lenin on the National and Colonial Questions: Three Articles* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1970), 1–19. See also Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 148.

57. Franklin Mieses Burgos, "Paisaje con un Merengue al Fondo," *La poesía sorprendida* 3 (Dec. 1943); reprint, in *Publicaciones y opiniones de la poesía sorprendida* (San Pedro de Macoris, R.D.: Universidad Central Del Este, 1988), 24.

58. Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, trans. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (1947; reprint, Middleton, CT.: Wesleyan University Press, 2001).

59. Franklin Mieses Burgos, *Clima de Eternidad* (Ciudad Trujillo: Ediciones "La poesía sorprendida," 1944)*;* reprint, in *Publicaciones y opiniones de la poesía sorprendida* (San Pedro de Macoris, R.D.: Universidad Central Del Este, 1988), 363.

60. Alberto Baeza Flores, *La poesía dominicana en el siglo XX: Historia, critica, estudio comparativo y estilístico* (Santo Domingo: Biblioteca Nacional, 1986), 11, my translation.

61. Mariano Lebrón Saviñón, "Bosque y Cielo," *La poesía sorprendida* 3 (Dec. 1943); reprint, in *Publicaciones y opiniones de la poesía sorprendida* (San Pedro de Macoris, R.D.: Universidad Central Del Este, 1988), 21.

62. Franklin Mieses Burgos et al, "Tiempo de Cien Años," *La poesía sorprendida* 5 (Feb. 1944); reprint, in *Publicaciones y opiniones de la poesía sorprendida* (San Pedro de Macoris, R.D.: Universidad Central Del Este, 1988), 45–46. 45.

63. Antonio Fernandez Spencer, "Poeta y Soledad," 347.

64. Ibid.

65. Ibid.

66. Ibid.

67. Ibid.

68. Alberto Baeza Flores et al, "Mundo Nuestra," *La poesía sorprendida* 6 (March 1944); reprint, in *Publicaciones y opiniones de la poesía sorprendida* (San Pedro de Macoris, R.D.: Universidad Central Del Este, 1988), 83–84. 83.