PURGING THE PAST: PALMA SOLA, TRUJILLO, AND THE SALVATION OF THE DOMINICAN NATION

by

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Abstract

This essay examines the rise of Palma Sola, a religious community in the south-west region of the Dominican Republic, in the wake of the assassination of the long-reigning dictator, Rafael Leónidas Trujillo. The focus of the thesis is on the divergent narratives produced within the community at Palma Sola and those produced by actors in the capital, leading up to an armed intervention by state forces at the end of December 1962. A central argument is made that, despite very different viewpoints on the significance and function of Palma Sola, both narratives evince a concern with reorganizing the meaning of the dictatorial past, and a desire to chart a path toward a more auspicious future. Throughout, this paper suggests that practice must be examined alongside discourses and symbols in historical explorations of culture. Further, it argues that relying on oversimplified definitions of “religion” and the “nation” can be misleading, for it disallows an analysis that can locate the conjoined roots of these divergent narratives.
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Introduction

Domingo Bautista was not, by his own account, inclined toward the superstitions practiced by so many of his neighbors in the San Juan Valley. Accordingly, in early 1960, when he first heard about León and Plinio Rodríguez Ventura through a friend, he eyed their growing reputations as gifted spiritual healers with a good measure of suspicion. His wariness notwithstanding, Bautista was impressed by the fact that many elderly members of the local population recognized in the Rodríguez brothers the return of the spirit of Papá Liborio, a curandero (faith-healer) who had gained popularity in the region half a century earlier.¹ Still, having witnessed the dangers of false belief before, he did not abandon his skepticism entirely, and hung curiously around the edges of the growing inner circle of the Rodríguez’s followers, from where he heard Liborio make the following prediction through one of his earthly interlocutors:

\[ \text{Pues, miren mis hijos, el Presidente Trujillo, para llegar al poder, hizo un compromiso conmigo y yo Liborio, le entregué el poder por 20 años. Al cumplir este tiempo, él se cansó de caminar detrás de mí... Ahora él está aferrado a una cosa ajena, y confiando en los brujos se ha dormido y así durmiendo lo voy a despecuezar.}\]

These were dangerous words. A threat to bring down the long-reigning dictator, El Generalísimo Rafael Leónidas Trujillo, would be enough to land oneself in the notorious detention center of the Military Intelligence Service (SIM), La Cuarenta, and informers were everywhere.³ But even more than a threat, Liborio offered this prediction as proof of León and

² Domingo Bautista. Si me permiten hablar,(pp. 46-7)
Plinio’s ability to serve as conduits for his spirit. If Trujillo survives past June 1961, he
challenged, then do not believe in me.⁴ Bautista, hedging his bets, distanced himself from the
Mellizos (twins), as the Rodríguez brothers came to be known, and awaited proof of their
divinity.

We know how this turned out. Trujillo was gunned down along a lonely stretch of
highway outside of Santo Domingo on the night of 30 May 1961. With this clear proof of the
Mellizos’ prophetic powers, Bautista the hardboiled skeptic accepted them – albeit with some
lingering doubts – as the embodied return of Liborio’s spirit, and became a close confidante of
both brothers and an influential member of Palma Sola, the religious community they would
form in September 1961.⁵ In the memoir he penned to offer an insider’s view of the community,
Bautista traces his involvement in the founding of Palma Sola, and his role as the head of its
Guardia, an unarmed security force that maintained order in the community. He testifies as well
to the growing dismay of local and national authorities, who viewed Palma Sola and the
resurgence of Liborismo as an embarrassing “outbreak of savagery” and potent reminder of how
far the nation had yet to travel on the road to civilization. This dismay culminated in an outburst
of state violence on 28 December 1962, when military and special police forces moved in to

writes that for peasants during the Trujillato, “Most disconcerting was the knowledge that
acquaintances, friends, neighbors, and even (former) spouses might denounce one… Most
peasants recalled living in fear that they might be denounced for ‘improper’ or ‘disloyal’
speech.” (p. 229)

⁴ Bautista, Si me permiten hablar, (p. 47).
⁵ Bautista’s narrative has some interesting tensions, and it is unclear whether his intermittent
expressions of skepticism about the veracity of the Mellizos’ claims is a genuine reflection of his
recollections of that time, or if this insistent claim to rationality is a response to the
overwhelmingly negative depiction of palmasolistas in the contemporary press. Perhaps, in
Spivak’s sense, Bautista adopted a certain language in order to be heard, and thus yoked his
authorial voice to his deeply rooted commitment to empirical standards of “truth.” See Gayatri
Spivak. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” In Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds. Marxism
crush the movement, leaving some eight hundred dead and nearly seven hundred in police custody. Bautista was fortunate to escape with his life.

What accounts for this dramatic confrontation? Did the Mellizos and their followers really pose such a threat to the country’s fragile peace and democracy, as the state contended? Was Palma Sola the site of an impending neo-Trujillista coup? Or were the palmasolistas simply victims of a larger conspiracy to purge the military of a constitutionalist army general, the only member of the military to die that day? My interest here is not to try to make sense of these tumultuous events, for the traces of violence contained in the surviving records are scattered, chaotic and confused, perhaps much like the violence itself. My concern, rather, is to explore what the divergent narratives about Palma Sola - those emerging from within the community itself (the palmasolista narrative) and what I will call the capitaleño narrative, built largely from the words of newsmen in the capital and government authorities – might reveal about the ways that a diverse range of Dominican citizens sought, in the wake of Trujillo’s death, to make sense of the past and to chart a path toward a more auspicious future. In his classic treatise on narratives and historical representation, Hayden White points out that although we tend to think of human agency as working forward, sometimes it involves a “willing backward,” a re-employment of past events in order to “draw from the new emplotment reasons for acting

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6 Precise numbers of the dead are impossible to discern. At the time, the Consejo de Estado reported no more than forty deaths. León Rodriguez, who was already in police custody at the time of the massacre, suggested perhaps 150 to 200. Most scholars working on Palma Sola follow Juan Manuel García’s lead in assuming eight hundred people perished that day. García arrives at that calculation by working backward from the number of people who lived in Palma Sola – somewhere between 1500 and 2000 – and then subtracting the number of detainees from that number. I am not wholly convinced by this arithmetic, as it is likely that some people escaped, but I have no better means to determine the actual number of fatalities. See Garcia, La Masacre de Palma Sola: Partidos, lucha política, y el asesinato del general: 1961-1963. Santo Domingo: Editora Alfa & Omega, 1986.
differently in the future. The desire to mark out the road to the future was a critical concern in both narratives, in all their variations, but, significantly, in the capitaleños’ ordering of history Palma Sola was positioned not as part of a new world but as a dangerous relic of the past. These divergent narratives map, in part, onto historical divisions between city and campo, but, I argue here, their respective “re-emploitments” also diverged because they began with distinctive understandings of the past.

And reckoning with the past had become, in the wake of Trujillo’s assassination, an urgent task. In a national landscape literally littered with his image, pulling down statues and busts of the larger-than-life dictator was part and parcel of an emerging project to create a new political system that did not depend on dictatorship for its stability. If Trujillo had come closer, during the final years of his reign, to the ideal “sultanistic” type dictator, he did not start out that way. Richard Turits argues persuasively that, on the contrary, Trujillo maintained his long hold on the country through the cultivation of a sort of rural populism, offering peasants both material gains in the form of legalized land tenure and ideological gains through granting them, for the first time, a “critical place” in the nation’s identity and modernity. Lauren Derby’s work suggests that Trujillo’s hegemony was also deeply dependent on his clever adoption of popular cultural forms such as “gossip, gift, exchange, fictive kinship, and witchcraft into the repertoire of domination of the regime,” thus embedding the regime into the daily practices that might conceivably have afforded Dominicans a place to evade Trujillo’s pervasive power. Echoing

8 Turits, Foundations of Despotism, (p. 1).
Turits’ notion of a regime of “terror and progress,” \(^{10}\) Derby reads the Trujillato as a combination of “fear and patronage” that led to a “culture of compliance.” \(^{11}\) Thus, at the end of the Trujillato, to make sense of the past was also to make sense of this compliance. The story of *la Era de Trujillo* became, in part, a story about who was to blame for its tenacity.

Strikingly, though his ghost loomed large in the capital, where editorialists debated how to contend with the Trujillista mindset that lingered on past the dictator’s death, \(^{12}\) in the surviving palmasolista literature, Trujillo is most notable by his absence. In general, the ritual songs that were sung at Palma Sola reflected a broad notion of an “evil” past, marked by chaos and darkness, and a perfect new world on the horizon. I argue here that the silences around the Trujillato at Palma Sola suggest that those who sought the Mellizos out and found comfort in their words and rituals had a deeply ambivalent relationship to Trujillo, who was both their Benefactor and an omnipresent and omnipotent force whose whims might decide their fate. The capitaleño narrative, however, was far more explicit about the ways that Trujillo figured in the emergence of the community. In this telling, Palma Sola represented everything that was wrong with the nation, both the reason for Trujillo’s rise and an effect of his long reign. As a symbol and a manifestation of the insufficient modernity of the Dominican Republic, Palma Sola served as a clear-cut example of the pernicious “ignorance” of “backward” peasants that had been so open to manipulation by evil-doers like Trujillo. Whether explicitly mentioned or not, the specter of Trujillo haunted Palma Sola and Santo Domingo alike.

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\(^{10}\) Turits, *Foundations of Despotism*, (p. 232).
\(^{11}\) Derby, *The Dictator’s Seduction*, (p. 7).
Exorcising the recent past was, likewise, achieved through different means according to these narratives. In Palma Sola, the essential actions were the purgation of sin, the banishing of evil *brujos* (witches) and spirits, and the creation of an egalitarian, harmonious community under the guardianship of the resurrected Liborio. Capitaleño ‘civil society,’ on the other hand, saw the dispatch of ignorance as the vital step in redeeming the nation, and thus the road to the hoped-for ‘civilization’ would be paved with social programs in education, proper Catholic religious instruction, sanitation, infrastructure development, and agricultural innovation. I want to make clear that I see the palmasolistas’ ignorance as no more – or less – ‘real’ than the evil spirits they sought to banish. It would, however, be disingenuous of me to insist that I accept the existence of brujos as fact; I am too far removed from Liborista practices to be able to embody them and suspend my own ‘rationalist’ training. Following Dipesh Chakrabarty, I accept that there is an element of “radical untranslatability” between spiritual ways-of-being and secular, “universal” categories.\(^3\) Thus, working within a social science tradition that is invested in “a certain kind of rationality and in a particular understanding of the ‘real’” that leaves no room for the agency of gods and spirits in our narratives is a limitation I cannot sweep aside in some dramatic gesture of communion with the subaltern.\(^4\) But to subvert at least some of the deleterious effects of this limitation, I would like to move away from reading Palma Sola as an instance of some discrete aspect of human existence called “religion.” As a category, it carries too much weight, and it suggests a near-complete sundering from ‘reason.’ The problem is inherent in the subject-object divide – that is, between academic observer-subject and ‘superstitious’ object – that Chakrabarty finds so troubling. In his rendering, “reason becomes elitist whenever we allow unreason and


\(^{14}\) Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe,* (p. 88, p. 98).
superstition to stand in for backwardness,” a move that capitaleño actors certainly repeated in
their depictions of Palma Sola.15

However, not only does the category of “religion” split the world into rational/irrational
spheres, the very notion that it is something around which we can draw clear boundaries is itself
“culturally bound, historically recent, and discursively loaded.”16 It is in part for this reason that
I choose to focus on the narratives emerging from within the community and from the forces in
the capital that eventually moved in to destroy it. The point is not to avoid the fraught territory
of “religion”, but to show how notions like redemption and salvation might find a home in
discourses and practices that are ostensibly secular. In an important respect, this effort to
equalize seemingly antithetical narratives takes the lead from Stephan Palmié’s exploration of
the conjoined roots of Afro-Cuban witchcraft and “modern” science. Palmié’s work eloquently
reveals the liberating possibilities of playing “local, disqualified forms of interpretation” out
against the “regimes of knowledge” that have come to define them as anomalous.17 Looking at
both Liborismo and the capitaleño doctrine of civilization as narrative productions that have no
greater or lesser “diagnostic purchase on social facticity” allows me to explore Palma Sola from
a different angle, one that aims to dismantle the kind of stark divisions between the two that
made the massacre thinkable in the first place.18 What other story can be told about this tragic
incident by holding together these two narratives that seem, on the surface, to be profoundly
antagonistic?

15 Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe, (pp. 237-8).
16 Bruce Lincoln. Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11. Chicago: 
17 Stephan Palmié, Wizards and Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity and Tradition. 
18 Palmié, Wizards and Scientists, (p. 70).
I want to be clear, however, that in invoking the term *narrative* I am not suggesting that this type of production is purely textual. While much indebted to and influenced by the now not-so-new cultural history, I agree with Richard Biernacki that reading culture as a system of signs and symbols is a risky proposition. Rather I want to take seriously the importance of *practice*, to move away from a totalizing view of culture as a coherent system. As Catherine Bell reminds us, focusing on practices, on “habits of action” instead of structures of belief, allows us to explore the incoherencies and disagreements within a society, the “individualized inner juggling and tensions, as well as practical non-judgments and refusals to engage.” Moreover, if culture can be understood as the making of meaning – and, consonantly, as a “strategic site for contestation between dominant and popular classes” – then, surely a large part of that meaning – and that contestation – comes from what we do as well as what symbols we engage in the process. For that reason, I consider the palmasolista and capitaleño narratives in the early post-Trujillo world to be a kind of *practical knowledge*, that which both explains the world but also offers a blueprint for action within it – a blueprint that may be built upon in creative ways by different actors – thus creating meaning in the nexus of practice and symbol.

However, though I see both the palmasolista and the capitaleño narratives as constituted by words as well as actions, discourses as well as practices, the access I have to these elements is unequal. With the notable exception of Bautista’s memoir, most of the voices from Palma Sola survive in a form mediated by police, government authorities, and reporters, within a climate of

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censure and violence. These accounts, however, contain an abundance of descriptions of the community’s ritual practices; not least because rituals tend to be understood as the exclusive purview of “religion” and thus contemporary commentators devoted no small amount of energy to their depiction. This situation exists in stark contrast to that of the capitaleño narrative, for which there is a proliferation of words and voices, and a dearth of evidence of the kind of quotidian rituals of self-conscious citizenship that emerged in this context of new political possibilities arising in the wake of Trujillo’s death. Thus, though I do what I can to probe the sources for palmasolista discourse and capitaleño practice, the very silences within these sources speak to the kind of division that was being produced between Palma Sola and Santo Domingo at the time.

My framing of Palma Sola departs somewhat from the existing literature, rich though it is. Most scholars have taken either an ‘inside’ or an ‘outside’ view as their basis of study. Juan Manuel García builds a case for the involvement of political parties in both Palma Sola itself, seeking to turn the Mellizos’ popularity to their advantage, and to the political machinations that ultimately led to the massacre. Lusitania Martínez and Lauren Derby both take a much stronger focus on the community itself, albeit with different interpretive frameworks. Martínez, much like Jan Lundius and Mats Lundahl, reads Palma Sola through the lens of socio-economics, finding the seeds of this “rural messianism” in structural factors. Derby likewise envisions Palma Sola as a movement of protest, but also suggests that the community can be read as a patria chica, a re-invention of the state with a moral basis that nevertheless reveals the extent to

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22 García, *La Masacre de Palma Sola.*

which Trujillista statecraft had infiltrated the popular idiom of power. Lundius and Lundahl have undertaken meticulous research and produced a multi-faceted account of both Liborio Mateo and his later incarnation under the rubric of “peasant religions.” I am much indebted to their efforts, but, despite the wealth of detail they provide, find the framework limiting. My contribution is, simply, to look at the interstices of palmasolista and capitaleño narratives, to explore the parallels and similarities between these two framings that, at the time, were held to be profoundly and violently antithetical. As divergent as they might initially seem, I argue that both can be fruitfully read as early attempts to find redemption for complicity and quiescence in the face of a terrorizing regime. The tragedy of Palma Sola was that the terror of the past was not – indeed, is never – truly past.

**Que entre el bien y que salga el mal: the narrative of Palma Sola**

One of the first descriptors of Palma Sola I came across in my early forays into the movement’s literature was millenarianism. Both Martínez and Lundius and Lundahl refer to Norman Cohn’s classic definition of millenarianism in their respective studies. Cohn argues that millenarianism is predicated upon a “phantasy of salvation,” specifically a salvation that is “collective… terrestrial… imminent… total… [and] accomplished by agencies which are

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24 Lauren Derby. “Papá Liborio and the Morality of Rule.” In *The Dictator’s Seduction*, (pp. 227-256).
consciously regarded as supernatural.” On the one hand, the fit with my analysis of Palma Sola is neat, for “salvation” itself is, in effect, already a narrative: a story about a past from which one must be delivered and a future time/space in which the hoped-for salvation becomes a reality. On the other hand, however, much of the literature produced in the field of millenarian studies exemplifies an unfortunate kind of Marxist reductivism that sidelines religiosity in an effort to “make sense” of such movements by exploring their socio-economic roots. Thus, though I loosely draw upon the rubric of Cohn’s definition, my concern in the following section is also to explore its limits, to show how it might mask or distort the movements it seeks to explain.

Trying to compress the messy reality of Palma Sola to fit with an abstract definition risks flattening the palmasolistas into a homogenous group, with identical perceptions of the past and aspirations for the future. What I hope to show here is that, though the search for salvation might be common amongst those who joined the community at Palma Sola, salvation itself is a very capacious concept.

In the broadest of terms, the past that palmasolistas sought salvation from was a world taken over by the forces of evil. Despite the expansiveness of the concept, this evil, or el mal, was, according to Carlos Esteban Deive, a central preoccupation in popular religious practice in the Dominican Republic.

A number of the songs sung at Palma Sola, part of a long tradition of

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28 Patricia Pessar condemns the standard interpretations predominant in the “heyday” of millenarian studies in the 1950s and 1960s. She critiques both social functionalists and Marxist scholars alike for the silencing of the religiosity of millenarianism. From Fanatics to Folk, (p. 6).
religious chants known as salves, reflect this broad concern with evil, and announce its defeat through the work of God and the Mellizos:

Se acabó todo el malo
Se acabaron las maldades
Qué viva Plinio Rodríguez
Qué ya no quede pa’ nadie

Con el poder de María
Y también de Jesucristo
Se terminarán los malos
Y quedarán los venditos [sic]

The evil that is either now over (se acabó) or soon to be (se terminarán) exists here both within individuals (el malo, los malos) and more generally in events and circumstances (las maldades). Palmasolista pronouncements of the end of evil were never more explicit than this. There was no mention of who, precisely, were the malos and who were the benditos; of who was to blame for the “lloroso” state of the world; or of what were the particular maldades that made the world such a dark place.

Though providing no specific answers, the work of Deive and Martha Ellen Davis on popular religion suggests that el mal was commonly understood to arise from the inappropriate manipulation of the seres and misterios (beings, spirits) that populated the spirit world. While they need not always have pernicious uses, misterios could be called upon to impede a rival, to

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30 The term salve originates in musical versions of the prayer Salve Regina, a Marian antiphon, which are generally associated with the rosary. There is a huge range of ritual salves in the Dominican Republic, and few contain any of the original lyrics from the Salve Regina. See Martha Ellen Davis. Voces del purgatorio: estudio de la salve dominicana. Santo Domingo: Editora Taller, 1981.

31 From J-735 Letra PRO of the Procuraduría General de la República, reprinted in García, La Masacre de Palma Sola, (pp. 195-6).

32 Salve quoted on Martínez, Palma Sola, (p. 171).
cause illness, economic problems, or even death. Some of these were more dangerous than others; *el baká*, in particular, a diabolical entity that took the form of an animal, was enlisted to promote the economic success of its contractor, but often demanded the life of family member as compensation. Indeed, the banishing of seres or brujos was an important part of palmasolista rituals, a practice that had deep resonance with the traditions of *curanderismo*, or faith-healing. Curanderismo was so central to popular religious practice that Davis suggests that what she terms “*el vodú dominicano*” can best be understood as a “medical cult” in which no distinction is made between physical and spiritual ailments. However, in their more quotidian form, the work of brujos and spirits had much more to do with *healing* than with *salvation*. That is, the kind of healing common in folk practice was directed toward the resolution of difficulties in the human world, albeit with the aid of the spirit world. Salvation, at least in the context of Palma Sola, involved a deeper connection between the two spheres, a state of being in which the pernicious forces of daily life were completely and permanently overcome. It is here the Mellizos’ teachings departed most significantly from the conventions from which they drew.

In Palma Sola, salvation and forgiveness were fundamentally linked. A number of the recorded stanzas make reference to accounts that need settling (“*él que tenga su cuenta, entregar*;” “*Todo él que la debe, la tiene que pagar*”), suggesting the need to do penance to repay the debts of past sins. Others make explicit mention of God’s desire that people “redeem” themselves and many repeat the phrases, “*nos estamos salvando,*” and, similarly, “*nos

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33 Davis, *La otra ciencia*, (pp. 108-9).  
34 Davis, *La otra ciencia*, (p. 111).  
35 Davis, *La otra ciencia*, (pp. 223-4).  
36 Martínez, *Palma Sola*, (pp.170-1).
Notably, salvation and forgiveness are consistently expressed in the present continuous tense: we are being saved, we are being forgiven. Penance is a process that, faithfully undertaken, will lead to “la puerta del perdón.”

The first step on this path to forgiveness was the ceremony of the juramento. This was generally a visitor’s third order of business, after the other formalities of signing Palma Sola’s registry and turning over any arms to the men entrusted with greeting new arrivals. The juramento was the primary means of communicating the significance of the Mellizos’ mission to new arrivals. Thus Nazario Lorenzo reported, in his police interrogation after the massacre, that during the juramento they were told to believe in Christ and Mary, because “llegaría un tiempo en que Dios miraría al mundo y entresacaría los puros de los impuros y con sus consejos se purificarían.” The first part of this ceremony involved a stop at the Cruz del Juramento, presided over by Tulio, another Rodríguez brother. In front of this cross, all first-time visitors were required to swear the following oath: “Juro por Dios, el Padre, el Hijo y el Espíritu Santo y por Liborio Mateo cumplir la misión que se me ponga para que Dios me sane de todos mis quebrantos.”

Next, pilgrims moved on to the second cross, known both as the Cruz Negra and the Cruz del Perdón, where they confessed their sins and requested Liborio to forgive and to save them. According to León, confessions included “all of the wicked things, like gossip, stealing, killing,
[and] doing one’s work poorly.”

This second station could be a particularly active one: forgiveness and salvation were complicated by the number of people who came with “algo pendiente,” such as an outstanding relationship with a brujo or misterio. In these cases, the simple act of asking forgiveness took on a more spectacular form, as the petitioner fell to the ground shaking, “mounted” by the spirit that had him or her in its grip. Unfortunately, evidence of this practice survives only in the third-person; there is no personal testimony to the experience or significance of mounting by spirits at Palma Sola, though a number of members of the community comment on spirit possession as a sign of the Mellizos’ power to cast out evil spirits. This “dispatch of witches” was directed by a close confidante of the Mellizos, Manuel Tapia, also known as Componte. As the victims of evil wrestled with their personal demons at his feet, Componte pronounced the end of el mal and the establishment of the New World, a world finally in the care of God. Some particularly acute cases of possession were attended to directly by the Mellizos, who brought the afflicted inside the rudimentary church for individual attention.

This part of the ceremony was not essential to the process of salvation; not everyone had outstanding debts to brujos. Other visitors made relatively uneventful petitions for forgiveness,

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44 Interview with León Rodríguez Ventura, in Martínez, “Un Estudio Preliminar,” (p. 196).
45 One witness, Leonardo Segundo Rodríguez, asserted that it was only women who fell “mounted by spirits,” but no other account suggests that women were the only ones who had need of dispatching a troublesome brujo. J-735 Letra ‘PRO’ de la Procuraduría General de la República. Appendix to García, La Masacre de Palma Sola, (p. 393). See also the interview transcripts reprinted in Martínez, “Un Estudio Preliminar,” (especially pp. 163-4); and Bautista, Si me permiten hablar, (pp. 65-8).
46 Interview by Ana Maritza de la Mota with María Rodríguez (daughter of Plinio) and Francisco Rodríguez (son of León). Martínez, “Un Estudio Preliminar,” (pp. 149-50).
and moved directly on to the *cuadro sagrado*, or sacred square, where they encountered a group of three crosses. Most approached this *calvario de Palma Sola* on their knees, others also carried rocks on their heads in an act of penance.\(^{47}\) Here, after circling the *calvario* three times, pilgrims kneeled down in front and crossed themselves, giving thanks to Liborio and to the Mellizos. In general, after swearing the oath, asking forgiveness, and visiting the *calvario*, new visitors were given missions of varying lengths. The Mellizos instructed them to return for the days of communal rituals, Tuesdays and Fridays, as a symbol of the sacrifices they would make in order to be forgiven. Bautista reports that the usual recommendation was nine visits, but this was not a hard and fast rule.\(^{48}\) Oleriano Echevarría, for example, reported that he had been charged with a mission to go to Palma Sola ten times in order to be healed.\(^{49}\) Upon completion of the requisite number of visits, the palmasolistas would be confirmed as believers in the word of Liborio, and could henceforth have faith that no harm would come to them if they remained firm in their belief in his word.

The Mellizos, principally Plinio, frequently charted specific paths to forgiveness for the pilgrims who sought their counsel. As means to promote spiritual healing, Plinio prescribed ritual baths at La Agüita, a small spring that Liborio himself had used for the same purpose. La Agüita was several kilometers distance from the site of Palma Sola, so the cure also involved an early-morning pilgrimage to bath nude – in strictly segregated groups of men and women – in the sacred waters. Senón Made, who visited Palma Sola 13 times, told an interviewer several years later that the number of baths varied according to the nature of the ailment: “3 baños en esta


\(^{48}\) Bautista, *Si me permiten hablar*, (p. 63).

\(^{49}\) J-735 Letra ‘PRO’ de la Procuraduría General de la República. Appendix to to García, *La Masacre de Palma Sola*, (p. 343).
fuente era para curar enfermedades, 5 baños para curar la fe, igual número de buches de agua deben ser tomados para aumentar el poder que mana de 'entre las piedras.'”

Though it is not clear how often such pilgrimages were undertaken, the frequent appearance of phrases like “andamos caminando,” “vengo caminando... aunque me duelen los pies,” and “senores, ataquen los viajes,” in the recorded salves suggests that this formed a significant part of the practices of purification.51

The ranks of the community swelled on Tuesdays and Fridays, the days when a communal ritual was held twice, at 7a.m. and at 5p.m., in front of the calvario. Forming two separate lines of men and women in front of the church, palmasolistas proceeded around the cuadro sagrado in a circle, singing ritual salves to the beat of the three wooden drums known as the palos, before coming to a kneel in their original positions. It was here that Plinio put his renowned oratory skills to work, instructing his followers in the word of Liborio, reminding them of their obligations to humility, and, according to Bautista, “teaching them how to all live like brothers, inside and outside of Palma Sola.”52 At the end of Plinio’s evening sermon, the playing of these three drums, direct descendents of those used in ceremonies of the Brotherhood of the Holy Spirit, a confraternity with long roots in the region, often continued late into the night.53

On these occasions, attendees performed both the ritual dance of El Espíritu Santo, as well as the more vernacular perico ripiao, a popular style of merengue accompanied by the accordion, the

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50 Interview with Senón Made, by Ana Maritza de la Mota, reprinted in Martínez, “Un Estudio Preliminar,” (p. 147). The sacred of power of stones has a longstanding history in popular spiritual practice. In the San Juan region, they are said to harbour the indigenous spirits that live below the water. See Davis, La otra ciencia, (pp. 98-9).
51 See the salves reprinted in Martínez, Palma Sola, (pp. 168-178).
52 Bautista, Si me permiten hablar, (p. 63).
53 Lundius and Lundahl, Peasants and Religion, (pp. 350, 352).
güiro (a hollow, gourd-like, percussive instrument), and the balcié, (a small drum). Here the evening’s events resembled those of a traditional “fiesta de misterio,” a festival organized to give thanks to a beneficent spirit for its good works. The difference was that in Palma Sola these were not annual celebrations, but bi-weekly, suggesting that Palma Sola was, in this regard, less a departure from previous practices than an intensification of them.

A common feature of these practices is their embodied nature. To peregrinate; to take a cleansing bath in a cold spring; to fall in a trance, mounted by spirits; to kneel before a cross and beg forgiveness; to dance and lose oneself in rhythm; to sing and hear the sound of one’s voice merge with others; all these are practices carried out through the body, and thus they not only reflect but also reproduce spiritual experience. Arguing that “religion” is not – or not only – doctrine but also lived experience, Meredith McGuire writes that these “embodied practices” are part of the “the myriad individual ways by which ordinary people remember, share, enact, adapt, create, and combine the ‘stories’ out of which they live.” They thus have the potential to “transmute painful or destructive memories and emotions into sources of emotional support, joy, and vitality.” So sin gives way to healing, the body is possessed but then cleansed of its demons, washed clean of the stains of past action. At Palma Sola, these stories to live by were made manifest by their performance through the body.

54 Lundius and Lundahl, Peasants and Religion, (p. 186).
55 For fiestas de misterios, see Davis, La otra ciencia, (p. 336). Ana Martiza de la Mota reports on a fiesta for Liborio that took place over Easter in 1979, when his spirit helped a family to identify the cause of strange occurrences in their home: a deceased uncle who had an outstanding debt to a baká. See Martínez, “Un Estudio Preliminar,” (pp. 155-6).
57 McGuire, “Embodied practices,” (p. 187)
58 McGuire, “Embodied practices,” (p. 197)
These embodied practices involved a particular mix of the individual and the communal: the sins for which one sought forgiveness were one’s own, but the process of purgation was public and collective. In effect, it was the individual atonement that allowed one to join the larger community that would bring a new, perfected world into being. For salvation at Palma Sola was also about the active making of *el nuevo mundo*. A crucial part of this effort was the egalitarian ethos of the community itself, a place where, at least in theory, all provisions were equally shared, anyone could have land on which to build themselves a home, and money and commerce were banished. In an interview many years later, León Rodríguez made an explicit connection between a personal form of sainthood and the brotherhood and harmonious ambience of Palma Sola:

> Yo lo que puedo afirmarlo es que ya en esta Jurisdicción de San Juan para abajo ya no había hombre ladrones, ya no había hombres explotadores, ya no había hombre vago... sino, ya todo el mundo estaba convertido en Santo... Todo el mundo por acá estaba unido en Cristo, todo el mundo era hermano, comíamos todo de un pan, de una tasa de café... habíamos un grupo. Tábamos vuelto santo todo en ese sitio.

Palma Sola was itself the utopic new world, a world without thievery or exploitation, in which all men were brothers and all goods were shared. This was, in other words, salvation made manifest, a unique space where *el mal* was finally conquered by *el bien*.

And, Plinio predicted, this space was set to expand dramatically. Under the growing harassment of the National Police, who had, under the direction of Attorney General Antonio García Vásquez, set up checkpoints on the roads heading toward Palma Sola, created a ruse to

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59 Practice, in this case, departed somewhat from theory. Bautista reports almost gleefully in his memoir that he managed to use his insider position to run a small construction business inside the community, which he kept hidden from the Mellizos. Bautista, *Si me permiten hablar*, (pp. 70-1).
60 Interview with León Rodríguez Ventura, conducted by Cesáreo Ramón y Ramón, April 1979. Transcript reprinted in Lusitania Martínez, “Un Estudio Preliminar,” (p. 206).
arrest León, and begun to raise the possibility of more direct intervention, Plinio declared that the Mellizos’ mission would end on January 1st, 1963. All of their followers were to gather in Palma Sola on that day, and although Plinio remained equivocal about what precisely would happen, a number of the salves and survivor testimony hint at some kind of apocalyptic event from which only the faithful would be saved.

Dejen que el tiempo llegue
Que el golpe le avisará
Quieran los jefes o no quieran
Como quiera va a triunfar
Porque de su propio gusto
Todos vienen a entregar
Y a pedir misericordia
Haber si se pueden salvar

Here the millenarian angle of Plinio’s prophecies becomes more acute. Regardless of the aims of "los jefes," “el golpe” is imminent and will triumph. “Golpe” is a significant choice of words, for it connotes not only a kind of blow or collision, but also coup, as in “golpe de estado.” Many of the more oppositional salves explicitly adopted the language of state politics, referring to Plinio as the “president” who would soon “dominate the entire world.” Derby argues that the use of this idiom was part of the Mellizos’ popular reinvention of the state, the creation of an

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62 In police interviews with the surviving detainees, many mentioned that they were told that the earth would shake, that there would be a great flood, and that the pure would be separated from the impure. At least one suggested, however, that this was never put forth as a certainty: “temblara la tierra o no temblara.” J-735 Letra ‘PRO’ de la Procuraduría General de la República. Appendix to García, La Masacre de Palma Sola, (pp. 342-9).
63 J-735 Letra PRO of the Procuraduría General de la República, cited in García, La Masacre de Palma Sola, (p. 198).
64 J-735 Letra PRO of the Procuraduría General de la República, cited in García, La Masacre de Palma Sola, (p. 194).
idealized *patria chica* that elevated state forms with a firm moral foundation.\(^{65}\) Indeed, the bureaucratic rituals of the place – the signing of the official registry upon arrival, the organization of security forces, the public oath of allegiance to Liborio – also borrowed from the authority and the “magic” of the state.\(^{66}\) Here, a key part of the utopic future that palmasolistas sought to bring into being was the alignment of the encompassing power of the state with *el bien.* Plinio would “take charge of the state,” but he would also create it anew because he was “prepared by the order of God.”\(^{67}\)

Of course, not everyone who visited participated in all of these practices or ascribed fully to the vision of the new world that the Mellizos heralded, reflecting the assortment of intentions and desires of those who made their way up the steep hillsides to Palma Sola. For it is something of a misnomer to speak of palmasolistas, who can hardly have been a homogenous group. Surely there is a radical difference in both experience and intention between the individual who visited Palma Sola once at the behest of a relative, and the individual who decided to settle there permanently, refusing to leave despite growing threats from local authorities and increasing harassment from the police. As Bell points out, the attempt to make of “religion” a “coherent set of beliefs” is not only the work of scholars but is also a project frequently undertaken by leaders of religious movements, with varying success.\(^{68}\) Thus the scholar Orlando Espín works together with León Rodríguez to construct a “theology of Palma Sola” that may have departed, to varying

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\(^{65}\) Derby, “Papá Liborio and the Morality of Rule,” (especially pp. 240-8).

\(^{66}\) Derby, “Papá Liborio,” (p. 245).

\(^{67}\) J-735 Letra PRO of the Procuraduría General de la República, cited in García, *La Masacre de Palma Sola,* (p. 194).

\(^{68}\) Bell, “‘The Chinese believe in spirits,'” (p. 113).
degrees, from the experiences of those who visited the community. In part because the Mellizos drew upon longstanding practices, there was room for visitors to the community to see it as a fairly straightforward continuation of local healing traditions. However, because the rituals of Palma Sola also involved an intensification of these practices, and because of the increasingly millenarian inflection of Plinio’s sermons, other visitors may have interpreted the significance of these rites of lustration more in terms of salvation. This diversity is one of the principal effects of such a broad narrative: the meanings of “good” and “evil” can be highly personalized, and the lack of explicit depictions of how and why the past was so imbued with maldades made the narrative highly inclusive. Good and evil became empty signifiers, waiting to be filled.

In charting just how they might have been filled, some scholars turned to the traditional imperative of millenarian studies to find the “decisive causative factors” of such movements, an approach that I find inadequate and potentially misleading. Specifically, both Martinez and Lundius and Lundahl have envisioned the evil that the Mellizos sought to conquer as bound up in the socio-economics of the region. But does this line of analysis hold? I argue that it does not, for even though shifts in Trujillo’s agricultural policy led to the forced expulsion of many peasant farmers from their land, the San Juan Valley largely escaped this trend. In that case, perhaps the most obvious place to look for the “collective emotional tension” – one of the factors

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70 Cohn, “Medieval Millenarianism,” (p. 42).
that Cohn lists as decisive for the rise of millenarianism— that might have catalyzed the Palma Sola movement is the death of Trujillo himself. At the very least, the end of his era created the space for the open practice of traditions formerly prohibited under his laws against brujería.\textsuperscript{72}

But did it stop there? The fact is that Trujillo figures nowhere in the surviving records of Palma Sola. Indeed, he was far more notable by his absence, especially given the temporal proximity of his death and the establishment of the community. Simply put, in this case, the avenues of exploration that the category “millenarianism” opens up lead to dead ends. Taking a different tack, I argue here that the silence at Palma Sola surrounding the larger-than-life dictator who had infiltrated nearly every corner of social life in the Dominican Republic is evidence of a deeply ambiguous interpretation of who Trujillo was for the people who assembled there.

Though I tend to invoke Trujillo’s self-appointed sobriquet, \textit{El Benefactor}, somewhat ironically, there can be no doubt that the title carried at least a grain of truth for many Dominican peasants, at least for part of his reign. As part of his attempts to extend his reach and secure popular support, Trujillo embarked on a massive land redistribution project in the first years of his rule.\textsuperscript{73} But Trujillo’s overtures to the peasantry were not limited to material hand-outs. Going against the grain of an elite discourse that had, historically, positioned peasants as “a species of primary material that had to be molded,” Trujillo announced in 1932 that his “best friends” were “the men of work.”\textsuperscript{74} In extending friendship and the title of citizen to peasants for the first time, he sought to establish a hegemonic pact that would be a double-edged sword for these new members of the modernizing nation. Yes, campesinos were given respect and land,

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Lundius and Lundahl, \textit{Peasants and Religion}, (pp. 153-155)
\item Turits, \textit{Foundations of Despotism}, (pp. 82-4.)
\item San Miguel, \textit{La Guerra Silenciosa}, (p. 19); Trujillo’s speech cited in San Miguel, (p. 96).
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but the paternal and sometimes brutal authority of the state made their “domestification” more a matter of “ambivalent consent” than of a wholehearted embrace of their new benefactor.\textsuperscript{75}

Regardless of this private ambivalence, however, the Trujillista state required that peasants play the appropriate role in order to obtain the benefits on offer. Turits shrewdly points out that peasants were able to push Trujillo further on his vague promises, but only by adopting his paternalist discourse. Thus many performed ingratiating gestures, writing to their “patron” to request his intervention and help in countering their particular challenges.\textsuperscript{76} However, Trujillo’s pervasiveness was felt not only in his ability to grant favours, but also in more sinister ways as well. In the course of his interviews with peasants who lived through the Trujillato, Turits found that most people recalled the high levels of state surveillance with trepidation. And spies were everywhere: acquaintances, neighbours, friends, even family members might be tempted to inform on one another, even with invented slights to the regime, in order to gain personal benefits or to inflict damage on a rival.\textsuperscript{77} In this sense, the state was not unlike the malevolent spirit of \textit{el baká}, an outside power to whom one could appeal for personal advancement or to injure an enemy.

The point I wish to emphasize here is that peasants’ “ambiguous consent” meant that there was no one who could claim to be free from the taint of complicity to a regime that gave land and \textit{respeto} with one hand but took away personal liberty and community trust with the other. The practices of Palma Sola and its overarching narrative fit this ambivalent relationship to Trujillo, and the silences surrounding the recently deceased dictator thus accommodated those

\textsuperscript{75} San Miguel defines this process as “domestication” in \textit{La Guerra Silenciosa} (p. 95).
\textsuperscript{76} “Ambivalent consent” is Turits’ phrasing, \textit{Foundations of Despotism}, (p. 13).
\textsuperscript{77} Turits, \textit{Foundations of Despotism}, (p. 90).
who might have counted themselves among his supporters. The introspective and reflexive nature of confessions and penances allowed palmasolistas to read “el mal” in deeply personal ways, albeit in a collective setting. Some might have interpreted the darkness of the past as the Trujillato entire, understanding the dictator’s demise to be a direct result of the rise of Liborio, as Bautista’s memoir suggests. For others, this darkness could well have been linked to a period of economic hardship, problems in interpersonal relationships, or recurrent physical illness. Within a broader narrative that linked suffering with sin, these rites of purgation – sweating off sins through pilgrimages through the valley, washing them away in the sacred spring of Liborio – mapped out a clear path to a more promising future. Whether one’s sins were of betraying one’s neighbors, of a shameful complicity with a brutalizing regime, or simply of gossip or petty theft, there was room for all sinners at Palma Sola. Swearing an oath to Liborio and respecting the community’s organizing principles afforded direct participation in the burgeoning new world. In short, the narrative of Palma Sola did not dictate what was evil about the past, but rather allowed its adherents to define the ambiguous terms of the story themselves. There was no singular link to the Trujillato; rather, there were doubtlessly many links, but they will remain a matter of the palmasolistas’ consciences, out of the grasp of the narrative I produce here.

Civilización o muerte!: the capitaleño narrative

Despite the detailed enumeration of the dangers presented by Palma Sola, the narrative produced by commentators in the capital was largely concerned with the condition of the Dominican nation and the character and deficiencies of its citizens. This was a particularly potent concern given the recent history of dictatorship, and, consequently, the need to make
sense of the enduring power of Trujillo despite the more brutal aspects of his regime. In this context, Palma Sola and the alleged manipulability of its members served as a powerful allegory for the Trujillista past, with palmasolistas standing as symbols of the “backward” – hence dangerous – tendencies of the population. Finding a solution to the “problem” of Palma Sola thus came to involve a kind of national purging, as the “internal frontier” between citizens and savages was definitively drawn through the exercise of violence.\(^7\) This internal frontier mapped onto historic divisions between urban centers and the countryside, with early nationalist thinkers positioning peasants as a kind of “internal other,” a perceived threat to social and political stability because of their alleged “superstition, lack of social discipline, and even their lack of national consciousness.”\(^7\)\(^9\) Much like the 1937 massacre of Haitians on the Dominican frontier, the dramatic spectacle of violence at Palma Sola in fact helped to create the divisions between the community and the “civilized” nation that was so deeply threatened by its existence.\(^8\)\(^0\)

The capitaleño narrative unfolded through an evolving relationship between the state and the press, and in the context of both continuities and changes in the practices of coercive statecraft. Given that the two national papers, La Nación and El Caribe, were established and largely owned by Trujillo himself and had essentially followed the government line from their inception, their role as conduits for the free flow of information in the capital was far from

\(^7\) The demarcation of such boundaries, as Ann Laura Stoler reminds us, is part of the “social divisions crucial to the exclusionary principles of nation-states.” Ann Laura Stoler. *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things.* Durham: Duke University Press, 1995, (p. 130)


established. Though reporters in the capital were often critical of government actions relating to Palma Sola, they also, unfortunately, used their new-found independence only to demand ever more drastic state intervention to curb the outbreak of “savagery” that they had first brought to the public’s attention. Further, in other respects the press showed itself very willing to repeat the government’s interpretation of events, unquestioningly accepting even quite suspicious documents fed to reporters by state officials and ultimately helping to create a justification for the massacre through their complicity.

Finally, in the press’s treatment of Palma Sola we can also see traces of the institutionalized practice of denunciation in national newspapers that had reached such dizzying heights in the final decade of the Trujillato. As Derby points out, the practice of denunciation cannot be read simply as another form of state domination, for it also gave civil society a role to play in this particular form of social control. This historical role of the press as serving as a forum through which the political and personal fortunes of a various members of the population would be decided was continued, in a somewhat altered form, in both the denunciations of the Mellizos and the editorial critiques of the state for its reluctance to directly intervene in Palma Sola. As well, the practice of denunciation served as another means of policing the boundaries of acceptable behavior, and thus communicated to readers the limits on their new-found, post-Trujillo freedoms.

Mirroring the diversity of interpretations of “evil” in Palma Sola, the principal terms of the capitaleño narrative were likewise broad, affording a number of different readings. The appellation that came to define Palma Sola in the contemporary press was “superchería,” a word

81 Turits, Foundations of Despotism (pp. 268-9).
82 Derby reports that the “Foro Público” section of El Caribe printed, between 1948 and 1961, some thirty thousand individual letters of denunciation. The Dictator’s Seduction, (pp. 136-138).
that encompasses both “superstition,” and, crucially, “fraud.” Both parts of the word are critical because, in one neat term, “superchería” indicted palmasolistas for their superstitious tendencies and, more importantly, it allowed for a damning depiction of the Mellizos as charlatans who dressed themselves as prophets only to turn the ingenuousness of their followers to their own ends. This narrative offered a powerful allegory for the Trujillato, a way of making sense of the rise and longevity of what was now widely seen as a brutalizing regime. The basic arc of the narrative remained fairly constant over the three months during which Palma Sola frequented the headlines. However, the various commentators differed on their explanation of the root causes of the palmasolistas’ vulnerability to manipulation, and whether this weakness was confined to the countryside or was, rather, endemic to the nation as a whole. Central to this debate, as we shall see, was a discourse of “civilization,” and that persistent obstacle to its realization on Dominican soil, “ignorance.”

The first of many articles about Palma Sola, an exposé written by Radhamés Gómez Pepín, appeared in El Caribe on 19 November. The headline ran, “La Superchería Afecta Economía de Región Sur,” though the article focused only marginally on the alleged economic effects of the Mellizos’ activities. Unfortunately, Gómez Pepín’s acerbic rhetoric set the tone for the discussion of Palma Sola in the capitaleño press. Here the “absolute dominion” that the Mellizos exercised over their “illiterate” followers was partly the result of the backwardness of the border region itself, which, despite the efforts of “Dominicanization” remained “terribly influenced by the worst customs of ignorant Haitians.” In this and the next day’s follow-up article, the majority of the accusations that would be lodged at Palma Sola in the prelude to the massacre made their first appearance. And those accusations came hard and fast: sexual immorality, including the rape of minors and married women, resulting in some fifty
pregnancies; depression of the local economy because peasants abandon the harvest on days of
ceremony, Tuesdays and Fridays, in addition to the traditional weekend rest days; truancy, as
children are pulled out of school to visit Palma Sola; dangerous effects on health, as parents
bring their ailing children to the Mellizos to be healed instead of to a medical doctor, with fatal
consequences; manipulation of the elections, by telling palmasolistas for whom to vote; and,
significantly, the threat of violence, as San Juan governor Alberto DiMaggio reported on rumors
that the Mellizos were planning to distribute some 500 daggers amongst their trusted men.83 In
varying combinations, and with an increasingly ominous cast, these accusations were repeated in
the pages of El Caribe and La Nación in the weeks before the massacre.

There was little ambiguity in the newspapers’ assessments of the problem: civilization, or
lack thereof. Editorialists expressed the hope that the government would act quickly “to adopt
the measures that would allow civilization and culture to reach these remote corners of the
country.”84 The distance between the frontier and the capital was thus positioned as temporal as
much as geographical: it was a place left behind, not yet fully “Dominicanized.” This was not a
particularly innovative depiction. On the contrary, the border region had been subject to intense
and sometimes macabre efforts on the part of Trujillo to cut its historic ties to Haiti and bring it
more firmly under the capital’s control, a campaign that ranged from the aforementioned
massacre of approximately 30,000 Haitians in 1937 to more benign projects of agricultural
reform.85 While Haiti, Haitians, and vodú figured less prominently in the denunciations of Palma
Sola than one might expect given the centrality of Dominican anti-Haitianism in the

83 El Caribe, 19 November 1962, (pp. 1, 14) and 20 November 1962, (p. 14)
84 El Caribe, 8 December 1962, “El Caso de Palma Sola.” (p. 10)
85 See Turits, “Bordering the Nation: Race, Colonization, and the 1937 Haitian Massacre in the
Dominican Frontier” in Foundations of Despotism, (pp. 144-180).
historiography of the island, there was undoubtedly a racial inflection to the discourse of civilization. But, like the “good” that would rise to banish “evil” in Palma Sola, “civilization” was also open to some interpretation, and the racial undertones never rose to dominate the picture.

*El Caribe’s* reporters, principally Gómez Pepín and his colleague Antonio Paulino, took it upon themselves to demand that the Consejo de Estado intervene in Palma Sola, chiding the Secretaría de Interior y Policía for his hesitance in the matter. While the official reason for taking a moderate attitude toward Palma Sola was that the reports the government had received were “confusing and contradictory,” Gómez Pepín was unconvinced. He countered this claim with reports that both the local government and civic organizations in San Juan de la Maguana, the capital of San Juan province, were unanimously opposed to the “insane occurrences” that took place at Palma Sola. Further, the editorials in *El Caribe* expressed a hope that the government would see fit to bring “culture and civilization to this remote corner of the country,” but they were not averse to the possibly drastic measures that might be needed to achieve this end. “In order to complete the necessary work of social prophylaxis, we can count on a national police force that is well-organized, well-equipped, and numerous. And if it is necessary to mobilize other elements, then so be it.”

Despite these vociferous calls for direct intervention in Palma Sola, the initial response from Attorney General García Vásquez evinced more compassion toward these “uncivilized” souls. If, as he concurred, Palma Sola was “the fruit of ignorance,” then it must be confronted

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87 *El Caribe* “Secretaría Dice Estudia Problema de Palma Sola.” 8 December 1962. (p. 24)
89 *El Caribe*. “El Caso de Palma Sola,” 9 December 1962, (p. 8)
with “a human and Christian spirit,” especially because education and justice had been relegated to the lowest level during the previous thirty years. García Vásquez made this connection between the Trujillato and the shameful level of ignorance exhibited at Palma Sola on a number of occasions. Three days later, El Caribe quoted the Attorney General arguing that during “los 32 años del régimen tiránico recién pasado,” the “sagrados sacerdocios” of education and justice had been ignored. In this rendering, while the Mellizos might be the principle agents of manipulation, the recently-passed tyrannical regime is ultimately to blame for the backwards state of the campesinos which has left them so susceptible to malevolent charlatans. Perhaps Trujillo’s “domestication” of the peasantry had succeeded in assuring their passivity, but he had failed to inculcate the requisite characteristics of civilization that would make them fit to serve the nation. Given the intensity of Trujillo’s efforts at Dominicanizing the border, this was a significant revision of Trujillista lore.

These narratives resonated not for their clarity or their verifiability, but for their symbolic value. The story of ignorant but essentially good peasants under the dominion of powerful, manipulative leaders was a potent parable for the Trujillato. In it, capitaleños found a way to explain how Trujillo had managed to rule for thirty-two years, by exploiting the ingenuousness of his followers and turning their superstitious tendencies to his advantage. Thus it is crucial that in this narrative the calls for action against Palma Sola were not lodged on the basis of campesino ignorance alone, but rather on the basis that such ignorance could easily be turned to

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treacherous ends. Tragically, like under Trujillo, the real danger of violence lay within the state itself.

For, his more compassionate rhetoric aside, García Vásquez was simultaneously ratcheting up the pressure on Palma Sola. On the 14\textsuperscript{th} of December, he informed the Consejo de Estado of the measures taken against the community, precursors to a more ambitious plan that would take place after the 20 December elections. These measures consisted of roadblocks on the routes into Palma Sola, the prohibition of carrying knives (armas blancas) in the entire province of San Juan, and the arrest of León Rodriguez Ventura, who was to be held until his “disciples” volunteered themselves to police for interviews.\footnote{Codigo 10491-13, Expediente 9, 0051-2. Fondos del Palacio Nacional, Archivo General de la Nación, Santo Domingo.} Once the elections were over, the threatened “medidas de fuerza”\footnote{\textit{El Caribe.} “Tratan Caso Palma Sola.” 12 December 1962 (p. 14)} were brought to bear on the community, and on the 21\textsuperscript{st} of December, a scuffle broke out between a group of palmasolistas and the Policía Nacional as the former made their way out of the community. What caused this skirmish remains unclear. \textit{El Caribe} stated that the peasants “rebelled” when the police demanded they register their cédulas (identity cards) with the detachment stationed outside.\footnote{\textit{El Caribe.} “No han Identificado Aún a Muerto en Disturbios.” 22 December 1962.} Bautista, on the other hand, insists that local members of the Unión Cívica Nacional, the political party that dominated the Consejo de Estado but had just lost the elections to Juan Bosch’s Partido Revolucionario Dominicano, instigated the violence by informing the police that the palmasolistas were armed and on the attack.\footnote{Bautista, \textit{Si me permiten hablar} (pp. 90-1). Bautista’s account is supported by a telegram the “Misioneros de Palma Sola” sent to the Consejo de Estado the next day, which stated that, “Presidente de Unión Cívica Nacional del Comité Municipal de las Matas de Farfan forma turbas adyunto de policías a misioneros que desde Palmasola se reconcentran a sus
press’s denunciations of Palma Sola. Alongside his report on this incident, Antonio Paulino, making guileful use of the passive voice, reported on the possibility that one of Trujillo’s notorious henchmen had taken refuge in Palma Sola. Further, Paulino wrote, “Rumours are also circulating that fugitives from justice are meeting there, that they receive orders from Cuban elements, and that, moreover, a man who stabbed a woman with a dagger is hiding there.”⁹⁷

Alongside this laundry list of accusations is a photo of the arms that were confiscated from the detainees, a few knives and about a dozen machetes, which are, of course, a tool as much as they are a weapon.

As tensions escalated, the link between capitaleño discourse and the practice of state violence became more direct and more sinister. In effect, these were but two sides of the same coin, simply different strategies in the social war that pitted the “civilized” against the “backward,” those ready to rise to the new challenges of democracy against those most likely to hinder the project of “progress.” In a new permutation of the capitaleño narrative about Palma Sola, the community became the site of an impending neo-Trujillista coup, a significant twist on the story formulated by the state and repeated by the press. Under the headline, “Afirman que a Palma Sola Llevaron Armas de Fuego,” on the morning of the massacre, El Caribe published an article based on a police interview with one Policarpio Vicente. The interview transcript had obviously been leaked to the press, as the article repeats all the main points of discussion that appeared in police records. What’s more, the interview is itself highly suspect; the transcript reads like some sort of call-and-response, with highly specific questions and answers that

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⁹⁷ El Caribe. “Se Cree que en Palma Sola Se Refugian Delincuentes.” 23 December 1962 (p. 2)
directly correspond to them. Vicente’s testimony, repeated without question by El Caribe, poses a number of wholly new accusations against Palma Sola. First, Vicente reported that the Mellizos had firearms that have been brought from Haiti. Second, he informed his interrogators of a group of three men and three women, apparently foreigners, who lived in one of the better houses at Palma Sola and possessed a radio, but that they did not participate in any of the rituals or mix with the other people there. Finally, Vicente claimed that Plinio promised his followers that they would have their revenge for the incident on 21 December. The insinuation, clearly, was that some sort of plot was in the works. It can hardly be a coincidence that this article, based on information to which only the authorities would have had access, appeared on the very day that the National Police and Armed Forces marched into Palma Sola.

Which is not to say that a “massacre” is necessarily what was planned. On the contrary, surviving accounts of the tragedy suggest a mass confusion as much as anything. There is particular disagreement over who instigated the violence; Bautista’s account holds that members of the Fuerzas Armadas drew first blood, whereas García Vásquez was unequivocal in blaming the palmasolistas for provoking police response. Though the official story is certainly suspect, based as it is on the patent fallacy that the palmasolistas possessed firearms, it is not my intention here to formulate a coherent narrative of blame out of the tumult of the tragedy. For once the first shots rang out, it is clear only that chaos reigned. Two forces had been sent to Palma Sola, the newly-formed Tropa Anti-Motines (Anti-Riot Troops) of the Armed Forces and the National

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100 Bautista, Si me permiten hablar (pp. 98-107); García Vásquez’s official account is held in Código 10491-13, Expediente 12, 0064-67. Fondos del Palacio Nacional, Archivo General de la Nación, Santo Domingo.
Police, and possibly the lack of communication between the two contributed to a generalized confusion over precisely who was shooting at whom.\textsuperscript{101} Certainly the tear gas the Armed Forces released to control the crowd didn’t help matters much, nor did the burning of the wooden shacks that comprised the community. Though it remains uncertain the extent to which some palmasolistas fought back against the assault, they were undeniably overwhelmed by the trained violence of state forces. When the shooting stopped and the fires burned themselves out, hundreds of the community lay dead, and but one member of the army joined their number.\textsuperscript{102}

There are two possible conclusions that can be drawn from the massacre at Palma Sola. The most controversial of these suggests that the violence of that day was actually unleashed with a very particular target in mind, General Rodríguez Reyes. As the only member of the military who lost his life, and as the only high-ranking officer opposed to overthrowing the recently-elected Juan Bosch, the theory goes that he was eliminated in order to pave the way for the coup that ousted Bosch from power in September 1963.\textsuperscript{103} In this reading, for which there is some circumstantial but no definitive evidence, the lives of the palmasolistas mattered so little that their deaths were but collateral damage in a bigger war over who would govern the country. On the other hand, the massacre can be interpreted as an unfortunate holdover from the recent past, insofar as the police and armed forces, largely trained under the Trujillo regime, had little

\textsuperscript{101} On the formation of the Anti-Riot Troops, see Lundius and Lundahl, Peasants and Religion (pp. 200-203).
\textsuperscript{102} This account is glossed from Lundius and Lundahls painstaking effort to create an ordered account of the massacre, Peasants and Religion (pp. 224-236), and from Bautista, Si me permiten hablar (pp. 98-107).
\textsuperscript{103} See Leopoldo Figuereo, De Liborio a Palma Sola. San Juan de la Maguana: Editora Logos Cetecom,1999. Lundius and Lundahl also mention this debate, but conclude that there is not enough evidence to support the conspiracy theory. Peasants and Religion (p. 559).
respect for the lives of these marginal people. Either way, the tragedy of Palma Sola suggests that the real evil that needed purging was not superstition or ignorance, but the banality of state violence.

Nevertheless, the measures the state adopted after the massacre focused singularly on the eradication of “ignorance” and the promotion of “civilization,” a project that nationalist thinkers in Santo Domingo had been championing for nearly a century. According to Teresita Martínez-Vergne, “civilization” and “progress” were indeed the defining terms of Dominican nationalism. Lacking a “usable past” from which to construct the nation, elite Dominican thinkers looked to the future, developing an ideology of progress that was inclusive rhetorically but exclusive practically. This forward-looking national project worked in tandem with the notion that segments of Dominican society needed to be rehabilitated into the national polity, and thus a fundamental problem that liberal intellectuals sought to address was how raise up the elements of the populace that were “not competent for civilized life.” Eugenio María de Hostos, a singularly important nationalist thinker in turn-of-the-century Santo Domingo, managed to achieve a species of consensus amongst his followers that a “revolution of education” was critical to this civilizing project. Though de Hostos may have inspired his contemporaries with rallying cries of “civilización o muerte,” his education revolution was never fully realized. Still, the broad

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104 This thesis is supported by Bautista’s account of the treatment of the detained survivors by the army as they were transferred to a prison in San Juan. He reports that soldiers robbed their prisoners and even shot those who refused to hand over their goods. Bautista, *Si me permiten hablar* (pp. 107-115). Lundius and Lundahl also quote Juan Bosch and the journalist Gómez Pepín as blaming the undisciplined troops for the extent of the violence. *Peasants and Religion* (pp. 551-2).
outlines of his project continued to echo in the discussions of how to make the surviving palmasolistas fit for “civilization.”

The first steps on the road to the “civilizing” of survivors involved the simple gift of clothing and the dispensation of identity cards to the 673 detainees. More integral to this vital process, however, was the “educational campaign” that, according to García Vásquez, would bring civilization to “the most humble and remote Dominican households.” Alongside the construction of schools in the border region, the Attorney General insisted on the importance of building military garrisons to keep order and supporting the efforts of missionaries to “definitively clear up the conscience of the peasantry” [aclarar definitivamente la conciencia de ese campesinado].

These efforts began while the prisoners were still in detention, with the police chaplain making regular visits to conduct religious instruction. A journalist for La Nación reported favourably that, in speaking with the detainees, “we could clearly feel the progress that has been made with respect to their religious education.” Whether this “education” succeeding in teaching the palmasolistas what to believe, or, on the other hand, what role they were meant to perform, is another matter. Macario Lorenzo, who, forty years later, would address an international conference on Liborismo as León Rodríguez Ventura’s spokesperson, solemnly told another reporter that, “Queremos estar en lo claro para no ser ignorantes. La ignorancia fue

109 La Nación, , “Resalta Atenciones Prestadas a los Detenidos de Palma Sola : Gozan de Libertad en Recinto de PN.” 5 January 1963, (p. 3).
que nos hizo meter en este lio.” At any rate, playing the requisite part of repentant peasant was an effective tactic. The detainees were released without charge on 21 January.

In addition to direct intervention with the prisoners, the Consejo de Estado convened large meetings to discuss strategies for tackling this pervasive problem of ignorance. On the 8th of January, a number of government agencies and civil society organizations gathered in the capital to lay out plans for the region’s rehabilitation, including the Secretaries of the Interior and Police, Health and Social Precautions, the Armed Forces, Public Works, Agriculture, and Justice; the Director of Agrarian Reform; the provincial attorney general from San Juan; the bishop of San Juan de la Maguana; the director of the Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo (UASD); and the president of the Rotary Club of San Juan de la Maguana. This was, clearly, a multipronged attack. The list of solutions that this conglomeration of organizations produced bore a striking similarity to Trujillo’s civilizing projects, including the construction of irrigation canals, highways, schools, medical dispensaries, and, significantly, more churches.

While material support, particularly in the realm of land reform, was deemed important to rehabilitating the detainees, education was crucial to eradicating their pernicious ignorance.

Rehabilitation was not under the exclusive purview of the state, however. Capitaleño civil society reached out to the various ministries with offers of help in solving the problem of Palma Sola. This was especially true of educational organizations, which perhaps saw a special role for

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110 *La Nación.* “Es Necesario Hacer Campana Educativa en Zona Afectada.” 3 January 1963, (p. 3) For Lorenzo’s incarnation as Leon’s spokesperson, see “El movimiento de Palma Sola, ayer y hoy,” in *La Ruta Hacia Liborio*, (pp. 241-2).
themselves in the eradication of the oft-lamented ignorance from which the campesinos suffered. For example, the Asociación de Profesionales Universitarias en Ciencias de la Educación (APUCE) eagerly communicated their willingness to conduct literacy campaigns and moral and civic instruction to the palmasolistas to the Secretary of Education in the wake of this meeting. Indeed, the APUCE seemed to take it as an affront when the Consejo de Estado appointed a Chilean sociologist, Florángel Cárdenas Fontecha, to undertake a study of the palmasolistas. APUCE critiqued Cárdenas Fontecha’s plan to use students from the UASD as co-investigators, and lamented the fact that a foreigner, with insufficient knowledge of the Dominican context, was in charge of such delicate and important work. APUCE eventually made a sort of peace with Cárdenas Fontecha, and invited her to a join them in a televised roundtable discussion in late January to discuss the problems of education and socioeconomics in Palma Sola, which they saw as “a general problem of the entire country.”

While APUCE’s complaint can be read critically as a the result of a kind of turf war with the visiting sociologist, what its members were also expressing was a desire to be part of the solution to the problems that plagued the country, a desire to be part of a break with the dark, uncivilized past and the heralding of a brighter, more modern future. For, as different commentators in the press pointed out, despite the tragedy of Palma Sola, it offered “an excellent opportunity for the people and the government to unite their efforts in a struggle to eradicate ignorance and superstition.” These efforts were, moreover, “a historic duty prevailing on all of

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115 The study, once produced, was not what the Consejo de Estado had hoped for, and was never published in the Dominican Republic. It appeared in Bohemia Libre Venezolana in June 1964 with the title, “Masacre de Palma Sola: Brutal Exterminio de una Secta Religiosa.”
116 El Caribe, 14 Enero 1963. “Señalan Factores Incidentes en el Caso de Palma Sola.” P.4
117 El Caribe 25 Enero 1963. “Invitan una Socióloga a un Diálogo por la TV.”
While Palma Sola may have symbolized all the pernicious ignorance that had led to Trujillo’s longevity, it also helped make clear, at least in the minds of many contemporaries, what needed to be done to eradicate this defect. Moreover, it offered different stakeholders in the capital – but especially those involved in education – a way of demonstrating their commitment to the Patria.

Meanwhile, other commentators took up the notion that, far from a decidedly rural and border region problem, Palma Sola in fact typified a malignancy that afflicted the entire nation. In his regular column in *La Nación*, Reginaldo Atanay minced no words in an indictment of his uncivilized compatriots:

> La revelación de Palma Sola no es más que una nueva confirmación de la gigantesca ignorancia que se desarrollan muchas de las actividades diarias del hombre dominicano.

> Y no solamente en los montes y parajes remotos de la República se registran casos de ignorancia casi total, sino también en las mismas ciudades y en diferentes formas.

> El caso de Palma Sola no debe sorprender a nadie; es una consecuencia natural del ínfimo grado de evolución educativa en que se encuentra nuestro pueblo. Acostumbrados a oír decir constantemente que nuestro país es uno de los más civilizados – táctica explotada con provecho por el rey del crimen en la República Dominicana – nuestros hombres, o por lo menos muchos de ellos, llegaron a creer la monumental mentira.

Upsetting the traditional geography of ignorance, Atanay includes urban denizens in his definition of the problem that plagues the nation. He also rejects outright the Trujillo-era insistence on the civilized nature of the Republic, arguing, in contrast, that this is a “monumental lie” that Dominicans believe at their peril. After entreating his fellow citizens to abandon the

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myth of civilization in order to focus on its realization, Atanay concludes forcefully but vaguely with the exhortation that the nation finally take “a definitive step toward progress.”

Indeed, working together for progress was a central trope through which commentators imagined the salvation of the Dominican nation. The religious rhetoric employed in the discourse of national post-Trujillo healing was pervasive. In an opinion piece in *El Caribe*, one observer asserted that the way to forget the “*noche lugubre e interminable de terror y de la muerte... Noche Trujillista,*” was to work together for “salvation” of democracy. Affirming that the Patria is “great, noble, and generous,” as well as a gift from God, the author concludes that “We must work together, with calmness and wisdom, prudence and serenity, thinking of God and in the Patria.”

Fixing the “problem” of Palma Sola, symbol of all the pernicious ignorance that had led to the durability of the Trujillato, was one of the ways that the path to redemption was traced. Thus Palma Sola represented both a responsibility and an opportunity to reform the nation.

And reforming this nation, this imagined community of fellow Dominicans, what was this if not, in part, a spiritual undertaking? In his classic thesis on nationalism, Benedict Anderson, too, concedes that, at least with respect to notions of sacrifice, immortality, and death, nationalist imaginings have a “strong affinity with religious imaginings.” Though he insists that he does not see nationalism as replacing religion, I agree with Claudio Lomnitz, that Anderson errs in his close association of nationalism with secularization.

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essay, Lomnitz points out that in Spanish America, at least, national consciousness emerged as an “offshoot of religious expansionism,” with the Catholic Church deeply imbricated in the very notion of Spanishness from the beginning of colonization. 123 This is certainly true in the Dominican Republic, where two of the seven members of the Consejo de Estado were representatives of the Church, and, until the late 1950s, Trujillo had harnessed much authority through his close relationship with and support of the Catholic clergy. 124

In the post-Trujillo world, the redemptive possibilities of a civilized future emerged as a counterpoint to the immediate past. This involved a significant shift in the temporal boundaries that El Benefactor had mobilised in his self-appointed role as the supreme agent of modernization. As much of the Trujillista discourse as this reform-minded capitaleño elite appropriated, they still turned it on its head, insisting, as one editorialist did, that the “moral liberation” that civilization portended was dependent upon banishing any remnants of the “mental deformation” cause by Trujillo. In other words, “La mentalidad del trujillismo no nos acerca a esa civilización. Más bien nos aleja.” 125 Though at least one commentator suggested that the violence with which Palma Sola met its end indicated another difficult legacy of the Trujillo era, by and large observers in the capital were content with the narrative they had helped produce. 126 Palmasolistas, and the nation at large, could be saved by education, employment, and economic development: the promised land of civilization.

123 Lomnitz, *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico*, (p. 15).
124 On Trujillo and the Church, see Lundius and Lundahl, “The Catholic Church and its Benefactor,” in *Peasants and Religion*, (pp. 586-595).
Conclusion

I was initially drawn to the study of Palma Sola by a sense that this was a profoundly complex story, a historical moment ripe with new possibilities, when much was in flux and the relationships between past, present and future were being worked out in myriad ways. In this, I was not wrong, and further exploration only heightened my impression that the collapse of Trujillista hegemony had created a moment in which the reorganization of meaning became a profound and urgent imperative. I have, following Palmié’s powerful example, sought to reintegrate two highly divergent narratives about Palma Sola’s significance back into their “common historical point of origin,” to undo some of the violence – both symbolic and physical – that rendered one of these narratives “civilized” and the other “backward.”

Both within Palma Sola and Santo Domingo, various historical actors grappled with the ramifications of Trujillo’s death, and with their own complicity and quiescence, perhaps even their full-fledged collusion or support for, a regime that was contemporaneously coming to be understood as immoral, brutalizing, and corrupt.

I argue that common to both these narratives was a search for salvation, a desire to find a means of analysis that both made sense of and definitely rendered the Trujillato as past, cordoned off from the present and from a more promising future. The contours of these narratives were, clearly, greatly divergent, shaped as they were by the “fundamentally different forms of historical experience and contemporary sociality” of their various interlocutors. In Palma Sola, the other-worldly search for salvation was undertaken in a collective setting but was also deeply personal. It involved a particular understanding of how each individual was bound

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127 Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists*, (p. 17).
128 Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists*, (p. 27).
up in the darkness of the past, and thus how each individual needed healing in order to herald a collective salvation. While spirit possession and lengthy pilgrimages might wreak their own kind of violence on the individual body, sore feet were nothing compared to the kind of violence wielded by the state in its own process of purgation. The nationalist leanings of capitaleños shaped their construction of Palma Sola as part of a lingering past, a “backwardness” that needed purging in order to bring about the salvation of the Patria. The practices that would lead to this coming salvation involved a war against the “ignorance” of the nation’s “uncivilized” elements, one that would be fought with guns as well as the arms of education and employment. For the observers in the capital, the nation was a collective body, but a diseased one, and the cure was a violent process of lustration.

One of the larger points I hope I have succeeded in making here is that in seeking to explain what Palma Sola was “about,” we risk flattening it into pre-conceived categories of causation—socio-economic strife, political turmoil, and so on. Rather, what I want to emphasize is not that these things were unimportant—far from it—but that the narratives of Palma Sola are simply not reducible to one or another of them, for these varying narratives were ripe with the possibility of divergent interpretations about past, present, and future. Within the capital, however, though there were some significant variations on the basic depiction of ignorant, manipulated palmasolistas, Palma Sola was less a central focus than it was one part of a variegated effort to map out a new political life for the nation. In Santo Domingo, Palma Sola was thus just one potent symbol in a larger project of the reorganization of meaning in the post-Trujillo world, a way for capitaleos to begin to think through and to disavow the Trujillista past.
In this comparison between the capitaleño and palmasolista narratives, I have at times turned to the frameworks of nationalism and millenarianism. What I would like to point out by way of conclusion is simply that the distance between these two concepts, at least in this case, is perhaps not so great. If we accept, as we have since Anderson, that nationalism is about an “imagined” community, is it a different sort of imagination than that which posits Liborio as a spiritual force strong enough to bring a new world into being? If the salvation of millenarianism is dependent upon “supernatural” agents, is the nation, in contrast, “natural”? By what sleight of hand do we make certain kinds of cultural logics “imaginative” and others “other-worldly”? The point is simply that culture – the making and contestation of meaning – unfolds on many levels, and we risk doing a particular sort of symbolic violence by holding fast to the distinction that marks off certain kinds of faith as “religious.”
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