

Future Visions of Dominican History in Odilius Vlak's *Crónicas historiológicas*

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ABSTRACT: The work of science fiction author Odilius Vlak (Azua, Dominican Republic, 1976) looks to the future to comment on the country's past. In many of the stories that comprise the collection *Crónicas historiológicas* (2017), Vlak examines how history is written and remembered through the eyes of future Dominicans. In this article, I examine Vlak's counterfactual takes on the Dominican War of Independence and the Trujillo dictatorship in the stories "Descargas de meteoritos en la batalla del 19 de marzo" and "Juegodrox platónicos." By injecting speculative elements into such significant moments in Dominican history, Vlak critiques how histories are created, sold, and mythologized, while also highlighting the role of counter-narratives in contesting official accounts. In "Descargas de meteoritos en la batalla del 19 de marzo," a mysteriously powerful space rock wins the Battle of Azua, and future generations are confronted with a virtual record of the violence of the Dominican War of Independence. In "Juegodrox platónicos," future Dominicans attempt to solve the mystery of disappearing children during the Trujillo era, while the dictator enlists science fiction writers and artists to fortify his larger-than-life persona. Examining Vlak's challenging of Dominican history opens up the possibility of studying contemporary Caribbean science fiction's relationship to the future and the past.

Keywords: Dominican literature, science fiction, historical fiction, alternate histories, Caribbean

In the Dominican science fiction-comedy film *Arrobá* (2013), directed by José María Cabral, three amateur thieves named Samuel, Pedro, and Pilón use a makeshift time machine to go back in time and retry a botched bank robbery. Unable to control the machine, the group accidentally travels throughout Dominican history trying to make their way back to the present, fleeing at different times from Spanish explorers and Trujillo-era firing squads. After kidnapping Rafael Trujillo and taking him with them in the time machine, the team finds themselves in a distant future, backstage at the filming of a gameshow called *GenomaElectrica*. In *GenomaElectrica*, contestants are strapped down and forced to undergo a genetic scan that decides what percentage of each subject is Dominican, and what percentage belongs to a "Raza Inferior." The host proudly announces that the show has not only changed the color of television, but also the country, implying that those contestants not considered sufficiently Dominican will be killed or deported once off camera. Pedro is chosen to be the first contestant, and is cheered on by the audience after scoring an acceptable 64% Dominican heritage. The next contestant shuffled onto the stage is Trujillo, still disoriented from the time travel. Once restrained, Trujillo is scanned and is found to be 51% of an inferior race. During the commotion of his removal, the rest of the crew quickly escapes back into the time machine. Though meant to be comedic, the scene of Trujillo's humiliation on *GenomaElectrica* is an example of how futuristic science fiction can re-examine Dominican history. Trujillo's failure to pass the purity test highlights the hypocrisy in his anti-Haitian policies, and the ar-

bitrariness of xenophobic and racist nationalism. At the same time, that Trujillo's vision for the country can be extended so far into the future also suggests that his violent legacy has and will continue to infect national discourse.

Similar to *Arrobá*, the work of science fiction writer Odilius Vlak (Azua, Dominican Republic, 1976) looks to the future to comment on the country's past. In many of the stories that comprise the collection *Crónicas historiológicas* (2017), Vlak examines how history is written and remembered through the eyes of future Dominicans.¹ Odilius Vlak, a pseudonym for Juan Julio Ovando Pujols, has become a leading voice in Dominican science fiction; other than *Crónicas historiológicas*, he has published the short story collection *Exoplanetarium* (2015), edited the first ever anthology of Dominican science fiction and fantasy, *Futuros en el mismo trayecto del sol* (2016), and in 2016 organized with the collective *Mentes Extremófila* the Dominican Republic's first ever science fiction and fantasy congress. Vlak's writing often combines spiritual entities with futuristic looks at the power of technology. In this article, I examine Vlak's counterfactual takes on the Dominican War of Independence and the Trujillo dictatorship in the stories "Descargas de meteoritos en la batalla del 19 de marzo" and "Juegodrox platónicos." By injecting speculative elements into such significant moments in Dominican history, Vlak critiques how histories are created, sold, and mythologized, while also highlighting the role of counter-narratives in contesting official accounts.

A closer analysis of Vlak's *Crónicas historiológicas* offers insight into the role of science fiction in speculating on the future of histori-

cal discourse. This article begins with a theoretical discussion on the genres of historical fiction and alternate history, examining their abilities to contest dominant narratives both globally and in Latin American and Caribbean contexts. Next, I engage in close readings of the two previously mentioned short stories, focusing on how heroes are created, histories are commercialized, and new technologies open up spaces for remembrance and mourning. In "Descargas de meteoritos en la batalla del 19 de marzo," a mysteriously powerful space rock wins the Battle of Azua, and future generations are confronted with a virtual record of the violence of the Dominican War of Independence. In "Juegodrox platónicos," future Dominicans attempt to solve the mystery of disappearing children during the Trujillo era, while the dictator enlists science fiction writers and artists to fortify his larger-than-life persona. Examining Vlak's challenging of Dominican history opens up the possibility of studying contemporary Caribbean science fiction's relationship to the future and the past.

Besides highlighting and examining Vlak's particular literary achievements, another motive behind this project is to begin to fill a gap in recent scholarship on science fiction from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. While this subfield has seen a recent increase in attention, scholarly work still tends to focus on work from Cuba, and to a lesser extent on Puerto Rico. Despite the achievements of Vlak and his contemporaries, scholarship of Dominican science fiction tends to focus on just two texts: Rita Indiana Hernández's 2015 novel *La mucama de Omicunlé* (Merced Hernández, 2017; Garrido Castellano, 2017; Pacheco 2017), and Junot Díaz's 2012 short story "Monstro" (González, 2015; Quesada, 2016). Vlak himself has added to the scholarship on Dominican science fiction, particularly with his prologue to *Futuros en el mismo trayecto del sol*, "Un país en el mismo trayecto del futuro," and his 2015 essay "Ciencia ficción y fantasía dominicana: Más ficción y fantasía que realidad," in the Spanish science fiction magazine *Tiempos Oscuros*. Still, there is much more work to be done in the rigorous study of particular Dominican science fiction texts, and this article's analysis of Vlak's work attempts to call attention to and jumpstart this process. However, in order to better understand Vlak's contributions, it is important to first understand the ways in which the alternate history as a genre can challenge narratives of linearity and predetermination within official histories.

Historical Fiction and Alternate Histories

Besides the Trujillo regime and the Battle of Azua, the stories of *Crónicas historiológicas* feature references to many other historical moments and figures, including President Joaquín Balaguer, the 1655 attempted siege of the colonial city of Santo Domingo by British forces, and the 1842 Cap-Haïten earthquake. Though often mixed with supernatural elements, Vlak's science fiction remains firmly based in Dominican (and occasionally Haitian) history. In a 2016 interview, Vlak was asked if all of the historical references in

his work meant that he spent much time doing research. The author affirmed that it did, and added:

Hay alguna información histórica que tú no la consigues ni en Wikipedia ni en la Web...Tienes que ir a una biblioteca y dedicar dos o tres horas leyendo; toma su tiempo... Pero aunque leas un libro, tú en realidad explotas el 10% de esa lectura en tu propuesta creativa, en tu cuento, en tu novela; solamente una fracción de minutas, de esa totalidad, de ese todo que tú captaste. (Cana)

Going beyond Wikipedia-level historical knowledge and dedicating so much time to research with admittedly little payoff, Vlak exhibits a commitment to maintaining points of historical accuracy within his alternate histories. That only a small percentage of the research makes it on a page shows the complexities of constructing a world based on counterfactuals. The reliance on the historical record is key; as media scholar Matt Hills (2009) writes, science fiction's "use of counterfactuals is hence one way in which it can destabilize ontological perspectives and compel readers to see 'real' histories in different, perhaps more critical ways" (437). By playing with the reader's general identification with historical events or figures, Vlak is able to both feed and disrupt their narrative expectations.

More than a reorganization of facts, historical fiction has the ability to question the ways in which the past is institutionalized and archived. In her work on contemporary Latin American historical novels, literary scholar Cecilia M. T. López Badano (2010) signals a new tendency within the genre to produce texts that "sitúan el curso histórico como un componente más de la construcción especulativa de la historia" (217). López Badano also notes that one way in which Latin American authors have highlighted the constructed nature of history is to include improbable causal relations and ruptures in time (217). Another effect of the fictionalization of history is the recognition of underrepresented or non-canonical stories and perspectives. As literary scholar Magdalena Perkowska (2008) writes on the new Latin American historical novel:

La nueva función de la historiografía y de la novela histórica consistiría en explorar las discontinuidades e intersecciones obliteradas por el proyecto de la modernidad, recorrer las brechas sociales y recuperar la diversidad del pasado para buscar raíces históricas de las heterogeneidades y racionalidades diferenciadoras del presente. Si se admite el presente como una realidad contradictoria, entonces la indagación del pasado no tiene que ver con la legitimización de ese presente, sino con el reconocimiento histórico de las incoherencias y discontinuidades en el tejido social. (105)

Historical fiction can destabilize popular understandings of

how the present was created, thus questioning the narrative of linear progress put forth by the project of modernity.

Within the tradition of historical fiction from and about the Dominican Republic, the Trujillo and the *Trujillato* period have received by far the most literary and scholarly attention. Late 20th and early 21st-century representations of Trujillo by Dominican authors include Diógenes Valdez's *Retrato de dinosaurios en la era de Trujillo* (1997), Miguel Holguín Veras's *Juro que sabré vengarme* (1998), Marcio Veloz Maggiolo's *Uña y carne: Memorias de la virilidad* (1999), Efraim Castillo's *El personero* (1999), and Ángela Hernández's *Mudanza de los sentidos* (2004). This list is complemented by the works of Dominican-American authors, such as Julia Álvarez's *In the Time of Butterflies* (1994) and Junot Díaz's *The Brief, Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), along with notable novels like *The Farming of Bones* (1998) by Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat and *La fiesta del chivo* (2000) by Peruvian author Mario Vargas Llosa.² The authors that have fictionalized the Trujillo regime have had an important role in the contestation of Dominican history. As scholar Ignacio López-Calvo notes in *God and Trujillo: Literary and Cultural Representations of the Dominican Dictator* (2005), "The collective deconstruction of the working dynamics of Dominican history through the negation or affirmation of false national myths leads this group of authors to define, in different ways, the national psychology of the Dominican nation" (147). López-Calvo also comments that by recuperating and analyzing the authoritarian tactics laid out in these books, readers can see the parallels with similar actions carried out by current regimes and by transnational corporations. Studying Trujillo narratives allow for a closer look into not just the representations of man himself but also the mechanisms, institutions, and rhetorical structures built around him.

While *Crónicas historiológicas* attempts a similar destabilizing of the history as these historical novels, Vlak's incorporation of speculative and unreal elements positions the texts within the broadly-defined subfield of alternate history. There is much debate among literary scholars about how to classify different kinds of alternate histories, along with the place of other related or tangential practices of history bending, including the counterfactual history, the alternative history, and the uchronia.³ For instance, the speculative takes on history in Vlak's *Crónicas historiológicas* may best fit into the subcategory that Catherine Gallagher (2018) characterizes as "'secret' histories that purport to explain the hidden private stories behind the official explanations of historical events" (2). Despite disagreements on nomenclature, there is more consensus concerning the potential social and political effects of the genre, including its "ability to shed light upon the evolution of historical memory" (Rosenfeld 93), and how it "can be used to show various approaches to reading the historical record" (Stypczynski 464). Karen Helleckson, in *The Alternate History: Refiguring Historical Time* (2001), argues that alternate history can also counteract understandings of history as predetermined and uncontrollable, creating a feeling of historical and political agency among readers: "The alternate his-

tory posits a universe in which we are capable of acting and in which our actions have significance" (111). As a popular genre, alternate histories allow for a wider engagement with popular history and public memory.

Helleckson delves further into the ways in which alternate history can question more than just the historical record:

The alternate history as a genre speculates about such topics as the nature of time and linearity, the past's link to the present, the present's link to the future, and the role of individuals in the history-making process. Alternate histories question the nature of history and of causality; they question accepted notions of time and space; they rupture linear movement; and they make readers rethink their world and how it has become what it is. They are a critique of metaphors we use to discuss history. And they foreground the 'constructedness' of history and the role narrative plays in this construction. (4)

While Helleckson and others have often classified different types of alternate histories based on the outcomes of the historical changes, there is little evidence in Vlak's alternate histories that anything has changed in the present. In the stories studied in this article, the meteorite used in the Battle of Azua does not change the outcome of the Dominican War of Independence, nor does Trujillo's funding of a department for speculative propaganda greatly affect the duration or intensity of his reign. This article posits that these facts make the collection less of a statement about the particular historical figures mentioned and more of a commentary on the way that history is constructed and remembered. Alternate histories like *Crónicas historiológicas* that eschew traditional cause-and-effect patterns question the linear histories that often privilege a supposed narrative clarity over diverse perspectives.

The recent increase in scholarship about Latin American and Caribbean science fiction has also seen a rise in scholarly attention given to alternate histories or uchronia from those regions. For example, Brian Price (2018) has investigated the role of uchronia and steampunk in the work of Mexican author Bernardo Fernández, while Kaitlin R. Sommerfeld and Juan C. Toledano (2015) have collaborated on a study of collective memory and dictatorship in Chilean science fiction. In his study of Argentine alternate histories, Luis Pestrani (2017) writes, "La uchronía es, como buena parte de la mayor ciencia ficción, narrativa especulativa que se afianza en un cambio conceptual—en este caso un punto de divergencia—para reflexionar sobre sus consecuencia sobre el hombre y la sociedad" (427). In the Caribbean, Javier de la Torre Rodríguez's article "En busca de la uchronía perdida" (2012) cites Cuban texts like F. Mond's *¿Dónde está mi Habana?* (1985) and Erick Mota's *Habana Underguater* (2010) in calling the alternate history "uno de los subgéneros más complejos y transgresores dentro de la ciencia ficción" (8). Yolanda Arroyo's article "Uchronías y un paralelo entre el fenómeno

Seva y el Código Da Vinci (2008) highlights the twisting of history in Luis López Nieves's story "Seva" (1983): "Fue creada a partir de un hecho histórico que llenaba de inconformidad a un sector dentro del cual se identificaba el autor, por lo que se dio una torcedura a la historia y se creó el rellenado en prosa epistolar" (34). As previously mentioned, this rise in scholarly work on Latin American and Caribbean speculative literature has largely ignored the Dominican Republic; studying Vlak's *Crónicas historiológicas* offers insight into how alternate history dialogues with the historical record within a specifically Dominican context.

Virtual Histories and Public Empathy

"Descargas de meteoritos en la batalla de 19 de marzo," opens in the year 2144 with Luis and Blaise, two *psientíficos* tasked with creating a virtual representation of the 1844 Battle of Azua, the first major battle of the Dominican War of Independence. In their conversations about their research and in their official presentation to the public, the narrative of the battle centers on the powerful meteorite that hit the island, was found and cared for by the Taíno people, and eventually allowed an outmatched Dominican side to defeat the larger Haitian army. According to the researchers, the first known account of the meteorite appeared in the writings of Hernán Cortés, who they also claim carried out his expedition through the Aztec kingdom looking not for gold but in search of a power similar to that of the space rock. Confusing history and fiction further, the researchers cite actual lines from Christopher Columbus's writings as proof that he also came across the meteorite in his journeys: "Igualmente la mayor parte de los caciques tiene tres piedras, a las cuales ellos y su pueblo muestra gran devoción" (16). This twisting of a historical text highlights the facility with which archival documents can be manipulated and taken out of context. Other historical figures mentioned in the winding lineage of the meteorite include: Diego Velázquez, colonial founder of Azua and first governor of Cuba; Nicolás de Ovando, the colonial administrator known for his cruel slaughter of the Taíno people; Dominican writer and philosopher Antonio Sánchez Valverde; and Emilio Prud'Homme, author of the lyrics of the Dominican National Anthem. Vlak mixes factual elements into this fictional historical record; for example, Prud'Homme was in fact forced to rewrite his anthem lyrics, though not because the original version contained references to a magical meteorite. The interconnections between these references and fantastical details force the reader to question how historical narratives are written and consumed.

Just as Vlak's historical counterfactuals are firmly based in fact, his imagined future of Santo Domingo includes specific geographic details. This follows Barney Warf's (2002) assertion that "alternative histories are inherently geographical, just as all histories, 'real' or otherwise, unfold spatially, for different temporal trajectories produce different maps of human behavior" (32). In explaining the transformation of the city and the area that was once the malecón,

Vlak writes, "del 2075 al 2105, toda el área que se extendía desde la desembocadura del Río Ozama hasta la Playa de Manresa, fue suprimida...La antigua frontera sur de la ciudad clásica, delimitada por la avenida George Washington, era ahora parte de sus dominios internos" (26). This redrawing of the city and coastline, a literal expansion of Dominican territory, highlights science fiction's capacity to imagine futures that go beyond natural and political borders. The vertical urban geography has also been transformed by the *Torre de Transmisión Ionográfica Tridimensional*, the new tallest building in Santo Domingo. The tower is part of a government complex that extends past the old coastline and is bordered by two present-day markers along the malecón: the monument to Antonio de Montesinos, who was known for speaking out against the abuse of the indigenous population in colonial Hipaniola; and the Obelisco Macho, originally built to commemorate the city's transition from Santo Domingo to Ciudad de Trujillo in 1935, but later repurposed as a monument to the anti-Trujillo resistance. This future geography's connection to the past is noted in the story as Blaise contemplates the 22nd-century urban landscape, "y lo hacía con unos ojos físicos ubicados en el presente, pero con una mirada que deslizaba hacia el pasado a bordo de la máquina de tiempo de un sueño despierto" (25). The reshaping of the city and the preservation or transformation of certain monuments reflects this future's relationship to the history of Santo Domingo.

The reasoning behind these geographic expansions gives insight into the ruling paradigms of this future world: "El cambio no se basó en una necesidad práctica de la superpoblación, sino en la fiebre esteticista que se apoderó de los cerebros de todos los líderes locales de la *Mitotecnocracia* mundial desde la segunda mitad del siglo XXI" (26). The goal of the Dominican mythotechnocratic leaders is to make Santo Domingo into an international center of design and information, "en el cual el mismo sol tuviera que detenerse a ofrendarle su admiración" (26). This future world extrapolates on the current obsession with and rapid trajectory of technological advancement, while also imagining a return to mythological or speculative arts and knowledge. The previously mentioned tower is a government building that houses institutions dedicated to issues of *Realismo Fantástico*: "cuyo meta era diseñar un presente salido de las mentes que piensan en el futuro y rescatar los elementos míticos del material histórico registrado" (27). This aim materializes in various projects, including the nurturing of those with exceptional minds and auras, along with a euthanasia program dedicated to safeguarding "*lo Bueno, lo Bello y lo Verdadero*" (27). These intersections between morality, design, and truth help the reader understand some of the dominant values of this future world and those who inhabit it, along with the context within which those people look back at history.

Just as it has affected the fields of civic governance, neurology, and architectural design, mythotechnocracy has transformed the ways in which history is studied. As part of the Academy of Histrology, Luis and Blaise are tasked with creating virtual representa-

tion of the battle for the videogame series *Mitos Patrios* that incorporates "los aspectos mitológicos, legendarios o paranormales... que son deshechados en la versión oficial de la Academia de Historia y su juego *Historias Patrias*" (15). The inclusion of mythological elements into the new historical record, beyond the mythotechnocratic glorification of such elements as a way to prove Dominican exceptionalism, can be connected to the nationalist project of authoring public memory. To further analyze this interaction between myth, memory, and nationalism, sociologist Duncan Bell (2003) introduces the concept of the "mythscape":

...the temporally and spatially extended discursive realm wherein the struggle for control of peoples' memories and the formation of nationalist myths is debated, contested and subverted incessantly. The mythscape is the page upon which the multiple and often conflicting nationalist narratives are (re)written; it is the perpetually mutating repository for the representation of the past for the purposes of the present. (66)

As a constantly-changing discursive space, the mythscape has the power to shape national histories, subsuming certain memories and privileging others (Bell 76). While Bell emphasizes the amorphous and contested nature of this space, the institutionalization and governing of the *Mitos Patrios* games in Vlak's story represent an official attempt to dominate public memory, thus highlighting the role of popular historical narratives in the consolidation and legitimization of state power.

Though much of this story's commentary on the future of Dominican history focuses on the content of Blaise and Luis's game, the form is equally intriguing. By creating an immersive virtual experience, participants have the opportunity to roam the battlefield, while cutaneous sensors allow them to feel some of the physical pains of warfare. Blaise refers to gameplay not as *acting as* historical figures, but as *being* them: "Por supuesto que he sido cada uno de esos personajes históricos...cuyos nombres brillan áureos en la memoria de la patria y también uno de esos héroes anónimos que *a pedrú limpia* rechazaron las huestes haitianas" (22). Similarly, Luis uses the verbs *ser* and *encarnar* to characterize the relationship between user and digital avatar, only once letting slip *fingir* in a way that would question the authenticity of the virtual experience. Both the *Mitos Patrios* and *Historias Patrias* series are meant to connect with users on an emotional or affective level. The success of this project becomes clear near the end of the public presentation: "El pavor avanzó como la peste en el ánimo de los decanos de la Academia de Historiología, y un trance petrificó los ojos de los espectadores del exterior. No fue diferente la reacción de cada uno de los que participaban en la batalla" (34). This transference of fear reflects what videogame researcher Brian Rejak (2007) has written about the future of virtual history simulations, that:

...it is easy to imagine that in the near future we will see games unite the attention to environments and action with equal focus on dramatic and emotional detail. At that point gaming may provide a complex reenactment of history that allows for emotional engagement and the potential for revision and reflection. (422)

While it is impressive that a videogame can imbue in virtual participants the same feelings that were experienced by those actually in the battle, this emphasis on emotional content over historical accuracy brings into question the motivation behind the large-scale official project to narrate Dominican history in this way.

The researchers present their work simultaneously to a panel at the Academy of Historiology and to the public, projected throughout the city from the tower. As an attempt to author popular memory, this involvement of the public suggests the difficulties of forcing a foundational history and mythology onto a nation; this project works much better if the people believe that they have a say in the matter. While this may appear as a democratization of history, Vlak's worldview is much more cynical about the reasons behind the involvement of the public. The Academy of Historiology and its partner, the computing company RVH3.D, seek approval of the historical and mythological aspects of the presentation for economic and political purposes: "La reacción positiva de los ciudadanos era la señal de que los aspectos fantásticos rescatados de tal trozo de historia sería rentables para la compañía y funcionales para el mantenimiento de la conciencia histórica nacional." (29). While other mythotechnocratic projects seek to exalt platonic ideals of beauty and truth, the recreation of history is more concerned with functionality and profitability. Also, the Academy can only sign off on this latest representation of the Battle of Azua "si los dominicanos quedaban impresionados por las imágenes recreadas de la investigación" (29). This wording suggests that the Dominican people can be swayed by the visual effects presented by the project, with less attention given to the historical content of the game. The push for consensus surrounding this project leads to the real reason behind the investment in this sort of historical research: "Todo para enganchar al terruño patrio las mentes de las nuevas generaciones: integrantes de una juventud terrícola cada vez más identificada con la historia que los pioneros espaciales...y no con la de sus respectivos países o planeta local." (29). Fearing the loss of a connection to Dominican history, and thus a loss of loyalty to Dominican nationalism, the game represents a desperate attempt by the authorities to preserve their own place in the nation's future.

As history and myth can both be contested discursive spaces, the presentation of the game has consequences outside of the official political aims. One such effect is the rediscovery and reincorporation of bits of language from Dominican slang now lost in this future world. While watching nanobots work in his laboratory, Blaise thinks to himself, "*En ese infierno atómico ciertamente la cosa debe picar más que el sol de las doce,*" a phrase that the narrator char-

acterizes as an “atavismo lingüístico” (10). Luís later apologizes to Blaise for using the term “*compái galipote*,” which he claims to have picked up from on the virtual reality games (12). While this could be seen as an extension of the official project of reinforcing Dominican identity, Luís’s apologies for using such words suggests that historic slang is not respected within mythechnocratic cultural hierarchies. The best example of this is when Luís, upon explaining a discovery to Blaise, says “¡Capicua!!!...perdón, ¡Eureka! De nuevo mis disculpas” (23). In his enthusiasm, Luís shouts a term often used to end a game of dominoes. By apologizing and replacing it with an interjection popularly associated with the Greek mathematician Archimedes, the reader is given insight into what aspects of Dominican culture are privileged in this future world. Still, these restrictions cannot stop the evolution of language through popular use which, along with references to traditional foods like *mangú* and *sancocho*, show the game’s ability to propagate historical cultural markers that don’t necessarily align with the official objectives of this government project.

The appearance of historical empathy represents an even more radical example of an unexpected effect of the game that goes against its original nationalist objectives. While it was already mentioned that public can experience the pains of battle and forge emotional connections with the virtual representation, there is a surprising moment during Luís and Blaise’s presentation in which the audience begins to feel compassion for the fallen soldiers of the Haitian army. Upon seeing the Haitian side brutally killed by the cosmic powers of the meteorite, both the game and those watching pause. Vlak writes:

Sin haber sido programado, a las víctimas haitianas de la Batalla del 19 de Marzo de 1844, les fue dedicada, de manera póstuma, un minuto de tiempo subjetivo de silencio en su honor...trescientos años de su muerte. Pues una vez finalizada la proyección...todo el mundo se quedó mirando hacia el espacio exterior con ojos encandilados. (35)

Unlike the earlier fear felt for the Dominican side, this moment recognizes Haitian suffering and offers users an unexpected space to mourn and reflect. *Antihaitianismo* has long been a part of official Dominican nationalism, from the end of the Haitian Revolution in 1804, through Trujillo’s anti-Haitian policies and violent actions, to the more recent deportations of Dominicans of Haitian descent.⁴ However, the stigma toward Haiti and Haitians is not merely a Dominican phenomenon. As scholar Silvio Torres-Saillant has argued, *antihaitianismo* was originally an international construct coopted by the Dominican elite for its political utility:

La elite dominicana heredó el antihaitianismo de las grandes potencias que regentaban el orden mundial al cual aspiraba entrar el recién nacido país...el antihaitian-

ismo puede dar la impresión de ser nativo de la sociedad dominicana, congénito con la nacionalidad, pero es más bien una importación que adquiere importancia política y por ello sobrevive. (Oliva 207)

By understanding *antihaitianismo* as an oppressive global collusion, the restaging of the Battle of Azua and the public’s momentary empathy toward the suffering Haitians take on added significance. Not only does this fleeting solidarity go against official Dominican nationalisms, it also separates them from larger political, economic, and cultural structures based on racism and xenophobia.

As to not overstate the subversive potential of this virtual game, the story ends with a more cynical look at this historical reinterpretation, with Luís referring to the project as the successful construction of “material para la creación de pan y circo destinado al consumo masivo” (37). The researcher points out that such institutionalized historical narratives are meant to distract the public from other issues, along with turning a profit. In this view, Blaise and Luís are participants in the coopting of academic work by economic and governing interests. This perspective also reshapes the function of the speculative elements in this alternative history, turning the magical meteorite into a mere diversion. Still, the fact that public reaction can diverge from the nationalist project, along with Vlak’s muddling of the historical record, suggests that both history and myth should continue to be discursive spaces full of negotiation and reinterpretation in the future.

Speculative Propaganda and Rhetorical Legacies

While “Descargas de meteoritos en la batalla de 19 de marzo” offers a more overt speculation on the future of history, “Juegodrox platónicos” deals with the place of speculative fiction within the historical record. The story is set sometime in the 2180s, and follows Norberto Deschamps, “encargado de la Diplomacia Solar de la colonia de voluntarios dominicanos en la luna Titán del planeta Saturno” (197). This Dominican Colony on Titan is part of an attempt by Caribbean and Central American powers to recreate those regions in space; Norberto is said to not enjoy leaving the “pequeño paraíso de bondades tropicales ajo las curvas del domo cristalino que albergaba el asiento del bloque de los países de Centroamérica y el Caribe—CARIvidencia Espacial” (197). The imagining of such a community suggests that not only do these countries now have the collective resources to finance such an exhibition, but also that conditions on Earth may have reached a point that such explorations are necessary. In the story, Norberto has been tasked with studying and deciphering a polygonal object that has found its way to the colonies. Once it is found that there are Dominican children born in the 1930s living inside each object, it becomes Norberto’s job to figure out how they traveled through time. The story also has a parallel narrative, following Manuel Eusebio Navarro, a science fiction writer who wrote propaganda during the Trujillo regime, and who

at that time was tasked with investigating the unexplainable disappearances of several children. Along with demonstrating the utility of science fiction for opening up new perspectives and possibilities, this alternate history suggests that the way history is written now can affect the ways in which technologies are coded and constructed in the future.

While much of the focus is put on the future of history and technology, the story also offers insight into a possible future of what it means to be Dominican. More than a diaspora, the Dominican colony on Titan represents an official and coordinated project to expand the Dominican Republic even beyond planetary boundaries. Though seemingly a forward-thinking project, this type of terraformation is intrinsically connected to history. As Chris Pak (2016) writes, "Terraforming narratives are preoccupied with the problem of creating a new human history that can escape, resolve or transcend the failures of the past" (205). This sort of worldbuilding is itself a way to create an alternate Dominican history. The setting also destabilizes what it means to be Dominican in the future, or alternatively highlights the lack of stability in such identities at any time. Norberto refers to his "condición de dominicano" (198-9), but upon returning to Santo Domingo contemplates his "doble identidad como terrícola y como dominicano" (244). Still, the children found within the mysterious objects are quickly identified as Dominican: "Las investigaciones posteriores revelaron que cada uno de los niños era de origen dominicano...Según la contundente cláusula final del reporte científico, los niños nacieron a principio del generalísimo Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina, en la década treinta del Siglo XX" (199). However, it is also noted that their particular genetic structure is no longer found in nature: "eran humanos naturales hasta en el último átomo de su organismo; sin modificación genética a nivel embrionario o nanobots reguladores de los ciclos vitales de sus células" (200). While it was possible to genetically identify the children as Dominican, they no longer bare genetic resemblance to future, modified Dominicans like Norberto. The use of alternate history in "Juegodrox platónicos" suggests that biological lineages can be replaced by shared historical trauma.

Just as the creation of mytho-historical videogames in the previous story was meant as a way to control national memory, Manuel's storyline shows the role that speculative fiction can play in authoritarian propaganda. Manuel, who writes under the pseudonym Orvuz Nasklit, works for the fictional "visionaria misión del Departamento para la Propaganda Futurista del Régimen del Benefactor de la Patria, adscrito al Ministerio de Educación" (203). Vlak once again cites actual events to ground his alternate history, citing the 1930 Hurricane San Zenon that destroyed Santo Domingo as the starting point for Trujillo's interest in science fiction. As Manuel explains:

Nadie dudó de que el Generalísimo estaba transformando la fisonomía propia de la Edad de Piedra de la ciudad en un augurio de concreto, acero y cristal de los que

sería el futuro; hecho que había que celebrarlo con una parafernalia propagandística cuyas desbordantes visiones estuviesen un paso más Adelante del futuro mismo. ¿Y que mejor modelo para construirlo que el futuro que estaba siendo inventado en las revistas pulp de la época? (203)

Recognizing science fiction's ability to speculate on technological advancements and the future of modernity, Trujillo manipulates it to disseminate his vision for a new Dominican Republic, while also glossing over the violent means by which such a project would be realized. In Vlak's story, Trujillo literally uses science fiction to paint over the past, commissioning murals by illustrator Frank R. Paul to cover his new buildings. As his part of the project, Manuel began to write the *Aventuras en el Futuro Trujillista*, starring *El Jefe del Tiempo*, "un héroe viajero del tiempo que se aparecía en cualquier época pasada o futuro en la que su país lo pudiera necesitar" (204). In a meeting about the missing children, Trujillo is so proud of his time-traveling character that he suggests that Manuel's books be sent to the Dominican troops at Cayo Confites. Science fiction motifs are manipulated to both promote a nationalist discourse and stoke the dictator's ego.

In Vlak's story, while Trujillo is amused by these supernatural powers, he is sure to assert that he is not the larger-than-life figure that appears in Manuel's stories. On the kidnappings, he says, "Esos problemas no los puede resolver el personaje de sus historias futuristas, El Jefe Trujillo, sino el Trujillo de carne y hueso que usted tiene en frente" (207). While it may seem obvious that Trujillo did not in fact have superpowers, some have argued that part of the authoritarian's cultural dominance stemmed from his representation as an almost mythical figure. As Lauren Derby writes in *The Dictator's Seduction: Politics and the Popular Imagination in the Era of Trujillo* (2009):

As Trujillo's inner sanctum became a virtual secret society, the veil of invisibility appeared to augment the powers within, as the "milling of the pretense and reputation of secrecy" made the secrets appear to grow in force as well as form. "Secretism" thus generated popular narratives about the occult and even magical powers of the ubiquitous yet invisible inner circle—such as the stories about Trujillo's "animal magnificence," about his never sweating, and about the evil glass eye of his right-hand man, Anselmo Paulino. People knew that Trujillo was up to something, but they did not always know exactly what. (4)

While Derby is referring to the creation of a symbolic superhuman Trujillo, Vlak's story takes that same goal and turns it into an official project. Seeing Trujillo revel in the accomplishments of his science fiction alter ego suggests a sort of human insecurity to which he would never admit. Also, despite the fact that much of "Juegodrox

platónicos" is set in the Trujillo era, the dictator's presence is limited to a single meeting. This decentering of Trujillo allows for a clearer view of the mechanizations and institutions through which he accumulated power. Like the Trujillo narratives mentioned earlier, Vlak demystifies the dictator and puts into question how the history of his reign is recorded and remembered.

Manuel, along with real-life Dominican folklorist Edna Garrido de Boggs, were invited to the meeting because conventional thinking had been unable to account for the disappearances. The writer uses the opportunity and audience with Trujillo to promote the usefulness of science fiction beyond propaganda. Manuel is convinced that the kidnappings are actually alien abductions: "Mi opinión...es que miremos hacia arriba. Observemos el cielo, pues es casi seguro que en él está la respuesta de esta desapariciones...Mi General, estoy casi seguro de que dichas desapariciones de deben a incursiones de naves extraterrestres en nuestro suelo" (206-7). But more than just as a way to solve the case, Manuel makes the case that science fiction allows one to understand the world from different perspectives. He says, "Estamos frente a un fenómeno único y misterioso; uno que requiere de una facultad que ha estado gritando a todo pulmón en nuestro interior: la imaginación. Su naturaleza fantástica necesita ser abordada con una actitud abierta a las explicaciones fantásticas" (206). By stoking the imagination of its audience, science fiction provides the vocabulary for analyzing a questioning situations from new angles. This conflicts with the original aims of Trujillo's speculative propaganda, which seeks to offer easy answers and distract the public with promises of an advanced, more comfortable daily life. More insight into the innovative potential of Manuel's science fiction arrives later in the story, as Norberto and his colleague Blaise notice that the author successfully predicted the DNAs double helix structure in a story written years before its formal discovery by Watson and Crick (231).

Other than the more abstract function of offering new perspectives, both Manuel and Norberto suggest that science fiction can be used for filling in gaps in the official historical record. While defending his idea that the kidnappings were alien abductions, Manuel brings up the supposed alien landing Roswell, New Mexico in 1947, saying that there was "información que los gobiernos so cuidan muy bien de que no llegue a oídos del público y que solo los lectores de literatura especulativa se enteran a través de una historia supuestamente imaginativa" (215). Centuries later, as Norberto and Blaise attempt to understand how the Dominican children traveled into the future, Manuel's story "El Ataque de los Juegos Alienígenas" becomes a primary resource. While not all the details in Manuel's text were accurate, he was able to hone in on the sentiment of the time period:

Había codificado alguna información muy seria en esa historia; la atmósfera que se sentía al leerla era verdaderamente magnética, como si el autor hubiese forzado a sí mismo a dejar por escrito una experiencia

que le espantaba, aunque fuera a través de una historia imaginativa; se sentía la urgencia de un alma abrumada por el fardo pesado de una siniestra revelación y su esperanza en las mentes del futuro. (229)

Beyond these atmospheric concerns, Manuel's story also pointed the futuristic scientists in the direction of two important aspects of the mystery: platonic solids and the children's game hopscotch. While thankful for this resource, the researchers are still surprised by the fact that Manuel chose to communicate them in the form of science fiction. They ask, "¿Acaso descubrió algo demasiado peligroso como para revelarlo a través de un género ordinario de divulgación como el ensayo?" (231). This suggests that another benefit of telling bits of history through speculative fiction is the ability to navigate political censorship. When labeled as a short story, Manuel's text is able to get closer to the truth behind the abductions, without raising suspicions at the propaganda office. Highlighting the importance of Manuel's story in future historical and scientific research promotes the idea that historians and readers should be open to a wider variety of texts, including literary ones, in order to get a more complete understanding of an era.

Norberto's investigation, aided by Manuel's story, led him to reexamine the genetic structures of the abducted children: "Se descubrieron algunas anomalías inexplicables en la codificación de su información genética...Era como si se hubiese robado alguna información específica de su ADN" (225). This discovery, along with Manuel's reference to platonic solids, leads Norberto to investigate the cyberspace community *El Eón de Platón*. Instead of the interactive virtual reality experience like the *Mitos Patrios* game, Norberto is confronted with an AI names Timeo, programmed to be concerned with future survival. Timeo explains, "La clave de nuestra supervivencia como especie está en el desarrollo de una flexibilidad en nuestro genoma para asimilar genes de otras especies" (238). The AIs use of the terminology "our survival as a species" expands the possibilities for this world's vision for future of humanity, as that collective could refer to humankind, or a sort of human-computer hybrid. Timeo admits to using the hopscotch game to capture Dominican children in the 1940s, a detail found in Manuel's story, and to mine their genetic material. The AI explains that the Dominican Republic's history of genetic mixing made these children the perfect sources of raw material for the survival project. "La composición genética del pueblo dominicano fue la solución a nuestro problema, ya que en ella yacía la respuesta a nuestra búsqueda de un ejemplo orgánico natural que no obstante siendo fruto de la mezcla genética sobrevivió como una variedad poderosa de la especie" (240). While dealing with artificial intelligence and time travel, this futuristic plan relies on timeless horrors of resource exploitation and colonial violence.

While the kidnapping of children by an AI initially appears like the reiteration of the classic science fiction trope of machines rebelling against their human creators, Timeo's justification for the kidnappings brings Vlak's story back to its critique of history. In explain-

ing to Norberto the exceptional nature of the Dominican genome, the AI outlines the country's history of genetic mixing:

El descubrimiento aparentemente fortuito del Nuevo Mundo y sus razas indígenas; su conquista y colonización por los europeos; la integración en el proceso de construcción de los nuevos pueblos de otros elementos raciales como el africano, dieron como resultado, especialmente en el Caribe, un Nuevo hombre que no solo era fruto de una mezcla de culturas diferentes, sino también de una mezcla genética diversa que, en el caso de los dominicanos, ostentaba una manifestación tan pintoresca que podía desafiar los matices del espectro electromagnético. (239)

This history erases the violences involved in this mixing; the discovery of the New World and Indigenous races are called "fortuitous," while African elements were "integrated" into the gene pool. The final product is not only described as "picturesque," but also granted supernatural powers. This exoticization of the Dominican children is used to validate violent kidnappings and is based on a record that glorifies nationalist discourse rather than interrogate historical truths. As this historical vision was uploaded to the AI by human programmers, Vlák's story speculates on the wide-ranging consequences that such histories can have in other fields, including science and technology. The erasure of past violences allows for the historical justification of similar dehumanization in the present and future. By speculating on how such erasures could be programmed into futuristic technologies, "Juegodrox platónicos" suggests that such historical erasures can infiltrate all types of language and coding. The future of history is thus positioned as inseparable from the futures of writing and technology.

Conclusions

In its futuristic recreation of the Battle of Azua, "Descargas de meteoritos en la batalla del 19 de marzo" speculates on what the act of

recording history might become. The overt inclusion of mythic elements points to a political project that asserts the state's role as the primary author of public memory. The keeping and dissemination of national histories is understood as both a move to consolidate power and a source of profit. The commercialization of history is disguised as democratization; by converting a historical narrative into a videogame, the user receives the illusion of agency, even though the narrative is just as proscribed as in a traditional text. Whether or not the project lives of to its participatory and inclusive rhetoric, both the virtual reality aspect and the mythological additions to the historical record represent an effort to have citizens *feel* a history instead of learning it. While this may be successful in harnessing a nationalist sympathy, Vlák's story also suggests an involuntary empathy for the opposing side as an unintended consequence. As with alternative history in general, this twist highlights the fact that no historical records are final or uncontested.

Though not as explicitly concerned with the creation of history as the previous story mentioned in this article, Vlák's "Juegodrox platónicos" demonstrates the ambiguous place of speculative fictions within historical narratives. On the one hand, the story shows Trujillo leaning on science fiction motifs of heroism and modernity to cover up the violences of his regime; on the other, Manuel's background in science fiction allowed him to get much closer to the real cause of the kidnappings than any of his closed-minded colleagues, and his story was eventually considered an invaluable part of the historic record. Not only does this story ask readers to recognize the connections between history, speculative fiction, and propaganda, it also suggests that these rhetorical tools are but few of many within a system based on language and code. If historical violences can be erased from the historical record, then dangerous structures can be coded into our future technologies. Written histories and science fictions are equally useful at exposing or combatting inequalities as they are at promoting or reinforcing them. Writing alternate histories thus represents more than an academic experiment, but a chance to challenge the narrative structures that make future oppressions possible.

NOTES

¹ The 2017 version of *Crónicas historiológicas*, published by Disonante, is the latest and most elaborate version of this collection. Two shorter versions of the collection were also published in 2014: *Crónicas de Ouroboros* by La Secta de los Perros, and the ebook *Crónicas historiológicas* by Alfa Eridiani. This article will refer to the 2017 version, as the added stories give a more complete view of Vlák's engagement with Dominican history.

² The list of recent scholarly work on Trujillo and *trujillato* narratives is extensive, and includes: Bruni (2002); Rich (2002); López-Calvo (2005); Gal-

lego Cuiñas and Efraín (2008); Lifshy (2008); Caminero-Santangelo (2009); Hickman (2009); Segura Rico (2009); Schlote (2010); Sepulveda (2013); Serrata (2016).

³ For more on these debates, see Helleckson (2001) and Gallagher (2018).

⁴ See Tavernier (2010) for more on the history of cultural and political *antihaitianismo* in the Dominican Republic.

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