

# ***CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture***

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>> ISSN 1481-4374 ©Purdue University

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* (ISSN 1481-4374) is a peer-reviewed quarterly of scholarship in the humanities and social sciences published online in full text and in open access by ©Purdue University and in hard-copy annuals in the Purdue University Press series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies <<http://www.thepress.purdue.edu/series/compstudies.asp>>.

*CLCWeb* publishes scholarship in the widest definition of the disciplines of comparative literature and cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." The journal encourages scholarship in a global, international, and intercultural context and work with a plurality of methods and approaches. In addition to the publication of articles, *CLCWeb* publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweblibrary/library>>. Work published in the journal is indexed in the American Humanities Index, in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature, in the Arts and Humanities Citation Index, and in the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America. *CLCWeb* is mirrored on the website of the British Comparative Literature Association <<http://www.bcla.org/clcweb/>>, it is preserved at research libraries in the Stanford University lockss system <<http://www.lockss.org/lockss/>>, and it is archived in the *Electronic Collection of Library and Archives Canada* <<http://www.collectionscanada.ca/electroniccollection/>>.

---

## **CLCWeb Volume 8 Issue 4 (December 2006) Article 4**

### **Luz Angélica Kirschner, "His/tory and Its Vicissitudes in Álvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*"**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol8/iss4/4>>

---

## **Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 8.4 (2006)**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol8/iss4/>>

---

**Abstract:** In her paper "His/tory and Its Vicissitudes in Álvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*" Luz Angélica Kirschner argues that in Julia Álvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* and in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, although with certain limitations and differences in their approaches, in a complementary way, their texts exemplify, as Joan Wallace Scott suggested, the need to consider gender "a useful category of historical analysis" to overturn the monological and well-organized version of official history that, in the process of history writing, has tended to obliterate "insignificant" narratives and voices. At the same time, Kirschner shows that these authors problematize existing historical paradigms, practices, and assumptions not in order to set another type of myth or monologue in its place, but rather, to create a space of indeterminacy that allows the negotiation of human history. Kirschner proposes that Atwood and Álvarez create in/with their texts an open space where it is not enough to recover the female subject and render her visible in history, but where it is imperative to critically analyze the specificity of women's experiences and to interpret them in more complex and multiple-layered ways.

**Luz Angélica KIRSCHNER**

## **His/tory and Its Vicissitudes in Álvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale***

In Julia Álvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994), and in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) both authors engage with male-controlled, totalitarian regimes where women, and most men, are victims of oppression and of institutionalized violence. In both literary works, the main characters are marginalized women resisting and trying to survive physically, mentally, psychologically, and ethically under an authoritarian and oppressive regime. In the paper at hand I compare and contrast Álvarez's and Atwood's texts to show that, although with certain limitations and differences in their approaches, in a complementary way, the texts exemplify the need to consider gender "a useful category of historical analysis" (Scott 28) to overturn the monological and well-organized version of official history that, in the process of history writing, has tended to obliterate "insignificant" narratives and voices. At the same time, I argue that these authors problematize existing historical paradigms, practices, and assumptions not in order to set another type of myth or monologue in its place, but rather, to create a space of indeterminacy that allows the negotiation of human history. I propose that they create an open space where it is not enough to recover the female subject and render her visible in history, but where it is imperative to critically analyze the specificity of women's experiences and to interpret them in more complex ways.

Julia Álvarez's historical novel on the Trujillato disrupts "a tradition until now only written by men" (Bados Ciria 15) by depicting the story of the lives of the sisters Minerva, Patria, María Teresa, and Dedé Mirabal -known under the revolutionary code name, *Las Mariposas* (*The Butterflies*) -- during the time of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo's regime in the Dominican Republic. Eventually, as Álvarez shows, three of the Mirabal sisters, Minerva, Patria, and María Teresa, would be killed on 25 November 1960 by cronies of the Dominican dictator as retaliation for their open opposition to the regime and their attempt to overthrow it. Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* is a dystopian vision of the world set in the future in which the current U.S. neo-conservative New Right and neo-fundamentalists have seized power in the year 2000. From the moment of its publication the work, in which Atwood, like Álvarez, moved into the traditionally male domain of dystopia, was compared to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984*. In contrast, Atwood presents the story of a woman, whose name has been erased by the patriarchal rulers of the emerging theocratic Republic of Gilead and now is simply called "Offred," that is, belonging to the Commander Fred. But Atwood's character, though diminished by her historical context -in a time when "thought must be rationalized [since] thinking can hurt your chances" (8) -- is nonetheless illegally narrating the story of her life during a time of control of information when she was expected to be silent. From the moment of their publication, Álvarez's and Atwood's works have received overwhelming critical praise for their literary accomplishment and artistic quality, but they have also been viewed as controversial. For instance, Atwood's work has been praised as "her strongest political vision to date" (Thompson 15). Nevertheless, Atwood has repeatedly had to defend her work "against charges of implausibility" (18). Equally, she has often had to counter arguments that have labeled her Gilead dystopia as "wildly fanciful" (18). In the case of Álvarez, scholars have highlighted the fact that Álvarez's innovative work contributes to "represent a missing part" in the Latin American patriarchal version of history that has tended to exclude or diminish the participation of women who have struggled, fought, and died alongside men in wars of independence and revolutions in Latin America (Coonrod Martínez 266). Elizabeth Coonrod Martínez reminds us that amid all the books, novels, and poetry written as a result of Trujillo's regime, Álvarez's work is "the first vision of women protagonists" (267). In contrast, critic Roberto González Echavarría has criticized Álvarez because, in his view, the writer lacked "the realization that the gringa dominicana would never really be able to understand the other woman [i.e., the Dominican who never left], much less translate her" (qtd. in Caminero-Santangelo 54-55). Lynn Chun Ink has decried Álvarez inability to contribute to the author's promised "de-

mythologization" of the sisters. She suggests that undermining her own project Álvarez's attempt to rewrite the historical events actually "creates the Mirabals as exempla" thus rendering "the women more legend than flesh and blood" (796). Likewise, Isabel Zakrzewski Brown has suggested that Álvarez's account "fashions stereotypes, rather than real people" (110). Zakrzewski Brown also finds that the writer "is unable to avoid the mythification process she had professed to elude" (110).

Álvarez attempts in her novel to recreate the stories of the Mirabal sisters in the Dominican Republic and she depicts the lives of these women -- who thanks to the use of "monolithic language" and the blind devotion of "mythologizers" (7) have been turned into romantic female icons -- as complex and active historical agents in their own right. In Álvarez's perception the Mirabal sisters deserve the (re)writing of their history because of the sisters' efforts to resist the oppression by the dictator Trujillo. Álvarez questions the tradition of the "Latin American novel by male writers [who] tend to portray Latinas as the objects of male-oriented novels" (Conrood Martínez 264). Álvarez's novel portrays Dominican history during the Trujillato regime through a specific and detailed focus on women's lives. Instead of following the patriarchal tradition and of limiting herself to exposing her authoritative version of the sisters' lives, Álvarez makes her protagonists the agents of the narrative. The writer shows how Álvarez's alter-ego -- the gringa dominicana (3) -- desires to engage with the story of the sisters' lives triggers the memory of the surviving sister Dede. As a result of Dede's recollection of the past, through her reminiscences, the reader hears the voices and learns the story of each of her sisters. In this way, contesting the unitary historical discourse, the Mirabal sisters become the narrators of their lives and "are allowed to speak up for themselves for the first time [and to] recognize themselves as protagonists and agents capable of changing the history of their country" (Bados Ciria 410). Rejecting the patriarchal mythologization of the Mirabals that dismisses "the challenge of their courage as impossible for us, ordinary men and women," Álvarez allows the flow of the private spheres of their lives to reveal the different personalities of the sisters and she does not present the sisters as heroic figures beyond the reach of their worshipers (324). Breaking down the separation of public rationality and private subjectivity by allowing the dialogue between the public and the private sphere, Álvarez portrays the conflict-ridden transformation each of the sisters undergoes as a result of the traumatic disruption of Trujillo's dictatorship in both their personal and family lives. She depicts the sisters as courageous women who did not become mature revolutionaries overnight and thus she presents the Mirabals as complex human beings who also had to face and overcome their own fears and insecurities.

Hoping not to contribute to the morbid romanticization of "other people's terror" (199), Álvarez allows the reader to witness the political awakening of Minerva Mirabal whom Trujillo came to consider "the brain behind the whole movement" (232). The novel presents Minerva's early sensitivity to injustice at school: through her classmate Sinita -- a victim of the regime whose family has been almost entirely terminated by the dictator -- Minerva learns about "the secret of Trujillo" (16). This revelation by her friend signals the beginning of Minerva's lifelong "complications" (20) with the self-appointed benefactor of the Dominican Republic. At the same time, Álvarez does not present Minerva as the embodiment of the patriarchal self-made revolutionary. The work emphasizes the importance of the student Virgilio Morales -- nicknamed Lío, the "troublemaker" -- for Minerva's political maturation; the novel emphasizes that after meeting him, "Minerva was never the same" (66). In the Latin American historical context of the time, Minerva believed that the communist ideals and ideas that Lío propagated represented "a very real opportunity to fight against the regime" (66). In relation to her three sisters, her political commitment to bring about change in her country would eventually "act as a vortex" (Sirias 59) that attracted all of them. Later, during the last months of her life under house arrest after her traumatizing months spent in prison and despite her status of "superhuman" (259) among her oppressed Dominican fellow women and men, Álvarez depicts a faltering Minerva. The reader is presented with a diminished Minerva who, after the trial, longs to remake her world, to go back to the ordinary life that has ceased to exist for her and her family: to stay at home with her sisters, to have time to raise her children. Álvarez presents a depressed woman who openly admits: "The

open vistas distressed me, the sense of being adrift in a crowd of people pressing in on all sides, wanting to touch me, greet me, wish me well. Even in the church in the privacy of Holy Communion, father Gabriel bent down and whispered '¡Viva la Mariposa!' My months in prison had elevated me to superhuman status. It would hardly have been seemly for someone who had challenged our dictator to suddenly succumb to a nervous attack at the communion rail. I hid my anxieties and gave everyone a bright smile. If they had only known how frail was their iron-will heroine. How much it took to put on that hardest of all performances, being my old self again" (259; emphasis in the original). And although *In the Time of the Butterflies* presents Minerva as the most intellectually independent of the sisters, the work also shows the struggles, which "no one could tell" (47). In one example, the sixteen-year-old Patria has to confront the collision between her awakening sexual desire and her religious beliefs. Álvarez describes a gradually changing Patria who, throughout the years, becomes painfully aware of and impatient with the limitations of the institutionalized "Mother Church" (163) and she becomes critical of an institution that remains indifferent to the suffering of the Dominican people and that does not intervene to counteract the violation of human rights by the dictator. Disappointed in the unreceptive institution and convinced that the people "could not wait forever for the pope and the archbishop" (163) to solve the injustices done to them, Patria decides to support her sisters and to join "the Church Militant" (163) in the effort to create a powerful national underground to plot Trujillo's overthrow. By the time of her decision, Patria expresses: "I'm not going to sit back and watch my babies die, Lord, even if that's what You in Your great wisdom decide" (162).

One of the most moving examples of complex character development is the case of María Teresa, or Mate. She receives a diary as a gift from Minerva on the day of her First Communion, and thus the reader has access to her personal, intimate diary writing. Her diary entries display Mate's continuous development from her childhood until the time when she becomes a revolutionary, a wife, and a mother. In her diary she also makes allusion to historical events, as for example "the opening ceremony for the World's Fair" (134) in 1955 when the dictator's daughter, Angelita, "wearing a gown sprinkled with rubies, diamonds, and pearls," was crowned "Queen" (134) of the Fair; or the news about the accusation by the Venezuelan President Rómulo Betancour against the Dominican government for "an attempt on his life" (246) as a result of the charges the president had brought in relation to Trujillo's human rights abuses. The diary exposes that Mate decides to join her sister Minerva -- Mariposa #1 -- and her husband Manolo -- Enriquillo -- in the struggle not out of idealism, but because she falls in love with one of the couple's comrades, Leandro Guzmán Rodríguez -- Palomino. Through Mate, Álvarez's work presents the experience of torture in the infamous "La 40" (254). In fact, the work shows how while in prison and after undergoing torture, Mate turns into an intellectually independent person who no longer follows naively and accepts unquestionably Minerva's ideals and behavior. The novel depicts how Mate starts to problematize Minerva's utopic revolutionary idealism, which remains oblivious to human complexities positing a Marxist subjectivity which is universal, unified and neutral. On the day that Minerva, as enlightened and self-appointed spokesperson of her inmates, dictates: "we don't want to create a class system in our cell, the haves and the have nots" (234) and goes on to attempt to explain away the intricacies of human behavior, in the case of their cellmate Dinorah, as mere "bad civic habits" learned "from a corrupt system" (245), Mate writes: "(We don't? What about when Tiny gave Dinorah a *dulce de leche* as payment for her favors, and she didn't offer anyone a crumb, even Miguelito?). Minerva gives me her speech about how Dinorah's a victim of our corrupt system, which we are helping to bring down by giving her some of our milk fudge. So everybody's had a Bengay rub and a chunk of fudge in the name of the Revolution. At least I get this notebook to myself. Or so I think, till Minerva comes around asking if I couldn't spare a couple of pages for America's statement for her hearing tomorrow. And can we borrow the pen? Minerva adds. Don't I have *any* rights?" (p. 234; emphasis in the original). Days later, after she has been tortured and initially refuses to be interviewed about her experience by the OAS Peace Committee, she appropriates Minerva's revolutionary language to expose, to a surprised Minerva, the limitations of her revolutionary discourse. The moment Minerva insists that Mate must complain, Mate replies: "But they haven't done anything ... They're victims, too, like you say" (250).

Aware of the dangers of any kind of "deification" (324), Álvarez also provides the reader with insight into Dedé's troubled marriage; her ambivalent approach towards the revolution although she approves of the need to remove Trujillo from power; and her moments of despair as "THE SISTER WHO SURVIVED" (5, emphasis in the original). In fact, Dedé makes clear that her survival was possible because "She [had been] afraid, plain and simple" (184) to join her sisters in the struggle against the tyrant. The reader also learns about the conflictive relationship between Minerva and the Dedé, and their rivalry over Lío. Álvarez presents Dedé's painful existence skillfully as "the oracle" (312) of her sister's legacy that, year after year, is beleaguered by reporters asking monolithic questions about her sisters. The work exposes that she has grown increasingly weary of her fate as the solitary authoritative spokesperson, who is listened to with interest but encounters no serious criticism or critical engagement from members of the audience, as "the grande dame of the beautiful, terrible past" (65). Aware of the unfeasibility of her position as "the" reliable, uncontaminated, and "true" source of knowledge about the terror endured by her sisters and the nation during the Trujillato; as the surviving sister who had been close to her sisters, she acknowledges: "But it is an impossible task, impossible!" (65). Undermining her own authority as authentic insider, Dedé makes us aware of the multiplicity of stories surrounding her sisters' death: "They all wanted to give me something of the girls' last moments. Each visitor would break my heart all over again but I would ... listen as long as they had something to say" (301), and concludes that even after the official investigation was over "there were several versions" (302), so many, that she "couldn't take one more story" (304). Dedé also draws attention to the limitations of memory that "cooks up, mixing up facts, putting in a little of this and a little of that" (72). In this way, *In the Time of the Butterflies* complicates hegemonic historical accounts that might have claimed to offer some kind of closure or truthful mastery in relation to the historical events during the Trujillato or the sisters' lives. Hinting at Dedé's limited and incomplete vision of the events, Álvarez exposes Dedé's perplexing situation as the authoritative sister who survived simply because "she was not actively in the resistance against Trujillo, as her sisters were" (Caminero-Santangelo 58). By highlighting the multifarious differences among the sisters, their lives, and their different degree of involvement in the resistance, the work blatantly exposes the impossibility of having "the" unified history of "the Mirabal sisters," as if they were one person, which mythologizers and worshipers have attempted to create. In fact, the differences of class, culture, race, and religion between the sisters and the other fellow Dominican women they encounter throughout their lives -- e.g., the four poor half-sisters by their father and the campesina Carmen María, their servant Fela, the mulata Magdalena, suggest the impossibility of having a unified history of Dominican women during the Trujillato. These women who unlike the sisters were not only exposed to political opposition and sexism, but also to racism, classism, and elitism, hint at the unfeasibility of having a representative experience of women at the time of the dictatorship. It would be valuable research, indeed, to inquire into the strategies that women like Carmen María and her daughters, Fela and Magdalena, in their specific and reduced circumstances developed in their attempt to resist, accommodate themselves, survive, and assert their humanity under the Trujillo nightmare. However, at this point suffice it to refer Shara McCallum's article "Reclaiming Julia Álvarez: *In the Time of the Butterflies*," whose reading of Álvarez displays that although giving women an active historical place, the text narrates "a great deal about the class and racial divide extant in the Dominican society" (97). McCallum states that while it is true that in the narrative the campesinos [peasants] are taken into account as a symbol of national identity, Álvarez emphasizes this accurately only as "a romanticized one" (101). Equally, McCallum, although approving of it to a certain extent, remains critical of the Taino revival in Álvarez's work because the celebration of the Taino has been an indianista device that has been used to romanticize the Indian past and culture in the effort "to hide the reality of the African-origin" of the Republic (103).

Similar to Álvarez, Atwood shows her courageous protagonist Offred as a vulnerable and complex woman living in a society where reading and writing have become a privilege of a few chosen ones and a crime for the others that is persecuted and punished with the amputation of hands (275). Amid these limiting circumstances, Offred makes use of the word to establish a

continuum between the past and the present in order to protect the past from being forgotten and to stress our responsibility for the past and the future. Unlike Álvarez who attempts to bring back to life the Mirabal sisters as ethnic and active historical subjects that were assassinated for their resistance to the despotic Trujillo regime, Atwood's novel suggests that to a certain extent the deplorable state of affairs reigning in the Republic of Gilead did not happen overnight and that it is the consequence of people's apathy, indifference to, and detachment from the violent events that had been taking place for a significant period of time. Offred explains: "We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it. Nothing changes instantaneously. ... There were stories in the newspapers ... corpses in ditches or the woods, bludgeoned to death or mutilated ... but they were about other women, and the men who did such things were other men. None of them were the men we knew. The newspapers stories were like dreams to us, bad dreams dreamt by others. How awful we would say, and they were, but ... they had a dimension that was not the dimension of our lives. We were not the people who were not in the papers" (56-57). After having killed the President and having "suspended" the Constitution, the theocratic regime depicted by Atwood endeavors "a return to traditional values" (7); the work suggests that the regime is the product of a society that very much resembles our own contemporary one, "an age of plummeting Caucasian birthrates ... AIDS epidemic ... Stillbirths, miscarriages, and genetic deformities ... linked to the various nuclear-plants accidents, shutdowns, and incidents of sabotage ... as well as to leakages from chemical- and biological-warfare stockpiles and toxic-waste disposal sites, of which there [are] many thousands, both legal and illegal ... and to the uncontrolled use of chemical insecticides, herbicides, and other sprays" (304). In fact, Atwood has stated that "there's nothing in [*The Handmaid's Tale*] that we as species have not done, aren't doing now, or don't have the technological capability to do" (qtd. in Howells 129). Deprived of freedom in the Republic of Gilead, Atwood presents the way Offred resists the context of "reduced circumstances" (8) that attempts to degrade women to the status of a "two-legged womb" (136), and to exploit them as a "national resource" (65) for the procreation and perpetuation of the phallogocentric economy. The work shows how, at first, Offred experiences hopeless despair in the face of the dehumanizing regime that takes control of her body and denies her access to it. It depicts how amid these circumstances Offred begins to fear and feel repulsion for her body not so much because it is "shameful or immodest" (63), but because it is "something that determines [her] so completely" (63). But as Offred's narration unfolds it is possible to see her efforts to create a "perspective" (143) for herself; to create her own circumstances in a society that refuses to offer her a context or possibilities. In order to avoid "slipping over the edge" (217), she chooses "sex over procreation, adventure over ceremony, Scrabble over Prayvaganzas" (Teeuwen 118-19). However, throughout her narration, Offred makes the reader repeatedly aware of the pain produced by her experience: "I'm too tired to go on with this story. I'm too tired to think about where I am" (129). At the same time, she makes clear that her life as a victim of the regime has not increased her political consciousness and turned her into a revolutionary heroine. Unlike the Mirabal sisters, Offred's attention is not really focused on the failings of the tyrannical Gilead system, but on her personal situation. In fact, exposing some of the paradoxes and dilemmas within some contemporary feminisms, Offred is not a feminist -- a Gilead Unwoman, like her radical feminist mother who did "not want a man around" (121) since she considered them useless. Further, Offred is not like her lesbian friend Moira who naïvely idealized women as superior human beings. Offred's friend believed that "the balance of power was equal between women" (172) and thus dreamed of "shutting herself up in a women-only enclave" (172). Indeed, when she falls in love with Nick and believes that she has "made a life for [herself] ... of a sort" (271), she bluntly confesses, "The fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom. I want to be here with Nick, where I can get at him" (271). Some days later, after she has learnt that Ofglen has hanged herself, broken with sheer terror Offred expresses: "Dear God ... I will do anything you like. Now that you've left me off, I'll obliterate myself ... I will empty myself, truly become a chalice. I'll give up Nick, I'll forget about the others, I'll stop complaining. I'll accept my lot. I'll sacrifice. I'll repent. I'll abdicate. I'll renounce" (286).

Thus, Atwood presents the reader with a composite figure that exhibits the contradictory facets of a human being who, reduced by systematic dehumanization to near-thing level, tries to accommodate herself to things as they are and avoids acts of heroism. In other words, Atwood depicts a character that in order to cope with an extreme situation eventually becomes a figure that has suspended -- for a moment -- her humanity. But Offred's narration is not supposed to be a monologue. Atwood's character makes clear that she hopes it is a dialogue between her and her potential audience. In her attempts to establish a contact with her prospective reader Offred explains: "I don't want to be telling this story. *I don't have to tell it. I don't have to tell anything, to myself or to anyone else. I could sit here, peacefully. I could withdraw*" (225; emphasis added), but she does not. And the reason why she narrates her story is not only the self-centered desire of sharing her "limping and mutilated story" (267-68). Her fragmented story telling also carries the promise of reciprocity: "because after all I want you to hear it, as I will hear yours too if I ever get the chance, if I meet you or if you escape, in the future or in heaven or in prison or underground, some other place" (268). In fact, Offred expresses that she tells her fragmented narrative, because she is "believing" in the reader for her own survival, but also because, as Offred states, "I believe you're there, I believe you into being. *Because I am telling you this story I will your existence*" (268; emphasis added). At this point, it is also relevant to remark that *The Handmaid's Tale* ends by asking the reader the question: "Are there any questions?" (311). Thus, after reading Offred's account, and taking into consideration her expectations on the potential reader, the answer to this question should be yes. And its imperative that there are questions to be asked in relation to Offred's narrative if the reader does not want to betray Offred's belief in her/him. She might be psychologically and physically reduced by the despotic system, but Offred is still well aware of her own weaknesses, contradictions, and ambivalences as a victim of the fundamentalist state: "I wish this story were different. I wish it were more civilized. I wish it showed me in better light, if not happier, then at least more active, less hesitant, less distracted by trivia. I wish it had more shape" (267). Consequently, the critical reader in dialogue with Offred, for instance, can question and bring to light the ambivalent meaning and true nature of Offred's traditional romantic plots with Luke, the Commander Fred, and Nick. The conversation with Offred can also lead the reader, as Madonne Miner suggests, to create an alternative story by imagining, "what would happen if she were to work with Ofglen, to spy on the Commander and to communicate his secrets on the mayday" (167). In other words, the narrator encourages her reader to rewrite/change these sentimental fictions and to contribute to the creation of alternative options to the pathological love-formula she enacts throughout her account. Thus Offred suggests -- paraphrasing Mnire -- a rewriting of the narrative that should open up the individuality and possibilities of couple formation available for women and men with the hope to avoid what her experience exposes in the future: "Falling in love ... Falling into it, we all did then, one way or another ... It was the central thing; it was the way you understood yourself ... Falling in love, we said; I fell for him. We were falling women. We believed in it, this down ward motion; so lovely, like flying, and yet at the same time so dire, so extreme, so unlikely ... And sometimes it happened, for a time. That kind of love comes and goes and is hard to remember afterwards, like pain" (qtd. in Minert 165-66). Atwood's confrontational work resists completeness, it depicts an uncomfortable -- although thinkable -- future, and it hopes to interact with its readers critically in order to engage in a productive contextual interchange of ideas between the text and its readers. Atwood involves the reader emotionally in order to encourage her/him to take responsibility, to prevent that Gilead's dystopian vision becomes the reality that humanity might have to face in the near future. After all, religious fundamentalism and theocracies do not belong to the realm of humanity's long distant past: they are a very real menace in our present time.

However, Atwood's open-ended work has two ambiguous stops. The work stops the first time, when Offred's main narrative ends at the moment she is stepping into the van that will take her out of Gilead. Afterwards, the reader is confronted with a final section of the book called "Historical Notes" which presents an academic conference, "The Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies." The event is placed in the future in the year 2195, two hundred years after the future present. Through these annotations, the reader learns that Offred has apparently survived and the

notes elucidate that with her humanity regained, in an act of rebellion, Offred did not withdraw peacefully, but was able to tape her narrative underground in cassettes that have been found by historians Professor James Darcy Peixoto and Professor Knotly Wade, scholars devoted to the study of achieves and manuscripts from Gilead. And although the "Historical Notes" answer some questions, just like Offred's account, they also end up opening more questions since, at this point, the reader becomes aware that in a fundamental way Offred was not telling her story herself; rather, her texts have been appropriated and brought into being by expert male historians. In other words, the "Historical Notes" expose how two hundred years after the fall of the misogynist Gilead state nothing much has really changed in relation to gender power structures and sexism. Throughout his "little chat" (300) on the patriarchal state that brutally restricted and objectified women, in relation to Offred's recordings, Professor Peixoto not only agrees, albeit reluctantly, "to use the word *document*" (301, emphasis in the original), he refers dismissively to "the metal footlocker" in which the tapes were found as "this item" (301). In his talk, Offred emerges as a "malicious" (309) narrator of an insignificant narrative who did not have the right "turn of mind" (310) to tell about more instructive aspects that might have made it possible for the dedicated historian to contribute to the creation of a manly grand narrative, that is, to learn more "about the workings of the Gileadean empire" (310). Her experience and remembrances are essentially tedious and useless peripheral aspects he has to endure. The scholar actually is more interested in establishing the identity of the "elusive 'Commander'" (306), which is to say, Fred. The notes present how, after almost two hundred years, women's histories, narratives, and cultures are still being evaluated and found "insignificant" although, nonetheless, explained, studied, and interpreted by the dominant male culture that constructs them to make them conform to the falsely objective masculine version of truth. The "Historical Notes" also expose the complicity of academia, which remaining oblivious to the lessons of the past, contributes to the perpetuation of women's subordination. Moreover, since enlightened Cambridge University Professor Peixoto makes clear to the reverential participants of the academic conference that the function of the scholar "is not to censure but to understand" (302), and thus liberally warns about "passing moral judgment upon the Gileadeans" (302), he and his audience materialize as a group of apologetic people who not only posit women as insignificant, but also "see itself above politics and power plays, [and] purports to be a sacred space where fair and liberated tolerance of difference flourish" (Raschke 260). In fact, as Debrah Raschke accurately expresses: "Professor Pieixoto duplicates 'the suppression' Gilead inflicted on Offred by 'claiming the right to define her experience' ... What he does not note is that the Academy, more than just 'preparing the way for Gilead again,' in fact, already is Gilead in the way that it manipulates language" (260)

By means of Professor Peixoto's single-voiced and nonchalant intervention and through the participants' serene compliance, the "Historical Notes" expose the impersonal and authoritarian speech of academia that by pushing into the margins the personal voice of the female subject also tacitly approves of the ideology of oppression and subordination that historically has justified genocide, homophobia, classism, elitism, ageism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, racism, and tyranny. Peixoto's monologue sorely highlights the need to have multiple voices in thoughtful and ongoing dialogue with the past in order to have alternate interpretations that, in the case of Offred's account, might possibly have given a more nuanced and sensitive account about Gilead, and might have offered the opportunity to renegotiate Peixoto's impersonal and biased approach during the academic meeting. And here once again, Atwood's text by showing the artificiality of the "truth" presented by the eminent Professor Peixoto in his idiosyncratic construction of his/tory; and by exposing the need to defy his prejudiced account that finishes with the self-congratulatory and standard question: "Are there any questions?" (311), the answer from the reader, once again, should be that indeed there are many questions that demand critical engagement. At the same time, by demonstrating that there are appropriate and inadequate ways of responding to texts, through the "Historical Notes," as J. Brooks Bouson acknowledges: "Atwood dramatizes her desire to save her novel from those readers who, like her fictional professor, would treat the text as a verbal artifact to be coldly dissected and ultimately dismissed" (Bouson 127). In turn, to a certain extent Álvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* represents an attempt to perform a responsible re-

reading of his/tory that Atwood's text urges the reader to perform. By questioning the imperialistic historical discourse of grand narratives that have tended to silence and marginalize women's contributions in world history, Álvarez challenges and rewrites history by presenting women as fundamental agents of change in Dominican history. Like Atwood's book, Álvarez's work also refuses to have an end despite Lío's desire to have a grand one when he, in celebratory mood, tells Dedé the first time he sees her after many years: "The nightmare is over, Dedé. Look at what the girls have done" (318). And although Dedé is aware that the death of her sisters represented Trujillo's historical fall and offered the Dominicans the opportunity to have free elections, she also acknowledges the ambivalent outcome of her sisters' enterprise as she hints at the capitalist exploitation taking place on the island that has turned it into "the playground of the Caribbean" (318). Although she admits that "Lío is right. The nightmare is over;" and that she declares: "we are free at last," Dedé challenges any humanist metanarrative of progress and development. Puzzled by the perplexing dehumanizing effects of laissez-faire capitalism on the island and its inhabitants, she leaves the reader with the haunting question that makes her shiver: "Was it for this, the sacrifice of the butterflies?" (318). *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *The Handmaid's Tale* call for more than just "an enlargement of the picture: a correction of oversights resulting from inaccurate or incomplete vision" that allows the creation of comfortable spaces that "permit calling old narratives into question when new evidence is discovered" (Scott 81). In other words, both works suggest that it is not enough to recover the female subject and render her visible in history; they hint at the imperative to analyze the specificity of women's experiences and to interpret them in more complex ways: to contextualize them, to historicize them, to turn them inside out and upon themselves to make visible other human experiences.

Although Dedé understands that there was a time when the traumatized and broken Dominican nation needed her to do the "talking" (313) in order to heal their collective psyche. As a person, she now understands that "if you don't study your history. You are going to repeat it" (313); that a meaningful connection to the past demands our dynamic commitment. She hopes for a study of Dominican history, where her sisters are no longer just the "unsung heroines of the underground, et cetera." (3), "a handful of adjectives" (6). She suggests a revision of her country's history which is not a mere repetition of commonplaces, but one where her sisters are shown as the "living breathing women" (64) they were. In other words, Dedé calls for a desessentialized study that analyses them as female individuals who were members of a multitude of interrelated and contending collectivities and social groups; an approach that seeks to incorporate the contradictions in their lives: the paradoxical aspects of their gender, ethnicity, religion, class, and sexuality. Dedé's plight resonates with Ignacio López-Calvo's observations on the way Dominicans have engaged with their tragic past. López-Calvo acknowledges that in the recent past Dominicans have begun to study their history with the aim "to diagnose today's sociopolitical problems in order to proactively avoid the recurrence of similar predictatorial conditions" (143). At the same time, López-Calvo presents critical voices -- that echoing Dedé's -- express their concern about the fact that the Trujillato still "seems to be deferred in the mind of today's society as a lived content, but without an adequate form, represented, in the best of cases, as an endless number of sensationalistic anecdotes inserted in the biographical account of the dictator himself" (140). *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *The Handmaid's Tale* are open-ended texts that destabilize the boundaries between history and novel, between fact and fiction and hint at the need of "reading for 'the literary'" in putative factual history texts and the historical in literary texts (Scott 95). Álvarez and Atwood expose that the past is not a single and uncontested truth or, for that matter, Peixoto's "great darkness" (311), even if orthodox discourse might still wants us to believe the opposite. Both novels challenge the readers to seriously question and re-evaluate their understanding of what has counted and still might count as objective, well-organized, and transparent history; the way in which historical "truths" have been produced. Atwood and Álvarez invite us to participate in the ongoing process of re/making and re/writing human history; to understand ourselves as parts of this human enterprise and, as such, to take responsibility for it. They create a space of multiple claims that does not "confine itself to single meanings, nor aim for the resolution of contradiction" (Scott 93). After all, Offred is "believing" (269) in the reader for

her survival and Dedé, who is well aware of her limited personal experience and unstable evidence, "doesn't want to be the only one to tell [her family's] story" (10) or to be central and only character of a tragically romantic historical narrative. Leaving the reader in a position of subjects of agency, *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *The Handmaid's Tale* highlight the emotional, intellectual, ethic, and civic responsibility of the reader and the scholar to dialogue with the text in an attempt to rewrite the present, the past and the future. In other words, paraphrasing historian Gerda Lerner in her *Why History Matters*, I propose it is necessary to contribute to shape the way we and coming generations experience life.

## Works Cited

- Álvarez, Julia. *In the Time of the Butterflies*. New York: Plume, 1994.
- Álvarez, Julia. *Something to Declare*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 1998.
- Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. New York: Anchor Books, 1998.
- Atwood, Margaret. *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*. Ed. Earl G. Ingersoll. Willowdale: Ontario Review P, 1990.
- Bados Ciria, Concepción. "In the Time of the Butterflies, by Julia Álvarez: History, Fiction, Testimonio and the Dominican Republic." *Monographic Review / Revista monográfica* 13 (1997): 406-16.
- Bouson, J. Brooks. "A Feminist and Psychological Approach in Women's College." *Teaching Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and Other Works*. Ed. Sharon R. Wilson, Thomas B. Friedman, and Shannon Hengen. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1996. 122-27.
- Caminero-Santangelo, Marta. "Speaking for Others: Problems of Representation in the Novels of Julia Álvarez." *Antipodas: Journal of Hispanic and Galician Studies* 10 (1998): 53-66.
- Coonrod Martínez, Elizabeth. "Recovering a Space for a History between Imperialism and Patriarchy. Julia Álvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies*." *Thamyris* 5.2 (1998): 263-79.
- Howells, Coral Ann. *Margaret Atwood*. New York: St. Martin's P, 1996.
- Ink, Lynn Chun. "Remaking Identity, Unmaking Nation: Historical Recovery and the Reconstruction of Community in *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *The Farming of Bones*." *Callaloo: A Journal of African-American and African Arts and Letters* 27.3 (2004): 788-807.
- Lerner, Gerda. *Why History Matters: Life and Thought*. New York: Oxford UP, 1997.
- McCallum, Shara. "Reclaiming Julia Álvarez: *In the Time of the Butterflies*." *Women's Studies* 29 (2000): 93-117.
- Miner, Madonne. "'Trust Me': Reading the Romance Plot in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Twentieth Century Literature* 37.2 (1991): 148-68.
- Raschke, Debrah. "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: False Borders and Subtle Subversions." *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory* 6 (1995): 257-68.
- Scott, Joan. "The Evidence of Experience." *Feminist Approaches to Theory and Methodology: An Interdisciplinary Reader*. Ed. Sharlene Hesse-Biber, Christina Gilmartin, and Robin Lydenberg. New York: Oxford UP, 1999. 79-99.
- Sirias, Silvio. *Julia Álvarez: A Critical Companion*. Westport: Greenwood P, 2001.
- Thompson, Lee Briscoe. *Scarlet Letters: Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale*. Toronto: ECW P, 1997.
- Teeuwen, Ruud. "Dystopia's Point of No Return: A Team Taught Utopia Class." *Teaching Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and Other Works*. Ed. Sharon R. Wilson, Thomas B. Friedman, and Shannon Hengen. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1996. 114-21.
- Zakrzewski Brown, Isabel. "Historiographic Metafiction in *In the Time of the Butterflies*." *South Atlantic Review* 64.2 (1999): 110.

Author's profile: Luz Angélica Kirschner is working towards her Ph.D. in comparative literature at the Pennsylvania State University with a dissertation entitled *Representation and Diasporic Experience: Cases of Jewish Argentinean, Turkish German, and Chinese American Women Writers*. Her interests in scholarship include Latino, Inter-American, and Trans-Atlantic studies, minorities writing, and women's writing, theory, and history. Kirschner has forthcoming articles on Angelina Muñiz-Huberman, Elisa Lerner, and Reina Roffé in the *Encyclopedia of Latin American Women Writers* (2009) and has published articles on Marjorie Agosín, Achy Obejas, and Aurora Levins Morales in the *Encyclopedia of Hispanic American Biographies* (2007) and the encyclopedia entries on "Machismo," "Navidad," and "Quinceañera" in the *Encyclopedia Latina: History, Culture, Society* (2005). E-mail: <[lak273@psu.edu](mailto:lak273@psu.edu)>.