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Chronicle of a Massacre: The Archive's Redemptive and Transformative Potential

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Almost fifty years ago, on October 9, 1971, a massacre in a *barrio* of Santo Domingo by police forces shocked the nation of the Dominican Republic.[1] Reyes Florentino Santana, a university student engaged in community-building projects, along with four of his friends, were last seen coming out of a funeral that night. The next morning their bodies were found sprawled across the city with signs of torture on their dispersed extremities. The usual human rights outcry ensued, and days of protest against pervasive state violence spread across the city. But the impunity enjoyed by the police officers prevailed; no one was held accountable. Curious by this act of gratuitous violence, I began to investigate this massacre as part of my larger dissertation project on how young activists and student politics transformed the Dominican Republic's political and intellectual culture during the immediate post-Trujillo years. My research turned up a chilling discovery: Enthralled by my findings of pictures and police documents on the massacre, at the Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), I hurried to the hotel to share it with my mother. As she broke into tears at the sight of the documents, she confessed that Santana had been her first teenage boyfriend, whose death she never overcame.

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1 Luis Ovidio Sigarán, "Terrorismo Cobra Cinco Víctimas," *Lístin Diario*, 11 October, 1971.

The discovery of this massacre that my mother never spoke to me about reflects the archive's potential as a space of healing and political transformation. For families like mine who were forced to migrate, leaving behind family histories and disrupting important social fabrics, archival discoveries of state violence have offered a more structured approach to understanding trauma, a political and personal redemption from inexplicable violence. For decades, no one knew why Santana and his friends were brutally murdered. They had no particularly "leftist" political rap sheet and were, at most, involved in cultural sporting events in their community. Yet, officers detained them, sequestered them in a room, and tortured them until they died.

Cold War anti-communist persecution in the Dominican Republic had an eerie blend of a racial and class logic. Following the assassination of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo (1930-1961), the political and social demographics of the country drastically changed. Young people began to participate in politics at an unprecedented scale, leading many of the protests and mobilizations that challenged the pillars of Trujillo's authoritarian system, and becoming the political vanguard of the country well into the 1970s. This caused a major change in the social demographics. As young activists fought for a more equally distributed economy, the children of peasants and of the emerging Afro-Dominican communities on the outskirts of Santo Domingo entered public schooling and higher education at an imposing rate. As historian Angela Hernández notes, between the early 1960s and the mid-1970s women's and lower class men's presence in the UASD increased by 740%.[2] The Dominican Republic's major socio-political shift during the 1960s meant that the military's and oligarchy's economic and political control felt a danger to its existence not experienced since the rise of the Trujillo regime.

The massive participation of young black working class Dominicans in politics and the public sphere generated arbitrary

2 Angela Hernández, *Emergencia del silencio* (Santo Domingo: Editora Universitaria-UASD), 142.

violence across the *barrios* of the Dominican Republic. Being young, poor, black and a student served as social ingredients for the Dominican state's recipe of persecution. Santana and his friends checked all of these social boxes, and they paid for it with their lives. We now know that the officers involved in the killings were motivated by a thirst for blood, a deep hatred for those at the bottom of a rigid social hierarchy. Their desire to end these young people's live was not driven by any ideological anti-communist fervor. Instead, they simply saw these five adolescents as easy prey within an era that loosened the reins of class and racial hatred.

This massacre also serves as a microcosm for a new age of Dominican state violence, one that was much less surgically precise than Trujillo's. Trujillo's regime meted out violence more structurally; it targeted political leaders, workers, business associates and anyone who spoke out against the regime. Ultimately, any decision to assassinate someone rested on Trujillo's authoritarian command. This was not so during the post-Trujillo years, particularly during the chaos of the post-civil war years and U.S. intervention. Dominican state violence after the war and during the Balaguer regime became disorganized, spreading through the *barrios*, cities and towns in search of those suspected of "subversive" behavior. Often times, those suspected of subversive acts were young, from public schools, poor, or black.

My family's experience with this archival discovery compels us to reassess our assumptions about the archive's utility, what we do with our sources after we encounter them, and how we go about framing our research questions. As historians, we have become accustomed to thinking about the archive as a tool of the state, knowledge created from the power of surveillance. And thus, the archive has come to illustrate a symbol of state repression. While this assessment remains true, I propose that we treat the archive as a multifaceted site – beyond its unilateral influence of state power and repression. It is not enough to read the archive "against the grain,"

as historians have usefully established.[3] In addition to this practice, the archive has a great power to bring emotional closure, political justice, and an organized interpretation of the world for victims of political violence.

The archive's repressive habit of documenting has recently turned out to be the most important factor for much of Latin America's healing from authoritarian violence. We see this process distilled more clearly in Guatemala, where the sudden reappearance of seventy-five million police documents is impacting post-Cold War activism. The discovery of these archives, historian Kirsten Weld recounts, renewed the national conversation about historical memory and transnational justice. The internationally funded initiative, the Project for the Recovery of the National Police Historical Archives (PRAHPN), is saving the damaged documents and analyzing their contents with the goal of prosecuting officials for crimes against humanity during the brutal civil war in Guatemala.[4] In the Guatemala scene, not only is the archive the site of individual redemption but of national reckoning. As Weld puts it, which is true for my mother and for Guatemala as well as the rest of Latin America, "Documents, archives, and historical knowledge are more than just the building blocks of politics – they are themselves sites of contemporary political struggle."[5]

These archival discoveries, characterized in the Guatemala and my family's case, were not encountered because of the archive's mere existence, but as a result of the historian's research questions. If not for my specific questions on the ways in which Balaguer's repressive logic intersected race, region, and gender, I would probably not have arrived at the investigation of this massacre, and therefore not have experienced

3 Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

4 Kirsten Weld, *Paper Cadavers: The Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala*, American Encounters/Global Interactions (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 4-5.

5 Weld, 3.

the transformative political and emotional encounter with my mother. After all, we historians are not hired sleuths in search of a smoking-gun evidence which magically solves historical questions. While the archive commands its transformative powers because of its facts-based, oftentimes incriminating documents, it is the historian's job to sift through its silences, lies, and incriminating truths. The contemporary moment in academia presents a unique opportunity to meld our innovative questions with the abundance - or dearth of - archival collections.

What we do outside of academia with the power of the archive's redemptive and transformative qualities presents one of the biggest challenges to the contemporary academic. How can we marshal the advances of technology to grant the public greater access to archival collections? Archival digitization projects, while they present some ethical problems and aporias, has the potential to change the public's alienated relationship to historical research. Digitization can be a tool for immersive reading and for the public's use in political activism. However, the challenge of dissemination presents another question: How do we mobilize the knowledge that such access exists? It would mean a far greater engagement from the historian with the public.