

In this article, I focus on how water operated as symbolic capital during the notoriously repressive dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo (1930–61) in the Dominican Republic. Under his regime, alongside an apex of territorial control and modern aesthetics came a nadir of political freedoms. During Trujillo's tenure, water took on important symbolic and material dimensions as a conduit for authoritarianism: it served as a tool to bind together dictatorial power and spatial order through a mode of territorial and urban design rooted in hubristic hydraulics. With hubristic hydraulics I refer to the strategic ways that water flow was harnessed through infrastructure and choreographed through landscape and monumental architecture to embody and lionize the dictator's power. Channeled into reflecting pools, nationwide irrigation works, and monumental fountains, water functioned at the juncture of aesthetics and politics as an important tool in the modernization of urban space and the territory at large. Water was a strategic resource that enabled Trujillo to be cast as the "*arquitecto de la patria nueva*" (the architect of a new fatherland), and the ways it was made to flow through modern architecture and infrastructure offer an illuminating means to expose the entanglement of territorial control, urban modernity, and authoritarian politics.

Although water has been traditionally an object of scientific study, its cultural meanings have come under increasing interdisciplinary scrutiny amid the recent aquatic turn that has birthed the field dubbed Blue Cultural Studies. This emerging area of research is nested within the Environmental Humanities and entails the exploration of the shifting meanings of bodies of water to trace their uses and representations in diverse cultural artifacts, as well as their physical presences in the web of life. As conceptualized by the English literature scholar Steve Mentz, there is a clear scholarly agenda within Blue Cultural Studies that recognizes maritime space as a "substantial partner in the creation of cultural meaning."¹ This article, however, advances

1. Steve Mentz. "Towards a Blue Cultural Studies." *Literature Compass* 6, no. 5 (2009): 997–1013, 1008.

an expanded agenda that asks for the political and aesthetic valences of bodies of water that are not limited to maritime or oceanic spaces. This expanded agenda probes a more varied hydrological and meteorological repertoire, spanning rivers, streams, and other freshwater flows; climatic conditions such as cyclones, rain, and drought; as well as the rural and urban infrastructures that harness and mobilize water in diverse forms, such as irrigation channels, dams, urban fountains, among many others. Hence, in this article water is conceived as more than just a simple natural resource. Rather, I engage it as a liquid ecology that is intrinsic to understanding modernity: a relational web of material, political, and aesthetic flows that traverse city and territory, politics and architecture, matter and body.

The concept of hubristic hydraulics builds on a long history in which the control of water shored up the power of individual leaders and elite groups, and bound communities together. The linkage of hydrotechnologies and structures of power dates back to the Bronze Age. Numerous scholars have demonstrated these connections on a global scale, from Karl Wittfogel's provocative (albeit contended) hypothesis that despotism is expressed in hydraulic megastructures, via Carolyn Dean's analysis of pre-Columbian display fountains as markers of the power of Andean leaders, through to contemporary analyses of modern state and corporate leveraging of "liquid power" through large infrastructure projects.² The concept of hubristic hydraulics also calls attention to the visual politics of water in the fabric of space and its dynamics of (in)visibility. Within this logic, the development of underground sewerage withdrew contaminated waters from the perceptual realm, eliminating them from sight, sound, and smell, while large-scale fountains choreographed clean water for leisure and entertainment, a shift that

2. For a global overview, see: Petri S. Juuti et al., "Short Global History of Fountains," in *Water* 7 (2015): 2314–48; Karl Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New York: Random House, 1957). For critical commentary, see William P. Mitchell, "The Hydraulic Hypothesis: A Reappraisal," *Current Anthropology* 15, no. 5 (1973): 532–34. On "liquid power," see: Eric Swyngedouw, *Liquid Power: Contested Hydro-Modernities in Twentieth-Century Spain* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).

performed a triumph of modern spatial order over the abject fluidities of the social body.³ Water infrastructure has historically mobilized political capital by distributing markers of state power across the landscape to connect the political center to the territory at large. Under Stalin, Soviet dams and canals gained political traction as infrastructural monuments whose modernity was mirrored by the avant-garde aesthetics of state propaganda, epitomized by Alexander Rodchenko's 1933 photographic report on the construction of the White Sea Canal.⁴ Large-scale water infrastructure and the incorporation of fluids into landscape and monumental architecture are enduring forms of national performance art—spectacles of development that today materialize in what Rob Nixon dubs the “hydraulic hubris” of megadams built in the era of neoliberalism and globalization.⁵ Over the pages to follow I develop the concept of hubristic hydraulics by exploring the symbolic dimensions attributed to water in the official imaginary of Rafael Trujillo's dictatorship. By focusing on three distinct spatial typologies—a reflecting pool, irrigation canals, and a monumental fountain—I examine how water and the constructions that channeled and displayed it served as conduits for the imaginary of Dominican modernity built on dictatorial power.

URBAN DEVELOPMENT (1865–1930)

Before analyzing these three spatial artefacts, it is important to contextualize the pre-Trujillo urban fabric of the capital, Santo Domingo, and the ambitious project for urban and territorial reform initiated during the dictatorship. Importantly, it was a water-related event that marked the inception of these latter processes in the Dominican Republic. Just two weeks after Trujillo became president, the island was hit by a devastating hurricane, whose high winds and torrential rainstorms made landfall on September 3, 1930, sweeping away most of Santo Domingo, a small city of some 30,000 inhabitants that apart from its colonial Spanish center still mainly consisted of flimsy wooden or adobe

structures with zinc roofs.⁶ This vulnerable cityscape was the legacy of growth and modernization stunted by the political upheavals and conflicts with neighboring Haiti that had dominated the nineteenth century. A shift away from colonial architecture only occurred in the post-1865 period of independence, with the introduction of novel building materials such as imported wood, steel, and metal sheets, which filtered into urban architecture via the construction of factories and railroads devised to support the growing sugar industry.⁷ Despite these innovations, the turn-of-the-century urban landscape was frequently cast in terms of abandonment and ruin, with Santo Domingo described in derogatory terms as a place lacking in the most basic infrastructure, such as sanitation, drainage, and waste collection. While the lack of an aqueduct to supply the city meant that water had to be stored in ceramic vessels, streams of rainwater washed trash down the streets, and roads were littered by holes, one of which was a six-foot-deep puddle described by one commentator as a “small-scale Niagara Falls.”⁸

By the turn of the twentieth century, however, Santo Domingo began to change. In 1906, the city boasted its first concrete house, and in 1910 it breached its colonial walls for the first time with the foundation of Ciudad Nueva, which was soon followed by the development of detached homes built in neocolonial and Mediterranean styles in the garden city-style district of Gazcue, which spread the city westward along the coast. This timid modernization sped up during the United States' occupation of the country from 1916 to 1924, which brought further imports of novel construction materials and more concerted development of public works and infrastructure overseen by the Oficina de Ingenieros (Office of Engineers, later renamed Dirección de Obras Públicas, Directorship of Public Works), a central urban planning body that served as a training ground for Dominican engineers and architects.⁹ As road networks and

6. The first census, conducted by the US occupying forces in 1920, recorded 30,943 inhabitants. Haroldo Dilla Alfonso, *Ciudades en el caribe: un estudio comparado de La Habana, San Juan, Santo Domingo y Miami* (Mexico City: FLACSO, 2014), 67.

7. Gustavo Luis Moré, “Modernidad y contradicción en la arquitectura de la ‘era de Trujillo’ 1930–1961” (Santo Domingo: Grupo Jiménez León, 2008), 217–79.

8. Francisco Veloz, *La misericordia y otros entornos* (Santo Domingo: Banco Central de la República Dominicana, 2002), 174, cited in Dilla Alfonso, *Ciudades en el caribe*, 69.

9. These agencies are summarized in an official publication released by the occupying forces; see *El libro azul* (New York: Compañía Biográfica, 1920).

3. Matthew Gandy provides a fascinating commentary on this process in his chapter “The Paris Sewers and the Rationalization of Urban Space,” in *The Fabric of Space* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014): 27–54.

4. Anna Neimark, “The Infrastructural Monument: Stalin's Water Works under Construction and in Representation,” *Future Anterior: Journal of Historic Preservation* 9, no. 2 (2012): 1–14.

5. The title of this article riffs on this phrase by Nixon. Rob Nixon, “Unimagined Communities: Megadams, Monumental Modernity, and Developmental Refugees,” in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011): 150–74.



FIGURE 1. Postcard showing the devastation of Santo Domingo after the San Zenón hurricane, 1930. Courtesy of Archivo General de la Nación, Dominican Republic.

public buildings took shape, in 1926 the city gained its first aqueduct and sewerage system that serviced the colonial center and a handful of new residential areas.¹⁰

Despite this modernization, when Hurricane San Zenón hit in 1930 it laid much of the city to waste (fig. 1). As the storm swept through the city, an estimated four thousand people lost their lives, another twenty thousand were injured, and some seven thousand homes were destroyed.¹¹ Trujillo, who had come to power through probable electoral fraud and following a military coup, was effectively left with a climate-induced *tabula rasa*—a foundation of rubble on which to rebuild a city washed away by high winds and torrential rains. Climate catastrophe provided the incoming ruler with the perfect pretext to entrench his leadership as a restoration of order in the wake of chaos and the spread of disease. Initially, this meant cladding the landscape and the social body alike in modern materials. Postcyclone reconstruction plans established concrete blocks as the main building material, legislation mandated paving the city streets, and later on a law was imposed that stipulated that

all visitors to Santo Domingo must wear shoes.¹² These policies of containment made hygiene and sanitation cornerstones of Trujillo's positivist ethos, leading to an equivalence of plumbing and civilization that was enshrined in the so-called "latrine law," a piece of legislation that mandated the construction of bathrooms in each family home and state provision of pre-fabricated latrines.¹³

The supply of clean water and the removal of sewage also became hallmarks of the regime's modernizing ethos. This surely explains the appearance in the post-hurricane years of a graffito on a public fountain that stated: "Bless Trujillo who gives us water." In one regime acolyte's interpretation of the graffito, flowing water was proof of national rebirth, whereby the Dominican Republic was "a previously sterile and barren region that is now fertile and prodigiously cultivated thanks to the colossal, ordered hydroengineering works personally overseen by Trujillo."¹⁴ As waterworks became metonyms for dictatorial power,

10. Dilla Alfonso, *Ciudades en el Caribe*, 102.

11. Dilla Alfonso, 74.

12. Richard Turtis, *Foundations of Despotism: Peasants, the Trujillo Regime, and Modernity in Dominican History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 224–25.

13. Turtis, 224–25.

14. José Antonio Osorio Lizarazo, *La isla iluminada* (Santiago: Editorial del Diario, 1947), 26, cited in Mark Anderson, "Disaster and the 'New

they obeyed a logic applied to the entire national territory; Trujillo embedded his image in the fabric of space by giving his name to regions, mountains, and cities and by erecting monuments that gave him a physical presence beyond Ciudad Trujillo, as the capital city was renamed in 1936.¹⁵

Hence, as post-San Zenón Santo Domingo began to be recast in Trujillo's image and likeness, the foundations were also laid for a core political myth of official propaganda that positioned the dictator as the *arquitecto de la patria nueva*. It was from the staged presence of water in architecture and infrastructure that this mythologization of dictatorial power would, over subsequent years, tap its symbolic capital.

REFLECTING POOL

"The History of the Era of Trujillo truly began on September 3, 1930!," declared Juan Ulises García Bonnelly in the first volume of his hefty two-volume work *Las obras públicas en la era de Trujillo*, published in 1955 to commemorate a quarter century of Trujillo's rule.¹⁶ After devoting many pages to showing how hurricanes had historically devastated the island and frustrated the Spanish colonists' attempts to develop Santo Domingo, García Bonnelly offered detailed and dramatic descriptions of the post-San Zenón landscape, conjuring cataclysmic scenes in which meteorological phenomena—torrential downpours, cataracts, and towering waves—ciphered chaos, destruction, and the threat to life. "Torrential rain continued as if the waterfalls of heaven were collapsing onto earth," he recalled. "The waves grew in size and strength, reaching almost one hundred meters in height, moving like mountains shaken by cataclysms, when the earth began to resemble the dense shadows of primeval chaos."¹⁷ This dramatic description reaffirms

Patria: Cyclone San Zenón and Trujillo's Rewriting of the Dominican Republic," in *Disaster Writing: The Cultural Politics of Catastrophe in Latin America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 45. Original quote: "una región que era estéril e infecunda y que ahora es fértil y prodigiosamente cultivada a consecuencia de una colosal obra de ingeniería hidráulica ordenada y dirigida personalmente por Trujillo."

15. The architect and critic Omar Rancier argues that Trujillo created a sophisticated system of signs and symbols, including place names and monuments, to materialize his domination of the territory. See Omar Rancier, "Trujillo y la ciudad, *civitas diaboli*: la ciudad encarnada," *Anales del IIA* 42, no. 2 (2012): 113–20.

16. Juan Ulises García Bonnelly. *Las obras públicas en la era de Trujillo*, vol. 1 (Ciudad Trujillo: Impresora Dominicana, 1955), 76.

17. García Bonnelly, 76. Original quote: "La lluvia continuaba precipitándose con abundancia de torrentes como si se estuviesen desplomando sobre la tierra las cataratas del cielo. Las olas iban creciendo en tamaño y fuerza, y alcanzaban hasta cien metros de altura, moviéndose como

Mark Anderson's contention that the 1930 hurricane became a cornerstone of Trujillo's "politics of disaster" that enabled the leader to present himself as the savior of a country vulnerable to human and nonhuman attacks.¹⁸ Perceived threats were leverage for Trujillo to consolidate his simultaneously authoritarian and paternalistic grip on Dominican society, as intimated in a speech delivered two days after the hurricane. Underlining his emotional shock at the horrific scenes, he confessed his subsequent impulse to provide relief as an instinctive and benevolent response to the people's suffering, declaring that "Initially, amid the bewilderment I felt at this fatal event, I shed tears I never imagined crying; but, aware of my responsibilities, I soon composed myself and have directed all my energy and action to providing relief to those beset by this terrible tragedy."¹⁹ In this astute economy of affect, the leader could present empathy as the humanitarian grounds for authoritarian control.

Landscaping work played an important role in Trujillo's performance of the provision of relief. The symbolic transformation of water-as-threat into water-as-relief became a hallmark of dictatorial authority and compassion. After the postcyclone rubble was cleared, the newly built Parque Ramfis, a public park named after Trujillo's son and situated on the seafront in Ciudad Trujillo, materialized spatially and aquatically the dictator's triumph over chaos, death, and disease, as well as initiating a cult of personality whereby sites and infrastructure were named after the Trujillo family (fig. 2). Built in 1937 over a mass grave at Plaza Colombina where unclaimed victims of the hurricane had been incinerated to avoid the spread of disease, Parque Ramfis offered Dominicans a leisure space right beside the sea that just years before had posed a fatal threat to well-being. Designed by Columbia University-trained architect Guillermo González Sánchez (1900–1970), a forerunner of a generation of Dominican architects that adopted modern

montañas sacudidas por los cataclismos, cuando el perfil del globo terráqueo empezaba a perfilarse entre las espesas sombras del caos primigenio."

18. Anderson, "Disaster and the 'New Patria,'" 31.

19. Rafael Trujillo, "La palabra del Jefe del Estado ante la enorme desgracia que nos abruma," *Listín Diario*, September 12, 1930. The speech, delivered on September 5, 1930, was later reproduced in full at the start of a key text in the mythologization of the hurricane: Ramón Lugo Lovato, *Escombros: huracán del 1930* (Ciudad Trujillo: Editora del Caribe, 1955). Original quote: "En el primer momento y bajo la turbación que me produjo tan fatal acontecimiento, brotaron a mis ojos lágrimas que nunca soñé derramar; pero consciente de mis responsabilidades me repuse prontamente y he concentrado toda mi energía y toda mi actividad a la tarea de proporcionar socorro a la población abatida por la terrible desgracia."



FIGURE 2. Aerial photograph of Parque Ramfis, Ciudad Trujillo, c. 1936. Source: Colección Arquitectura y Paisaje, Archivo General de la Nación, Dominican Republic.

aesthetics, the park consisted of a large concrete esplanade that opened directly onto the Caribbean. It could be accessed via a series of graded steps from the Malecón or the streets running parallel and perpendicular to the seawall. The park's central feature was a monumental oval reflecting pool that served as a space for quiet contemplation and for bathing. Around it, benches, walkways and gently sloping flights of steps offered circuits for strolling and repose, while covered pavilions provided shade from the tropical sun. Adjacent to the park and the seawall, González Sánchez designed an obelisk that served as a monumental focal point and place of congregation for pro-Trujillo political rallies. The semantic shift of renaming Santo Domingo Ciudad Trujillo and the opening of Parque Ramfis and the Obelisk in 1936–37 cemented the causal link between the city's reconstruction and the dictator's political agency, which was gendered through the phallic monument, whose nickname "Obelisco Macho" tacitly evoked Trujillo's notorious reputation as a womanizer.²⁰

20. The "macho" obelisk was the precursor of the later two-column Monumento Trujillo-Hull, or "obelisco hembra" (female obelisk) as it was

Parque Ramfis's aesthetics of reflective aqueous surface and invitation to contemplation advanced what we might term historiography by spatial means. As it set in place a triumph of controlled water over the hurricane's liquid ecology of torrential rains, overflowing groundwater, and residual dampness of decay and putrefaction, the new park cast urban chaos as a thing of the past. To underscore this restoration of order, official propaganda kept graphic scenes of apocalypse in the public imagination, using overflow and contaminated waters, as well as the damp and mildew as symbols of chaos, to remind Dominicans of

the disfigured bodies that piled up with arms, legs and heads of children and old people, and water from overflowing gutters and drains spilling over them in waterfalls and the humidity that saturated the atmosphere, the stench of yards and streets clogged up with trash, the mold that started to grow on ruined houses

nicknamed, raised to celebrate the Dominican Republic's repayment of its foreign debt in 1942.

that gave off a sickening stench of abandoned cemetery.²¹

The park literally paved over and washed away these physical traces of disaster as its esplanade sealed the mass grave and replaced it with a reflecting pool that looked skyward, rather than earthward. Ultimately, the post-hurricane reconstruction efforts that materialized in Parque Ramfis allowed for Trujillo's hubristic representation as a deliverer of life-giving water, described in official publications. He appeared "on the mountain of rubble of the former Athens of the New World . . . as if illuminated, like a new Moses who came to make water flow from the rock and the new city—the city of Trujillo that rose up before present generations' astonished eyes, like a phoenix from the ashes."²²

IRRIGATION CANALS

Symbolic waterworks were not limited to the urban landscape. The Trujillo regime worked to expand its hydraulic capacity nationwide, boasting a rise from three to eighty irrigation canals after the dictator was in power, with a capacity to channel 174,369 cubic meters of water per second to irrigate 130,000 hectares of agricultural land.²³ Concrete canals crisscrossed the territory, creating new agricultural zones to connect them to an expanding network of roads and bridges that linked to the main seaports, among them the capital's River Ozama port, whose infrastructure was also upgraded under Trujillo. Alongside irrigation works, state hydraulic policy encompassed sewers, drains, and dam and hydroelectric projects designed to exploit the nation's rivers. Mastering water flow through the science of hydraulics thus constituted a touchstone of rural and urban modernization alike, as shown by the regime's claim that before 1930 water was an unproductive resource that "plied the territory via rivers, streams, and other sources and was given

back to the sea without it being charged valuable taxes through its utilization."²⁴

Amid the irrigation system that connected rural outposts to modernizing cities, the monument that best emblemized the nationalistic and personalistic rhetoric of infrastructure was the Canal Presidente Trujillo in Santiago province (fig. 3). Built at a cost of \$1.5 million, this flagship waterwork raised on reinforced concrete stilts was even embellished with the dictator's name to confirm its metonymic function as an infrastructural monument. Here, moreover, Trujillo's hubristic hydraulics fit the mold of developmentalist hubris that Marshall Berman presents as a hallmark of autocratic leadership, whereby the pretension of transforming the landscape into a finely-tuned mechanism of production made the "systematic repression of the masses" a corollary of hydraulic control.²⁵ Much as Stalin relied on the forced labor of prisoners to build the White Canal, Trujillo used unpaid laborers (*prestarios*) to build public works.

Even as infrastructural spaces and monuments were part of a coercive political economy in which developmentalism and authoritarianism were entwined, official ideology stressed that hydraulic policy was testament to Trujillo's role as *Benefactor de la Patria*. In state propaganda, quotes attributed to the dictator emphasized the redemptive impact of irrigation and the domination of nature as conditions for human flourishing. As one quote in a public exhibition at the Pabellón de Recursos Hidráulicos (Pavilion of Water Resources) put it: "Irrigation is a blessing for the earth. Rivers are linked to the destiny of heroic rural life. I love men who have bent the countryside to their will, bonding to their fate the dust where they struggle."²⁶ Water was the key catalyst in this imaginary of transformation in which dust became fertile land. Richard Turtis clarifies the role of irrigation in the politics of benevolence that ensured peasant affiliation to Trujillo, explaining that even though peasants were made to

21. García Bonnelly, 44. Original quote: "los cuerpos desfigurados [que] se amontonaban con los brazos, piernas y cabezas de niños y ancianos, y sobre ellas corría, haciendo cascadas, el agua de las cunetas y desagües desbordados . . . [l]a humedad que saturaba el ambiente, las emanaciones de los solares y calles atacados de basura revuelta, el moho que comenzaba a formarse en las casas en ruina [que] despedían un olor nauseabundo a cementerio abandonado."

22. García Bonnelly, 112. Original quote: "sobre el montón de escombros de la antigua Atenas del Nuevo Mundo . . . como iluminado, como un nuevo Moisés que viniera a hacer brotar el agua de la roca y la nueva ciudad, la ciudad de Trujillo, [que] surgió a los ojos asombrados de las generaciones presentes, como el Fénix de las cenizas."

23. "Pabellón de recursos hidráulicos," *Album de oro de la Feria de la Paz y Confraternidad del Mundo Libre*, vol. 1 (Ciudad Trujillo: Imprenta Nacional, 1955), 377–83.

24. "Pabellón de Recursos Hidráulicos," *Album de oro*, 380. The sources to be tapped included the rivers Las Damas, in Puerto Escondido; Nizaito and San Rafael, both in Barahona; Yaque; and Yagajal, in Santiago Rodríguez province. Further rivers were undergoing feasibility studies in the mid-1950s. Original quote: "surcaba el territorio nacional por ríos, arroyos y otras fuentes, [y] era devuelta al mar sin cobrarle el preciado tributo de su utilización."

25. Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin, 1989), 75.

26. This quote was displayed on the wall of the Pabellón de Recursos Hidráulicos at the Feria de la Paz y Confraternidad del Mundo Libre in 1955. Original quote: "El riego es la bendición de la tierra. El río está asociado al destino de la vida heroica del campo. Amo al hombre que [lo] ha hecho dócil a su voluntad, uniéndolo a su suerte, el polvo donde lucha."

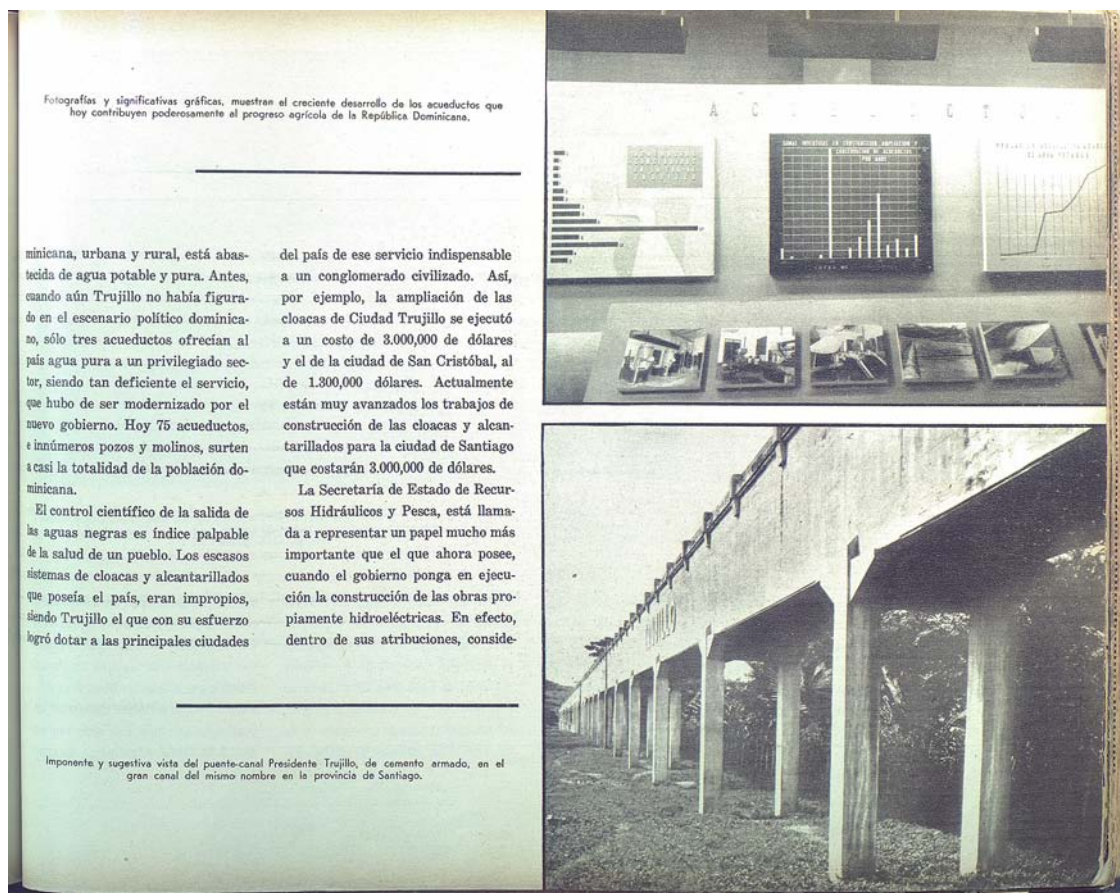


FIGURE 3. Photographs of the Pavilion of Hydraulic Resources at the Free World's Fair of Peace and Brotherhood in 1955. Source: "Pabellón de Recursos Hidráulicos," *Álbum de oro de la Feria de la Paz y Confraternidad del Mundo Libre*, vol. 1 (Ciudad Trujillo: Imprenta Nacional, 1955), 380. Courtesy of Archivo General de la Nación, Dominican Republic.

do forced labor to build canals, those who received irrigated lands from the Trujillo state recalled the regime positively.²⁷ According to one of Turtis's interviewees, the regular flow of water guaranteed by Trujillo liberated farmers from living at the mercy of "the grace of Jesus Christ."²⁸ The improved quality of life this hydraulic feat brought bound peasants to Trujillo. As one interviewee remembered: "We suffered through hunger and misery. . . . There were times . . . we did not even cook because there was no water. . . . We could not even bathe. . . . After Trujillo made this canal, we lived better. . . . [B]ecause of this canal, we owe our lives to [Trujillo]."²⁹

In short, state hydraulic policy and testimonies about irrigation canals clarify how water control expanded modernization beyond the capital city into Dominican

hinterlands. There, concrete and steel, the novel materials credited with materializing urban modernity, also set agricultural lands into a modern mold. Reproduced in text and image in print media and national exhibitions, the infrastructural monuments of irrigation became firm features of the imaginary of modernity, indexing Trujillo's capacity to advance the nation through an infrastructural continuity that bridged countryside and city, "coalescing into a single imaginary of modernization the disparate locations of rural and urban culture."³⁰

MONUMENTAL FOUNTAIN

One waterwork surpassed all other attempts to wed Dominican modernity to the dictatorship. The Teatro Agua Luz Ángelita (Ángelita Water Light Theater) was an open-air

27. Turtis, *Foundations of Despotism*, 215–16.

28. Turtis, 216.

29. Turtis, 216.

30. Neimark, "The Infrastructural Monument," 3.



FIGURE 4. The newly-constructed Water Light Theater at the Free World's Fair of Peace and Brotherhood in 1955. Source: *Álbum de oro de la Feria de la Paz y Confraternidad del Mundo Libre*, vol. 2 (Ciudad Trujillo: El Mirador, 1956). Courtesy of Archivo General de la Nación, Dominican Republic.

auditorium equipped with 355 fountains that spurt vertical or arching jets of water lit in different colors in time with orchestras that played for cabaret shows performing on a large stage (figs. 4–5). The Teatro was completed in 1955 at the entrance to the Feria de la Paz y Confraternidad del Mundo Libre (Free World's Fair of Peace and Brotherhood), an ultra-modern urban complex built west of the colonial center. For the first year, the complex functioned as a fairground of pavilions and entertainment facilities to host celebrations of a quarter century of the era of Trujillo. Later it became the new hub for government ministries and institutions. The Teatro's dancing fountains were the high-water mark of both urban modernity and hubristic hydraulics.³¹ During the festivities, the Teatro was the Feria's largest entertainment attraction, open nightly when it hosted international cabaret groups such as the Paris Lido and International Follies. The lavish state propaganda publication, the *Álbum de oro de la*

Feria de la Paz y Confraternidad, described it in typically gushing terms: "Visitors who came to the Fair from the world over applauded the marvelous musical spectacles at the Water Light Theater. The dancing fountains at the Ángelita Water Light Theater are now considered one of the marvels of America."³²

Whereas the hydraulics of sanitation sent fluids underground and out of sight, the theater staged a vertical spectacle of water jets that spurted from hundreds of fountainheads set into concentric rows of concrete canals. The display revived the biblical motif that had cast Trujillo as a new Moses: the leader who could draw water from stone, or, in this case, from the liquid stone of poured concrete. In this sense, the Teatro's dancing fountains perpetuated the staged choreographies of water flow that have long

31. Anecdotal accounts trace the fountain's origins to a trip Trujillo made to Spain to visit Francisco Franco, where he witnessed Carles Buigas's Font màgica de Montjuïc. Impressed by its scale, he decided to replicate this spectacular fountain in Ciudad Trujillo.

32. *Álbum de oro de la Feria de la Paz y Confraternidad*, vol. 2 (Ciudad Trujillo: El Mirador, 1956), 76. Original quote: "Visitantes de todo el mundo, que acudieron a la Feria, aplaudieron los maravillosos espectáculos musicales presentados en el Teatro Agua Luz. Los juegos de las fuentes en el Teatro Agua Luz Ángelita están considerados ya como una de las maravillas de América. Un espectáculo siempre cambiante y siempre bello presentan las fuentes del Teatro Agua Luz Ángelita."



FIGURE 5. Cabaret show at the Water Light Theater in 1955. Source: *Álbum de oro de la Feria de la Paz y Confraternidad del Mundo Libre*, vol. 2 (Ciudad Trujillo: El Mirador, 1956), Courtesy of Archivo General de la Nación, Dominican Republic.

indexed state power. This tradition dates back to urbanization in early modern Europe, and specifically to thirteenth-century Umbria, where wealthy secular oligarchies began to regulate city-states through rational city planning. There, the construction of centrally located decorative fountains that surpassed merely functional uses emerged as a means of symbolizing the enduring power of religious authorities and emerging power of secular elites. This trend continued in the ensuing centuries as fountains became central features of iconic sites such as the Villa d'Este in Tivoli and the Palace of Versailles.³³ In a very different historical and geographical context, the Teatro's vertical jets of water similarly represented political power by staging a zenith in hydraulic science that marked the ultimate culmination of the post-hurricane reconstruction and modernization of the Dominican capital that had spanned the twenty-five-year-long era of Trujillo. If Parque Ramfis had inaugurated Santo Domingo's emergence from the rubble left by the 1930 hurricane, the 355 dancing fountains at the Teatro Agua Luz Ángelita confirmed Ciudad

Trujillo's entry to the global stage of development, where it was billed as a destination for international tourism.

It is significant that the 1955 inauguration of the Feria was accompanied by a strategic renewal of the visibility of the devastation of the hurricane of a quarter century earlier, as publications such as the *Revista de obras públicas* (Public Works Magazine) and *Escombros* (Rubble) returned the urban chaos to the public imaginary. While the former featured before-and-after photographs of the capital's destruction and reconstruction, the latter republished a compilation of archival chronicles from 1930 that described the post-San Zenón landscape in horrifying terms. This move was strategically designed to make the impact of the fair's modern architecture and its showpiece fountain even more dramatic, an intention confirmed by the fact that Dominicans from across the country were incentivized to visit the capital through organized trips that enabled them to witness progress with their own eyes.³⁴ With its capacity for large audiences, the Teatro befitted this large-scale state

33. Juuti et al., "Short Global History," 2334–2338.

34. It is worth noting that access to the Feria was ticketed and thus was likely prohibitive for rural peasants. While it is hard to know how many people attended, public parades were organized in which different social



FIGURE 6. A man swims through the obsolete water channels that used to power the dancing fountains at the Water Light Theater in Santo Domingo. Fausto Fontana, *Modern Ruins: Abandoned Teatro Agua y Luz used as Lap Pool*, 2014. Courtesy of Fausto Fontana.

spectacle, which sought to induce awe at the modernity realized under Trujillo. In this sense, the Teatro participated in the visual culture of what I theorize elsewhere as “spectacular modernity”: the materialization of political power relations through spatial politics and cultures of display.³⁵ As they witnessed the cavorting cabaret acts, the public was encouraged to acknowledge that behind the scenes it was the power and authority of Trujillo that made the fountains dance.

CONCLUSIONS

When the Dominican Republic made its inaugural appearance at the Biennale di Architettura di Venezia in Rem Koolhaas’s 2014 version titled *Absorbing Modernity*, its exhibition *La Feria Concreta/The Concrete Fair* at the Arsenale staged a striking visual counterpoint between the country’s mid-twentieth-century urban overhaul and those buildings’ contemporary decay. Hung over colorful

handmade rugs, a group of large lightboxes displayed a selection of archival prints of iconic constructions built in a stridently modernist style.³⁶ These vintage scenes were accompanied by contemporary images of Santo Domingo, amid which one photograph stood out. It pictured a young man swimming through the crumbling structure of a narrow water canal—a tangle of crumbling concrete, truncated pipes, trash and sprawling weeds, which was redolent of ruined modernity, rather than a monument of it (fig. 6). The image showed the remnants of the Teatro Agua Luz Ángelita’s hydraulic infrastructure. While only a handful of visitors to the Biennale may have identified the building, the contrast with the adjacent archival images of gushing fountains could not have been more dramatic. Within the violent body blows of modernity that Koolhaas invited countries to exhibit, Dominican modernity was figured as ruin of dictatorship: an

groups participated, thus incorporating the populace into the spectacle as part of its starring cast.

35. On the concept of “spectacular modernity,” see Lisa Blackmore, *Spectacular Modernity: Dictatorship, Space and Visuality in Venezuela, 1948–1958* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017).

36. These included the sweeping hyperbolic arches of the *Basílica Catedral Nuestra Señora de la Altagracia* (André-Jacques Dunoyer de Segonzac and Pierre Dupré, designed 1947, finished 1970) at Higüey and the gushing fountains that stood at the center of the *Feria de la Paz y Confraternidad del Mundo* (Guillermo González, 1955), a purpose-built administrative center credited with consolidating Dominican modern architecture.

aquatic remnant of the hubristic hydraulics that had refashioned the modern city as a spectacular display that presented dictatorial power as a condition for national progress, using water as a symbolic resource to stage this personalistic performance.

Having survived in the decades after Trujillo's assassination, in the 1980s the Teatro wound down its activities, and by the mid-2010s it was entirely abandoned, used only as a hub for sex work, a water source for bus drivers to fill buckets to wash their vehicles, or for occasional bathers (like the one pictured in the Venice photograph) to swim through the canals that had once serviced the vertical water jets that lionized the dictatorship. Dictatorial ego alone is not the cause of the Teatro's demise (nor of the material decay and provisional uses that afflict other modern buildings from the period), not least because the structure remained an active leisure facility for two decades after the end of the era of Trujillo. While its status as a ruin of dictatorship offers a provocative metaphor for the pitfalls of hydraulic hubris, the Teatro can also be read as a warning about contemporary water-related crises. Today, Santo Domingo, and the Dominican Republic at large, face severe challenges, as drought and inundation threaten the livelihoods of rural farmers, and a lack of sanitation endangers the health of vulnerable communities living in urban shanties on the banks of the River Ozama, itself an effluent of the city's wastewater. When regarded in light of the triumphant hydraulic discourse that accompanied mid-twentieth-century urban modernity, it is clear that democratic politics alone are not a guarantee of water security, ecological health, or social well-being. Hydraulic policies remain a challenge, one that is ever more urgent.

In sum, the three hydraulic typologies analyzed here reveal the symbolic capital attached to water as a marker of urban modernity and the political capital that the dictatorship attempted to attach to its authoritarian ruler. As remnants of dictatorship, waterworks attest to the ambitious scale of modernization that reshaped the Dominican landscape in the mid-twentieth century, but also to the restriction of political freedoms that made such a dramatic overhaul a question of imposition rather than choice. Added to these issues, the water-related challenges facing the nation today restate the relevance of thinking critically about hydraulic infrastructure, not only to assess, as has been the goal here, its political underpinnings in dictatorship, but also to consider the pending tasks of creating water infrastructure attuned to more just and democratic forms of collective life and to the unpredictable liquid ecologies in times of climate change.

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