

## ***Papi: Rita Indiana***

Rita Indiana's *Papi* (2005) is a young girl's homage to her father. From the outset, however, we sense that he is something of a monster: he is compared to Jason from the horror movie, *Friday the 13th*. Or possibly he is like Freddy Krueger, from the *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise. "He shows up when you least expect him," we are told. He is "around any corner," lurking with an "aluminium softball bat or an axe or a pick" (1). Moreover, like the horror movie villains with their endless sequels, he never quite goes away: "he always comes back" (2). But instead of fear or horror, his looming presence provokes joy in his daughter: "Sometimes when I hear that scary music, I get really happy cuz I know he might be coming this way" (1). Indeed, most of the novel consists of excited praise for this phantasmal Papi and all his excessive attributes: "My Papi has more of everything than your papi, he's stronger than yours, he has more hair, more muscle, more money, and more girlfriends than yours" (8). Again, however, even this praise inadvertently reveals Papi's darker side: he is a womanizing *macho* man lifted straight from the stereotypes of Latin American and Caribbean pop culture masculinity. But although he lets her down as much as (if not more than) he lets down everyone else around him, his daughter is fiercely attached to him: "I don't wanna be without my dad" (13). Yet she has to learn to withstand his frequent absences—he is mostly in Miami; she lives in the Dominican Republic—and accept the fact that often he is not there when he says he will be. He shows up when you least expect him because when you expect him, he does not show up at all! The narrator spends plenty of time simply waiting for Papi to arrive: the novel is a study in waiting and expectation. Until one day Papi does not turn up at all, not even late. So the narrator has to come to terms with the loss of someone who was never quite there (for her) in the first place.

Papi is, then, both too much and too little: too much in that, when he finally arrives, he is like a whirlwind, propelled by and propelling the desire and yearning all around him; too little in that he is phantasmal, insubstantial, and never enough to compensate either for the excessive waiting that precedes his appearance, or for the global inequalities and frustrated aspirations that underlie the frenetic yearning that gives life to his hyped-up image. He is a postmodern *caudillo*, product of the market rather than the state, but like the populist leaders of old he is stronger on promise than on delivery. He is conjured up

as a goal, a dream of “order and peace” (80), the latest miracle cure in the armory of snake-oil salesmen, in a role-playing game in which we find ourselves immersed thanks to the contemporary mediascape of which a figure such as Papi is the product. At the book’s end, however, other games come into view.

### 1. *Constructing Excess*

Papi is both agent and product of excess and hyperbole. He is defined by delirious accumulation and expenditure, mimicked or conjured up in Indiana’s prose by lists without end, a fantasy of consumerist abundance that is never exactly plenitude as there is always more to be bought, more to be used up. “My Papi has so many clothes and so many closets to keep them in,” we are told, “that sometimes, when he wants to wear a particular shirt, he has to buy it new cuz he forgets which closet he put it in.” He has “so many cars, so many pianos, so many boats, submachine guns, boots, jackets, overcoats, heliports, my Papi has so many boots, and then more boots, my Papi has so many girlfriends, my Papi has so many boots, cowboy boots with eagles and snakes etched into the leather, leather boots, rubber boots, black boots, brown ones, red ones [. . .]” (10). He has so much stuff, in fact, that it cannot possibly be all for him. When he returns to the island, his arrival is an event worthy of being announced on TV (“Quisqueya’s darling son has returned” [6]; “Quisqueya” is an indigenous name for the island of Hispaniola, shared by the Dominican Republic and Haiti) and people line the streets, to bask in the glory of someone who has made it big in the USA, and to benefit from the ensuing abundance as Papi rewards their loyalty like an old-fashioned *caudillo*: “They dream you fill your suitcase with gifts for them, that you work only for them, live only for them; in their dreams you owe them everything” (3). Everyone wants a piece of Papi, but to receive they have also to give, to sacrifice the little they have for the one who has everything: “Somebody kills a pig in Papi’s name so a woman can catch up to him and bring a fork to Papi’s mouth and he can blow on that roast pork and then, yum, eat it all up without missing a step. And so they slaughter chickens, goats, and guinea fowl all along the way, and running the whole time, Papi takes bites of everything” (6). Wherever Papi goes, the fever of consumption goes with him.



Mercedes-Benz, with hood ornament

Papi is also a patron of production and construction. In the first place, consumption depends upon and drives production, as everything that is bought has first to be manufactured in the factories and sweatshops, from the Caribbean to China, that feed the global flow of commodities and desire. But Papi seems also to sponsor some part of a frantic construction boom that is depicted as transforming the Dominican Republic's capital city, Santo Domingo, with "huts everywhere, trucks carrying construction materials, Titan Concrete logos on the side of those steel hulks. Cranes and more cranes turning their brontosaurus heads" (85). And at the end of the day, "when the projects are finished, the inaugurations are televised. [. . .] In front of each project there's a sign saying Papi Did This" (86). This is the classic playbook common also to populist leaders and dictators such as the Dominican Republic's own Rafael Trujillo (effectively in power, if not continuously as president, from 1934 to 1961), who presided over the first wave of Dominican modernization in a personalist rule that renamed mountains and cities.

Trujillo, who was assassinated in 1961, was followed by his political associate Joaquín Balaguer, mentioned at the conclusion of Indiana's novel, in power off and on in the 1960s and 1970s and then again from 1986 to 1996, despite increasing decrepitude (he was 80 years old in 1986) and, by the end, almost complete blindness. But especially in his last two terms in office—the “twelve years” of 1966 to 1978, and his return in the 1980s and 1990s—Balaguer oversaw a massive boom in infrastructure construction: schools and hospitals, highways and housing projects that accompanied and in some ways mitigated the unequal effects what Maja Horn identifies as a mid-century “eruption of consumer culture” (*Masculinity after Trujillo* 103). Hence, despite authoritarian tendencies, corruption, and political violence, both Trujillo and Balaguer left an ambivalent legacy among the Dominican people: of prosperity (at least for some) and the trappings of economic and social development, as well as intimidation and fear. These are much the same attributes as Papi's in Indiana's novel, which can thus be read in part, as Rosana Díaz Martínez suggests, as a portrait of paternalistic power not unlike those offered by classic dictator novels such as the Guatemalan Miguel Angel Asturias's *El Señor Presidente* (1946) or the Paraguayan Augusto Roa Bastos's *I, the Supreme* (1974): “on the one hand, [Papi] expands the archetype of the dictator in Hispanoamerican literature and, on the other hand, he augurs, from the eye of the whirlwind that is Caribbean postmodernity, a sketch of the patriarch as product of the outlandish new itineraries of a culture that is hybrid, consumerist, and globalized” (“¿Una alternativa?” 91). Papi is a transnational *cacique*, always on the move, never confined, as were the sovereigns of old, to a fixed territory or people.

Papi is excessive also in his presumed fecundity and fertility, as his ever-present image spreads the message of his paternal benevolence and authority: “everywhere—on billboards, at intersections, on electric signs, on the murals on those salty walls along the Malecón—there's Papi's face and the colors of the flag, and below him a slogan like a prayer: We're All Family” (87). If his symbolic kin are legion, his biological offspring are almost as multitudinous, and a bit eerie, almost as though they were little aliens: “Papi's children all look the same, albinos with ash-colored hair and blue eyes, and they all wear little sailor outfits. [. . .] They crawl in a single file and go door to door looking for Papi, asking for a helping hand” (79). But the narrator considers herself special, part of the “royal family,” because her mother has a claim to be “Papi's only wife cuz she was the

first and they married the way God intended, in the church” (80), even though “people give [her mother] strange looks when she says I’m Papi’s daughter” (84). So, while it is possible that there are other little girls (or boys) who think they have the same rights to Papi—after all, he spreads himself about—as far as the narrator is concerned, her ties to him are special and unique. She imagines herself, with her papi’s encouragement, shooting at his other girlfriends (no doubt, also other mothers) as they speed along the Malecón: “I stick an arm out and fire and fire and fire, and you can hear Papi’s girlfriends screaming as they fall from the parade floats, fatally wounded, grabbing their chests” (16). Here, as elsewhere, the narrator fantasizes complicity with her father, that the only relationship that counts, for him as well as for her, is the one that the two of them share.

My question then is how you see that relationship. What kind of a daughter is the narrator to Papi? What kind of father is he to her? Do we get a sense of what she may mean to him, as well as of what he means to his daughter? Write some ideas down in your notebook: what does this novel say about the father/daughter bond? While you do that, I’ll have a glass of Mirinda, but I’ll be right back.

#### Drinks Pairing: Mirinda

Soft drinks are often the most visible sign of capitalist globalization. No matter how remote the community, how decrepit the shack that serves as a village store, Coca Cola or its equivalents have usually made their mark. This ubiquity has given rise to the phrase “coca-colonization,” in use at least since shortly after World War II, when coke advanced alongside GIs in Europe and the Pacific. This led to suspicion in some quarters. In the late 1940s, according to *Time* magazine, in France “Coke salesmen were described as agents of the OSS [Office of Strategic Services, forerunner of the CIA] and the U.S. State Department” (qtd. in “Coca-Colonization”). During the Cold War, Coca Cola continued to expand, setting up bottling plants across the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Africa. The company’s main rival has always been New York-based PepsiCo, which is nearly as ubiquitous. Both Coke and Pepsi have long had regional brands (marketed primarily outside the United States), fomenting so-called “glocalization,” whereby global forces also create or accentuate local differences. One of PepsiCo’s regional brands is Mirinda, popular in India but originally produced in Spain, which comes in a variety of fruit flavours: orange, grape, pineapple, and so on. In the 1980s, Mirinda was heavily

promoted and commercially successful in the Dominican Republic, and the brand today induces a certain nostalgia among Dominicans who grew up during that time.

It is hard to distinguish projection from (what may be) reality in the narrator's description of her father. In some ways, as much for her as for everyone else around, Papi is simply a blank screen on which she can trace her wildest imaginations as to what a father could be. Indeed, his frequent absences only encourage this tendency to construct a Papi of image and simulacrum, much like the villain lurking off-screen in a horror movie grows in his monstrosity through the suspense of his always delayed emergence from behind the bushes, around the corner. At times it is almost as though Papi were entirely imaginary, the narrator's imaginary friend—no wonder he is at times imagined as insubstantial as “smoke” (64), or as a puddle of sweat, a “stain on the couch” (13)—whom she invokes to impress her schoolmates (“My Papi has more cars than yours, more cars than the devil” [8]), and whose purported largesse will win her popularity. She tells us that Papi buys her a box of yo-yos, and then “imagine[s] giving the yo-yos away during the recess at my school as the teacher says, Get in line. Everyone wants to be my friend, even Julio César and Raúl wanna be my friends” (32). Perhaps it is she who wants to win stature and influence by giving out things, making up for some deficit just as Papi's triumph is all the greater because of the fact that he was born, we are told, “a poor boy on a dirt floor” (62). It is not so much that the narrator feels she has (or wants to win) Papi's love; she wants to *be* Papi, and to love as he does.

## 2. *Loving the Game*

One of the few times that the novel mentions love is when the narrator has an extended fantasy about seducing one of her father's girlfriends, María Cristina, while wearing her father's clothing and “Magic Marker sideburns and mustache” (51), all to a soundtrack provided by Spanish balladeer Raphael's 1966 Eurovision hit, “Yo soy aquel”: “I continue staring at María Cristina as I come closer, slowly, and as I get so I could almost touch her nose with mine. . . / *And I'm here, here to love you. / And I'm here, here to adore you. / And I'm here, here to ask you for. . . /* Then I grab her hand and put my arm around her waist [. . .] and I quickly lift off the ground, away from Papi, while we kiss with our eyes closed” (52). Elsewhere, the narrator is several times seen as androgynous or perhaps even masculine (“That's why they buzzed my hair off, like a boy's. [. . .] And that's why I

climbed on top of Natasha under her bed" [44]) while Papi, for all his spectacular *machismo*, is also, thanks to his association with consumerism and shopping, sometimes strangely feminized: "Papi has so much money, he has to carry a woman's purse; a man's bag is just not big enough" (20). Papi's hyperbolic masculinity is undercut—for Julio Penenrey Navarro, "the structure of the story itself enables the deconstruction of his masculinity" ("Narrativa del delirio" 15)—as a correlative to the narrator's desire to take on his attributes and ultimately to replace him entirely.

It is not, then, entirely unexpected that, when Papi dies, his daughter can claim that "Papi was in me, and I was in Papi. I even licked the salsa picante from Papi's impeccable cuticles. I was exactly the same as Papi. I was Papi. I am Papi" (129). This is not simply an identification with her father. It can be understood as what Sigmund Freud describes as melancholic incorporation of a lost object, which he contrasts to the (psychically healthier) process of mourning: "The ego wants to incorporate this object into itself, and, in accordance with the oral or cannibalistic phase of libidinal development in which it is, it wants to do so by devouring it" ("Mourning and Melancholia" 249-50). Or in Nicolas Abraham and Maria Took's gloss: "Introducing all or part of a love object or a thing into one's own body, possessing, expelling or alternatively acquiring, keeping, losing it [. . .]. The fantasy of incorporation merely simulates profound psychic transformation through magic [. . .]. In order not to have to 'swallow' a loss, we fantasize swallowing (or having swallowed) that which has been lost" ("Mourning or Melancholia" 126). In *Papi*, the narrator is pictured as incorporating her father quite literally when she takes his false tooth from what she cannot quite admit is his corpse and swallows it: "I swallow it, I jump, I fall into a river, I swim, I splash about, I get out, I run, run, run, run, run" (127). To avoid paralysis, to keep moving with the flow of commodities and capital that gave Papi life, she quite literally consumes her father, which enables her to deny that he is really dead at all. Papi becomes immortal as his daughter becomes Papi, as she takes on his role.

So perhaps Papi is less either a person or a spectre, but a role. Indeed, a little over halfway through the book, it is as though the narrator were starting her narrative again, but this time framing it in terms of a role-playing game: "Your adventure awaits but first you have to understand the backstory. Solid knowledge of the backstory before starting the game will make the adventure much richer" (78). This is an evocation of both table-top

fantasy games, along the lines of *Dungeons and Dragons*, and video games such as *Wizardry* or *Dragon Quest*, which came into their own and were popular in the 1980s, especially with the growth in the market for personal computers and nascent video game consoles made by firms such as Atari. Technology and new patterns of leisure enabled experimentation in literary and para-literary genres, not least the “choose your own adventure” books that were also in vogue at the time. All these pastimes—table-top games, video games, and the texts that imitated their hypertextual effects—involved the (often collective) construction of narratives for which the player or reader was an active, not merely passive, consumer. It was as though the vision latent in a novel such as Julio Cortázar’s *Hopscotch* could now be realized in new ways. At the end of Indiana’s novel, indeed, the narrator is given a TV and PlayStation console, signalling a potential transition to new forms of narrative invention that the book already tries to incorporate or mimic.

The game that the narrator imagines has as its “principal objectives [. . .] to intercept and interrupt the business associates’ evil industry and to find Papi, which would restore order and peace in the world.” As is customary with such games, however, to achieve this goal requires facing and overcoming “numerous obstacles. The lots at the mall, elevators, roofs, beauty salons, town squares, the caves, the resorts, and everywhere else, all booby-trapped, all crawling with monsters. We must conquer them step by step, word by word” (80). In short, language—“word by word”—will be the terrain of these encounters, of this struggle, and of this quest. Papi can only be found, and his enemies defeated, as he is created or recreated through Indiana’s deliriously dogged prose: dogged, because it steadfastly pursues its objectives, to define and capture the enchantment of this fugitive figure who has “escaped in time” (79); delirious, because, as in a video game, everything associated with Papi is a little larger and stranger than life, fed by the desires and aspirations of those around him. “Papi increases in power,” we are told, “thanks to the energy given off by everyone in the world who wants a new car. Papi’s power blooms when the spirit of those who yearn vibrates at its highest.” Papi is our creation, the creation of all those enticed by the prospect of the roles they can play if they only had the keys, not to the kingdom, but to the Buick, Chevrolet, or Mercedes-Benz, or whatever else Papi is offering to sell them: “they let their women go with the watchmen and sell their kids just so they can buy a car at Papi’s dealership, where they’re



given the magic key so they can fly, get women, and eventually more keys" (78). Papi, or the idea of Papi, holds out the promise that we, too, can become "players" in all senses of that term: playing the field, taking on a role, bending reality to our advantage.

Hence critic Fernanda Bustamente Escalona, in her analysis of Indiana's "ludic aesthetic based on multiple disarticulation," in which "discourses of identity, national and media referents, as well as the different forms of written creation, are freed from every regulating grammar and come to be inscribed in the field of the experimental and the transitory" (259), points out that "the recreational exercise of playing not only allows us to define [her] characters or to assume the role of the 'player,' but it also manages to juxtapose different universes—in which narrative reality, audiovisual reality, and dream reality become one and the same" (265). *In a world in which movies, adverts, music videos, video games, and television all blend and cross-contaminate, new cross-cultural and transnational jargons and slang arise, and new roles to play, to compensate for the increasing inequalities and unbridled violence that are also associated with unregulated markets, be they legal or illegal.*

At the end of the novel, the narrator seems to come down to earth, with a bit of a bump. After a frenetic passage leading some kind of millenarian post-Papi cult, whose followers render now to her the fruit and aspirations of their consumerist desires ("People cried and jiggled their raised key chains. Then more people came, grown-ups and kids and pets, with camping equipment and gifts for me: peanut butter, guava juice, German porn on VHS tapes, all so that when Papi returned, he'd do something for them, cure their toothaches and such" [132]), we shift at last from Papi to Mami. Mami is in hospital, her body full of tumours, balls that she shows her daughter who imagines that "we'd play with it and I would hit it out of the park with a bat like [Dominican Major League baseball player] Sammy Sosa" (143). But such extravagant fantasies have been banished by the time we get to the book's final paragraph, in which the daughter comes to visit her post-operative mother in the clinic and, after a brief shock in finding her bed empty, hears her coming down the hall, chatting to a nurse. When she comes into view, the narrator's mother is smiling and cheerful, even though she is carrying a bag with her own urine and blood, and suitably pragmatic: "I can stand up now and even walk a little but I'm still gonna need your help to go to the bathroom" (145). As the final sentence of novel that has been stuffed with dreams of flight, of going ever faster, of outracing monsters and shooting up highway pursuers, this much slower and gentler conclusion, acknowledging

the aging and ailing body that once upon a time gave birth to the narrator, signals not perhaps the end of the game (there are still “memory games” played by mother and daughter, as they “try to remember somebody’s name” [144]) but a new set of roles to take up: care-giver, companion. There may still be monsters around the corner, but they no longer overshadow the here and now.

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Song: “La hora de Volvé” (Rita Indiana)