Narcotraficantes, *Pandilleros* and Urban Violence: Coming-of-Age in Contemporary Dominican Novels by Luis R. Santos and Pedro A. Valdez

Julia Borst (Bremen)

En este artículo, se analizarán dos novelas dominicanas contemporáneas –*Palomos* (2009) de Pedro A. Valdez y *Princesa de Capotillo* (2010) de Luis R. Santos, ambas apenas estudiadas hasta ahora– que serán leídas como novelas de adolescencia dominicanas. Estos dos textos trascienden una vista simplista y unilateral de la República Dominicana como paraíso turístico con grandes hoteles y playas espectaculares. Más bien, Valdez y Santos ofrecen una perspectiva más diferenciada sobre otras dimensionas de la realidad poscolonial en la República Dominicana. Por consiguiente, sus obras abordan problemas sociales urgentes y evocan una sociedad que sufre de una violencia pandillera prolífera y de un narcotráfico exuberante y cuyas clases bajas urbanas viven en condiciones miserables. Ambas novelas relatan esta situación adoptando la perspectiva narrativa de adolescentes quienes se aventuran en un futuro precario en una sociedad que no parece ofrecerles opciones alternativas más allá del crimen y de la violencia. Además de elaborar que la perspectiva del adolescente les sirve como medio de crítica social a ambos escritores, también se va a señalar que las dos novelas, presentando protagonistas adolescentes que luchan para encontrar su papel en la sociedad dominicana y llamando la atención a fenómenos sociales y culturales marginalizados, desestabilizan discursos identitarios tradicionales sobre 'dominicanidad' y cuestionan su validez en el presente.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to analyze how the coming-of-age process is represented in contemporary Dominican novels. While there are numerous studies on this issue in U.S.-Dominican literature, where the topic is quite popular,[1] and especially on those authors of international renown such as Junot Díaz or Julia Álvarez,[2] Dominican coming-of-age novels from the island have been rather neglected so far (see Lorenzo Feliciano (2011, iii)).[3] This is particularly true for the two texts I focus on in this essay, as both have barely been noticed by

[1] See among others Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), Julia Álvarez's *How the García Girls Have Lost Their Accent* (1991), or Angie Cruz's *Soledad* (2001).
[2] See e.g., Fuchs (2014); Lovelady (2005); Künstler (2012); Mackey (2011).
[3] One of the few studies dealing with coming-of-age novels from the Dominican Republic is Lorenzo Feliciano's (2011) dissertation on the bildungsroman from the Hispanophone Caribbean.

academia: *Palomos* (2009)[4] by Pedro A. Valdez and *Princesa de Capotillo* (2010)[5] by Luis R. Santos.

Whereas the knowledge of many potential readers from Western countries is limited to a vision of the Dominican Republic as a tourist paradise with big hotel resorts and spectacular beaches, Santos's and Valdez's novels go beyond this biased view of the country. These authors offer differentiated insights into other dimensions of postcolonial reality in the Dominican Republic by addressing urgent social problems that are widely unknown to the general public outside of the Caribbean. Both novels invoke a society suffering from proliferating gang violence and rampant drug trafficking and whose urban poor live in miserable conditions. In the two texts analyzed in this study, the authors portray these conditions by adopting the narrative perspectives of adolescents who live on the edge of crime and violence while searching for options for a better future in a society that seems to offer none.

In the following, I examine how the coming-of-age process in these novels closely relates to this harsh social criticism. Moreover, I discuss how the texts feature adolescent protagonists struggling to come to terms with their place in Dominican society and how they destabilize traditional identity discourses of *dominicanidad*. Through a close reading of *Princesa de Capotillo* and *Palomos*, I elaborate that both novels initiate important discourses on social exclusion and marginalized cultures in the Dominican Republic that are being silenced by an official vision of Dominican culture. However, to begin with, I give a short introduction to both the genre of the coming-of-age novel and the tradition of 'rewriting' it from a postcolonial perspective. Furthermore, I offer an overview of the situation of adolescents in the Dominican Republic who are growing up in an urban context characterized by crime and violence.

2. Some Basics about Coming-of-Age Novels

Santos's and Valdez's novels stand in the tradition of the literary genre of the so-called 'coming-of-age novel' or 'bildungsroman'. The classical bildungsroman, as defined for instance by Gutjahr (2007), Mayer (1992), or Selbmann (1994), focuses on an adolescent (and mostly male) protagonist's "passage from childhood […] into maturity and the recognition of his […] identity and role in the world." (Abrams (1993, 132)) This passage is characterized by different experiences and conflicts that permit the protagonist to engage in a critical reflection of this coming-of-age process. As a result, the character starts questioning social norms and

[4] Valdez, Pedro Antonio: *Palomos*, Santo Domingo: Alfaguara, 2009. References to this text will henceforth be abbreviated as *P*.

[5] Santos, Luis R.: Princesa de Capotillo, Santo Domingo: Ed. Santuario, 2010 [2009]. References to this text will henceforth be abbreviated as *PC*.

role-models, but basically he eventually finds his place in society and develops his own values and world views. Traditionally, the term 'bildungsroman' refers to a fixed European historical text type in the tradition of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* [*Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795/96)] (see Selbmann (1994); Hardin (1991a)).[6] However, the term has subsequently been applied by academia to all sorts of narratives that focus on the coming-of-age process of an adolescent protagonist characterized by a profound identity crisis.[7] While this trope is often studied in the context of Western literature (see e.g., Millard (2007); Wagner (2007)), the concept of coming-of-age novels nowadays also plays a significant role in 'Black' and postcolonial literary studies that focus on the coming-of-age process of marginalized subjects in formerly colonized cultures (see among others Doub (2010); Feng (1998); Fernández Vázquez (2003); Gymnich (2006); Künstler (2012); Kushigian (2003); Leseur (1995); Lorenzo Feliciano (2011)). As Fernández Vázquez (2003) and Gymnich (2006) emphasize, numerous authors from non-Western cultures 'rewrite' the genre from a postcolonial perspective to illustrate the particular challenges that adolescents face in many formerly colonized societies, such as social injustice and marginalization, poverty and violence as well as "the prospect of integration into a society in crisis, at odds with itself" (Doub (2010, 6)) due to a colonial legacy often not yet overcome.[8] Accordingly, Fernández Vázquez (2003, 119) and Lorenzo Feliciano (2011, x) elaborate that in postcolonial coming-of-age narratives the protagonist's quest is therefore likely to fail so that the main character's typical teleological development is suspended.[9] Gymnich (2006, 79-80) furthermore highlights that these experiences of the postcolonial adolescent subject –living in a 'modern/colonial world' in the understanding of Mignolo (2000)– transcend the characteristic problems dealt with in European versions of the coming-of-age genre and therefore demand a modification of the genre's narrative paradigms.

With respect to coming-of-age novels in the Hispanophone Caribbean, Lorenzo Feliciano's (2011) study has to be mentioned, as it includes Dominican novels from

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[6] For an Anglophone survey of the genre 'bildungsroman' see e.g., the contributions in Hardin (1991b).

[7] Millard (2007) or Selbmann (1994) for instance discuss the topic of historically fixed genre definitions of the bildungsroman. In addition to 'bildungsroman', there are many more terms for narratives that deal with the coming-of-age process and follow similar patterns, such as 'novel of formation', 'novel of education', 'adolescent novel', 'novel of initiation', 'picaresque novel' and so on. The boundaries are fluid to some extent, as these categories share numerous features. For possible classifications see e.g., Gutjahr (2007, 11-14) and Wagner (2007, 42-48). As the concept of 'bildungsroman' often refers to a particular historical text type in the context of German literature, I prefer the less biased term 'coming-of-age novel' in this paper.

[8] Gymnich (2006) names postcolonial coming-of-age narratives as an important example of counter-discursive writing in postcolonial literatures. She defines this kind of 'writing back' as an act of subversive resistance that challenges both Eurocentric genre conventions and cultural models.

[9] Although a failed quest for identity is considered characteristic of postcolonial rewritings of the genre, it is not limited to those cultural contexts. As e.g., Wagner (2007, 47) demonstrates, it also prevails in numerous postmodern novels about adolescence.

Hispaniola.[10] She elaborates how in coming-of-age novels from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean the protagonist's individual search for identity is often correlated to the countries' collective history and the complex and precarious process of (postcolonial) nation building (see Lorenzo Feliciano (2011, iv; ix-x)). This is an important aspect that can also be found in Santos's and Valdez's novels with respect to their criticism of unidirectional, homogenizing constructions of collective Dominican identity, as I illustrate in the following analyses of the novels. However, whereas the texts studied by Lorenzo Feliciano basically focus on political topics (see Lorenzo Feliciano (2011, ii)), Santos and Valdez tend to address coming-of-age in relation to social issues. In contrast to Dominican coming-of-age novels, such as those analyzed by Lorenzo Feliciano (2011, vi), whose historical context is the Trujillo dictatorship and Balaguer's presidencies, Valdez's and Santos's novels moreover do not deal with the country's dictatorial past and its immediate aftermath but are set in the present. Both writers thus overcome the obsessive preoccupation of Dominican literature with Trujillo (see Gewecke (2007, 234); De Maeseneer (2006, 20-21); Birns (2013, 144-145); Jetzt/Mena (2013, 28))[11] and shift the focus to essential contemporary social issues that are related to social injustice, poverty, and youth criminality and that affect in particular poor urban neighborhoods. Consequently, in contrast to many novels on the dictatorial era, the violence depicted in Santos's and Valdez's texts is rather apolitical and related to (international) crime.

3. Social Marginalization and Urban Violence: Coming-of-Age in the Dominican Republic Today

In both *Princesa de Capotillo* and *Palomos*, the setting is poor urban neighborhoods of the Dominican Republic. These so-called *barrios* are shown as a space that bears the stigma of a hotbed of violence where one does not live but rather survive (see Pedrazzini/Sánchez (2001)). Through this focus, Santos and Valdez call the reader's attention to a less known aspect of Dominican reality – an aspect that strongly interferes with a popular tourist vision of a Caribbean vacation paradise (see Gewecke (2007, 98)) but that is nevertheless part of many Dominicans' everyday life.

Although the Dominican Republic has experienced considerable economic growth since the 1990s, a neoliberal economic policy, privatization measures and corruption have resulted

[10] That is *Mudanza de los sentidos* (2001) and *Charamicos* (2005) by Ángela Hernández as well as *Papi* (2007) by Rita Indiana Hernández.

[11] This preoccupation with the Trujillo era is characteristic of Dominican literature from the island *and* the diaspora but also still prevails in academia, as the prevalence of the topic in many studies such as Gallego Cuiñas (2006) and Lorenzo Feliciano (2011) or a search on Dominican literature in academic databases prove.

in rising social injustice and let the majority of the population go empty-handed (see Gewecke (2007, 93-99); World Bank (2014)). Moreover, important economic branches such as tourism or production in free-trade zones have recently declined (see Gewecke (2007, 98)). Given a rising fragmentation of urban spaces as in many other Latin American countries (see Koonings/Kruijt (2007)), a large proportion of the Dominican population nowadays lives in socially marginalized areas characterized by miserable living conditions, (partly chronic) poverty, and very low economic mobility (see World Bank (2014, 9-15)). Additionally, international drug trafficking and gang crime, particularly in urban areas, are among the main concerns of today's Dominican society (see USAID (2013, 8); UNODC/World Bank (2007, iv-v; x)). As a report by the UNODC and the World Bank (2007) reveals, these phenomena promote both violence and a general atmosphere of insecurity in many neighborhoods of Dominican cities.

Youth crime and gangs are a problem often brought up in relation to Central America with respect to the so-called 'maras' (see e.g., Gutiérrez Rivera (2013); Levenson (2013); Peetz (2012))[12] but much less frequently discussed in a Caribbean context. Nevertheless, the mentioned report from 2007 reveals that Dominican adolescents are also particularly affected by violence and crime –both as victims and as perpetrators (see UNODC/World Bank (2007, x))– and that there is no doubt that gang and drug-related youth violence and crime are on a rise in the Dominican Republic (see UNODC/World Bank (2007, 62-63; 66)). Factors such as "poverty, youth unemployment, large-scale migration to urban areas, drug trafficking, a weak education system, ineffective policing, the widespread availability of weapons, drug and alcohol use, and the presence of organized gangs" (UNODC/World Bank (2007, x)) all promote this development.[13] The set of problems mentioned by the report also plays a prominent role in both *Princesa de Capotillo* and *Palomos*, where the adolescent protagonists are confronted with many of these aspects, as the following analyses illustrate.

[12] There are likewise many fictional texts from Central and South America dealing with this phenomenon, such as Rafael Ramírez Heredia's *La mara* (2005), Paulo Lins's *Cidade de Deus* (1997) or Colombian *sicario* novels (e.g., Fernando Vallejo's *La virgen de los sicarios* (1994)).

[13] See Levenson (2013, 7) for a similar set of factors promoting 'gangsterism' among adolescents in Latin American societies in general.

4. Coming-of-Age as a Discourse on Social Exclusion and Marginalized Cultures in Contemporary Dominican Novels by Luis R. Santos and Pedro A. Valdez

Pedro Antonio Valdez (*1968 in La Vega, Dominican Republic) is the more known of the two authors.[14] He has published several novels and short story collections since the 1990s but has become particularly popular on an international level since his novel *Carnaval de Sodoma* (2002) was made into a movie by the famous Mexican filmmaker Arturo Ripstein (see Valerio-Holguín (2013)). In *Palomos*, published in 2009 by Alfaguara and thus one of his more recent novels, Valdez tells the story of a group of adolescents, living in a *barrio* in the city of La Vega (see Valerio-Holguín (2013, 202)), who call themselves *Los Fox Billy Games* and dream of becoming famous *reguetón* singers. This utopian dream is contrasted with the bleak reality of everyday life in the *barrio*, a life that is characterized by the presence of violence and poverty and a lack of prospect of escaping these precarious living conditions.

Luis R. Santos (*1954 in Santiago de los Caballeros, Dominican Republic) also wrote several novels and short stories published in national and international anthologies. Although less known on an international level, he is fairly popular in the Dominican Republic. Santos's novel *Princesa de Capotillo*, published in 2009 by Editorial Norma, is set primarily in the *barrio* of Capotillo in the Dominican capital Santo Domingo. It narrates the story of the gang leader Kiko who fell in love with a girl called Yojaira, the so-called *Princesa de Capotillo*. Out of jealousy, Kiko kidnaps the young woman on the day she wants to marry another man. If one has a closer look, however, one can see that the hijacking of Yojaira is only a subplot and that the main focus is on –as Santos highlights in an interview– "[the] proliferation of daily crime and crime related to drug trafficking." (Guzmán Molina/Santos (2009; my translation))[15] The novel displays how Kiko and the other members of his gang called *Los Broders* succumb to the temptation of making lots of money in drug dealing and, as a result, slip into a world of urban violence.

Both novels feature many typical elements of coming-of-age narratives identified by several studies on the topic (among others Fernández Vázquez (2003, 14-15); Mayer (1992, 19); Wagner (2007, 47-48)) such as a, generally male, adolescent's quest for identity, the questioning of existing social norms and values, first romantic/sexual experiences, a protagonist

[14] As e.g., his inclusion into the encyclopedia of the contemporary Spanish-American novel by Corral et al. (2013) proves. For bio-bibliographical information on Valdez and Santos see e.g., Valerio-Holguín (2013); Santos (2007); Escritores de Santiago (2007).

[15] "[el] desbordamiento de la delincuencia común y de la delincuencia asociada al narcotráfico." (Guzmán Molina/Santos (2009))

experiencing different sorts of crises, or his search for his place among his peers as well as in society. A fact that particularly stands out with respect to Santos's and Valdez's texts is the social dimension of the narratives: rather than describing coming-of-age as an isolated interior process, both writers portray an experience strongly linked to the social context.[16] They use the literary topos of adolescence as a narrative technique to blend into the plot an intense social criticism by describing coming-of-age as an unavoidable confrontation with fundamental grievances of present-day Dominican society and, thus, by linking the entrance into adulthood with the painful experience of this reality.[17] To see how this socio-critical perspective is implemented in the two novels and how the narrative unmasking of social exclusion as a major problem in Dominican society at the same time introduces critical remarks on marginalizing visions of *dominicanidad* (Dominicanness), a closer look at both texts is indispensable.

4.1. *Princesa de Capotillo* by Luis R. Santos: The Silencing of the *barrio* as a Marginalized Space of Dominican Culture

In *Princesa de Capotillo*, the coming-of-age process of the main protagonist Kiko is completely subverted. A romantic encounter, which Gutjahr (2007, 46) mentions as characteristic for many coming-of-age narratives, is replaced by the violent appropriation of the desired girl. He kidnaps Yojaira when she chooses the son of a politician who can get her out of the *barrio* rather than the have-not Kiko who, like other have-nots, is "condemned to marginality, to rejection and to disdain by a society that locked them out" (*PC*, 30; my translation).[18] At gunpoint, Kiko forces her into marriage, just to subsequently see her being ruthlessly shot by police officers who are after the kidnappers.

But it is not only the topos of the first romantic encounter that is subverted in the violent and unjust world described in *Princesa de Capotillo*. Rather, the main character's formation is turned into a story of proceeding criminalization. In contrast to the common rather positive and successful moral development of the protagonist in traditional coming-of-age narratives (see above), Kiko does not develop his own ethical values but instead abandons all moral constraints. His criminal career is described as a progressive, inexorable escalation. It starts the night he "had graduated as a killer" by ruthlessly murdering a security guard "as if it was a

[16] For the focus of the traditional German bildungsroman on the interior development of the protagonist and a psychological dimension see e.g., Mayer (1992, 19); Gutjahr (2007, 41-43).

[17] This combination of a sociocritical perspective and the coming-of-age topos is particularly interesting as, according to Barth (2009, 146-147), the narrative technique of using an adolescent's perspective that is characterized by a lack of experience or even simple-heartedness might constitute a particularly subtle way to express veiled social criticism in literary texts.

[18] "condenado a la marginalidad, al rechazo y al desdén por parte de una sociedad que los excluía" (*PC*, 30).

scene from a Quentin Tarantino movie" (*PC*, 49; both my translation).[19] Later, under the influence of drugs, Kiko and his gang *los Broders* raid a classy restaurant where they shoot one of the managers although it was completely unnecessary for the hold-up to succeed. It is striking that the gang members show no remorse at all with respect to this brutal murder; instead of subsequently talking about the uselessness of this act of violence, the young men only regret that they did not correctly utter their rehearsed phrases with which they had wanted to intimidate the guests (see *PC*, 53-54).[20]

Soon Kiko and his gang become the chief drug lords of the *barrio* and they start doing business with the corrupt police officer *capitán* Serrera and the mysterious Papi Blonda, the fugleman of the rich drug kingpin El Don, who pays *los Broders* for killing the cartel's enemies (e.g., *PC*, 83-84). While the young men throughout their lives have felt marginalized by society, they now enter a world of crime where "[they] felt important for the first time." (*PC*, 75; my translation)[21]

The gang members' assumed position of power, though, is more than fragile: the text leaves no doubt that the *pandilleros* are not able to break free from social hierarchies that also exist in the world of crime. Rather, they are still pawns in the hands of the big string-pullers in drug business such as El Don or Papi Blonda. Although the latter might seem like a mentor –a typical element of coming-of-age narratives in general (see e.g., Fernández Vázquez (2003, 14))– to Kiko in the beginning, it soon becomes evident that, in fact, the criminal does not mentor but rather uses the adolescent as an instrument to consolidate El Don's power. This is once more highlighted at the end of the novel, where Papi Blonda is assigned with Kiko's death because of the bad press after the kidnapping of Yojaira.

Although the reader might assume that seeing his loved one Yojaira murdered brings Kiko back to reason, Santos's protagonist is not saved from the path of violence by this event; he now completely loses any control. This is emphasized by the ruthless hijack of a six-year-old child in order to blackmail her father and by Kiko's involvement in the final massacre in Navarrete, where he and his friends brutally execute other gangsters for money (see *PC*, 151-161). It is hardly surprising that, eventually, Kiko's 'violent education' leads to his own vicious

[19] „se había graduado de asesino", „como si se tratara de una escena de un filme Quentin Tarantino" (*PC*, 49).
[20] The fact that the rehearsed phrase "Do not move, *modofoki*, or I will rip your butt with a bullet!" (*PC*, 53; my translation) ["¡No se muevan, *modofoki*, o a tiro les parto la nalga!"] is very much alike to the sentence uttered during the hold-up "Down on the floor everybody, damn! […] The first *modofoki* that moves, I will rip his ass with a shot!" (*PC*, 54; my translation) ["¡Al suelo todo el mundo, coño! […] ¡Al primer *modofoki* que se mueva le parto el culo a balazos!"] makes the character's irritation about his allegedly poor rhetoric performance sound even more ridiculous, which emphasizes in an ironic way that the gang members have completely lost touch with reality and that any moral values have gone astray.
[21] "Era la primera vez que se sentían importantes." (*PC*, 75)

death: In the end, he is killed by Yojaira's fiancé Tony. Kiko's former ally *capitán* Serrera, who is blackmailed by Tony's father, the powerful politician, assists in this murder and helps with its cover-up.

In the novel, Santos describes Kiko as a young man, emotionally abandoned by his mother (see *PC*, 20), who learned nothing but violence. Kiko grew up in an environment where a dead body is just one more

> in the parade of dead bodies in front of the eyes of the spectators, who did not blush anymore in the face of the massacre, who have got used to the savagery, and who have already accepted the images of the killings, of the bloody bodies in underwear, thrown on the bed of a truck or into the morgue of a hospital, like something normal, like something that is part of the every-day landscape. (*PC*, 83; my translation)[22]

When the protagonist learns that the love of his life wants to marry another man, he consequently just follows the bad examples set by his peers and takes what he wants by force. Although the members of *Los Broders* are often described as rather naive (see e.g., *PC*, 78-79; 80), the text leaves no doubt that Kiko consciously decides to get involved in crime in order to escape poverty and powerlessness. However, the novel also implies that Dominican society is at least partly responsible for criminal careers like Kiko's. In fact, in the novel there seems to be no way out of misery but through disreputable actions. It is the drug kingpins or corrupt police officers and politicians involved in criminal actions who are in charge and who decide who lives and who dies. The beginning of the novel provides a particularly insightful episode: The protagonists express their belief that if you are from the *barrio*, the only way to get rich is to become a baseball star, a drug dealer or a politician (see *PC*, 31). While at first glance the relevant text's passage seems to offer a choice –to become rich by protecting or by breaking the law–, the characters in the novel illustrate that this choice is just an illusion, as those involved in politics or police work are shown as deeply involved in drug trafficking, too (see e.g., *PC*, 72), and as (or even more) ruthless as the 'true' criminals.

Even though Kiko's actions seem barbarous in certain episodes, the novel simultaneously shows him as a young man desperately in love but rejected because of his social status. Eventually, it is this rejection that leads him to revolt against a predetermined life of misery.

[22] "en el desfile de cadáveres ante los ojos de los espectadores, que ya no se ruborizaban ante la matazón, que habían venido acostumbrándose a la barbarie, y ya recibían las imágenes de los asesinatos, de los cuerpos ensangrentados y en paños menores, tirados en la cama de una camioneta o en la morgue de un hospital, como algo normal, como algo perteneciente al paisaje cotidiano." (*PC*, 83)

But ultimately, the murder of the protagonist illustrates that the social balance of power is back in place. Assurance is given that the powerless such as Kiko are shown their place in the social hierarchy by those who are really in power – i.e. by corrupt politicians, police officers and drug kingpins. Money and political influence are also what decide about who is persecuted by law for crimes, so that those who 'have' (power) usually benefit from impunity – as do wealthy people in the novel, like the Mercedes driver who shoots an adolescent windshield cleaner in the streets just because he is annoyed by him (see *PC*, 51), a scene the narrator ironically comments as follows: "Nothing has happened. […] no one intervenes." (*PC*, 51; my translation)[23] Especially the police –embodied by the opportunistic, corrupt *capitán* Serrera– is represented rather as an ally of criminals than as an institution supposed to protect the citizens –especially if these live in the *barrio*–[24] with officers having the "license to kill" or a "past in the area of murder" (*PC*, 38-39; 84; both my translation).[25] They do not care about violence and crime in the *barrios*[26] as long as they get their share of drug money. By addressing this issue at length, Santos's novel explicitly participates in the prevailing critical discourse about the Dominican police uttered by human rights institutions such as Amnesty International (2011).

Throughout the novel, the miserable living conditions of the *barrio* are contrasted with the wealth of the Dominican upper class, represented by the modern urban space of Santo Domingo with its nice boulevards and its metro, as can, for instance, be seen in the following description:[27]

> When they crossed [the street; J.B.] towards Villa Mella, they stopped to observe the majestic metro station […]. […] an impressive work of modern engineering. But close by there was the neighborhood of La Zurza, an impressive work of social engineering: loads of garbage, fattened rats, fetuses in decomposition, emaciated dogs, children plunging into the trashcans and into the filthy sewers in the neighborhood, old people with withered faces. And lots of shit running in floods from the hill towards the precipice

[23] "Nada ha pasado. […] nadie interviene." (*PC*, 51)

[24] See for instance the episode when a character named Juan who is blackmailed by Kiko's gang does not dare to go to the police (see *PC*, 109-110). For some of the numerous examples of police criticism in the novel see e.g., *PC*, 83; 87; 91; 111.

[25] "licencia para matar"; "pasado en materia de asesinatos" (*PC*, 38-39; 84).

[26] The police, for instance, announce a manhunt after Yojaira was kidnapped. Yet Santos (see *PC*, 123) has his narrator explain that actually they do not do anything, as the girl is no-one important's daughter.

[27] For the exclusion of the inhabitants of the *barrio* from spaces claimed by the upper class see also the scene where Kiko and his gang are not admitted into a club, which makes them come back in a car and open fire on the guests (see *PC*, 100-101).

> and lots of despair running alongside the Metro, symbol of the most impressive progress. (*PC*, 52; my translation)[28]

The growing social injustice is displayed by spatial metaphors, as the inhabitants of the *barrio* only rarely cross the symbolical borders to this parallel universe of affluence. If the protagonists of the novel do penetrate into these parts of the city, it is first to roam the streets temporarily in unbelieving amazement – and later, more and more often, to commit some kind of crime (see e.g., *PC*, 53; 101). Otherwise their life is restricted to the back roads of the city, to the *barrio* representing a marginalized place in Dominican culture that does not matter officially, as the dedication of the novel reveals. It reads: "For all those who live in the barrios, those *marginal republics*, of the big cities in the Dominican Republic and other Iberoamerican countries." (*PC*; my translation, original emphasis)[29] This quote highlights that the experiences of drug and gang-related violence narrated in *Princesa de Capotillo* are the untold stories of a myriad of marginalized subjects who live in the peripheries of Dominican culture. Santos's aim in writing this novel populated not only by gangsters but also by other marginalized characters such as street children, Haitian immigrants, beggars, et cetera (see e.g., *PC*, 43-45; 51) is to give them a voice and make their stories heard – it is to remind the reader that there <u>is</u> a problem. The dedication of the novel, however, also emphasizes that the silencing of these experiences is not limited to Dominican society but prevails in other Latin American and Caribbean cultures as well.[30] The urban violence in *Princesa de Capotillo* is therefore not to be read as a single event but as a general development of social decline in many postcolonial societies due to the marginalization of whole social strata.

The novel's focus on social injustice leads to my second argument, for the text's continuous emphasis on the division of Dominican society into those who have everything and those who have nothing –no money, no influence, no voice– also challenges existing assumptions about what constitutes Dominican identity and culture. There is a very insightful

[28] "Cuando iban a cruzar hacia Villa Mella se quedaron observando la majestuosa parada del Metro […]. […] una impresionante obra de la moderna ingeniería. Pero muy cerca de allí estaba el barrio La Zurza, impresionante obra de ingeniería social: montones de basura, ratas cebadas, fetos en descomposición, perros con las costillas al aire, niños zambullidos en los basureros y en las asquerosas aguas de las cañadas circundantes, ancianos con rostros marchitos. Y mucha mierda corriendo a raudales desde lo alto hacia el despeñadero y mucha desesperanza corriendo a la par con el Metro, símbolo del más grandioso progreso." (*PC*, 52)

[29] "Para todos aquellos que viven en los barrios, esas *repúblicas marginales*, de las grandes ciudades de República Dominicana y demás países de Iberoamérica." (*PC*)

[30] That the problem is not limited to the Dominican Republic is also pointed out by one of the characters who compares the inhabitants of Capotillo to "billions of the wretched, although they might live in shacks with different names" (*PC*, 14; my translation) ["billones de descojonados, aunque residan en antros con nombres diferentes"].

passage in the novel that explicitly questions a vision of Dominican culture dominated by an elitist upper class and excluding all those living at its margins:[31]

> They were at the corner of Lincoln and 27 de Febrero, and there one could observe part of the spirit of the big city and even of the nation. A *Porsche* jeep stops, one of those that cost more than a hundred thousand dollars. Inside, there is a blond woman with the most precious jewelry, an *Iphone* and a *laptop*. (*PC*, 51; my translation, original emphasis)[32]

This wealth –as well as the woman's rather European appearance with her blond hair–[33] in opposition to the miserable life in the *barrio* questions in how far this picture really represents the spirit of the Dominican nation, for this description certainly does not include the inhabitants of the *barrio* in Santos's novel.

Interestingly, the marginalization of the *barrio* is narratively protracted by the novel's narrator Gumersindo Soto Soto, a former teacher who considers himself "the memory of the *barrio*" (*PC*, 13, my translation),[34] which is why he wants to tell the terrible story of Kiko and Yojaira. Soto Soto appears as a first person narrator in the first framing chapter of the novel but then withdraws from the embedded main story, narrated in the third person. However, his presence consistently shows through by occasional comments in the text such as 'said Soto Soto' (see e.g., *PC*, 30; 56; 85; 128).[35] Yet, despite a rather critical perspective on social injustice, this character simultaneously participates to a certain extent in a depreciatory discourse about the Dominican lower classes, for his comments expose him as a rather biased voice convinced of a moral degradation of the *barrio*'s inhabitants and repeating numerous

[31] In an interview from 2009, the author of *Princesa de Capotillo* explicitly blames the country's elite for marginalizing the lower classes of Dominican society (see Guzmán Molina/Santos (2009)).
[32] "Estaban en la Lincoln con 27 de Febrero, y allí se podía observar parte del espíritu de la gran ciudad e incluso de la nación. Se detiene una yipeta *Porsche*, de esas de más de cien mil dólares. En ella va una rubia con preciosísimas joyas, un *Iphone* y una *laptop*." (*PC*, 51)
[33] As studies on Dominican identity and nation building show (see e.g., Franco Pichardo (2003); Gewecke (1996); González et al. (1999a); Torres-Saillant (1994); Valerio-Holguín (2000)), Dominicanness has been defined throughout the country's postcolonial history in relation to European culture, that is Dominican thinkers have understood Dominican culture as a Hispanic culture, whereas they have devalued the neighbor on Hispaniola, Haiti, as representing an African culture. Race and physical appearance, therefore, have played a major role in this context, which is why dark skin color has been mainly associated with Haitians being called 'negros' while Dominicans with dark skin color tend to be considered 'indios' (see e.g., Franco Pichardo (2003, 113); Fennema (1999, 237)). By choosing a woman with a rather European appearance as an example of the rich social elite in the Dominican Republic, Santos evidently alludes to the fact that Afro-Dominican elements are marginalized by an elitist understanding of Dominican identity (see studies quoted above). For the complexity of 'racial' identity in Dominican culture see e.g., Torres-Saillant (2000) or a short text by Moscoso Puello from the 1930s published in Roorda et al. (2014, 195-200). Although highly important in the discourses on collective Dominican identity in general, race does not play a major role in either Santos's or Valdez's novel.
[34] „la memoria del barrio" (*PC*, 13).
[35] According to Mayer (1992, 20), comments on the plot are also typical of the traditional bildungsroman. It is interesting to note that Santos's own perspective on the *barrio* is also that of an outsider, as he states in an interview (see Guzmán Molina/Santos (2009)).

clichés and prejudices about the Dominican lower classes and adolescents (see e.g., *PC*, 15; 17-18). Although this narrative perspective might make the novel's description of poor Dominican neighborhoods seem kind of black and white, the text's strength lies in its subliminal criticism of the upper class's appropriation and thus homogenization of what defines Dominican identity (see e.g., Gewecke (1996, 205).[36] The following quote points out exemplarily that such an exclusive understanding of Dominicanness excludes the *barrio* as an alternative space of Dominican culture: "This *patria* that many were defending, means nothing to them [the inhabitants of the *barrio*; J.B.], they didn't feel part of it, and, above all, they didn't fit in, they weren't welcome" (*PC*, 85; my translation).[37]

Santos's novel, however, reminds the reader that these margins of Dominican culture – including every-day life in the *barrio* of the lower classes of Dominican society, drug trafficking and urban violence– nevertheless <u>do</u> exist and that the stories about these alleged 'margins' have to be uncovered. My reading of *Princesa de Capotillo*, therefore, reveals that if collective memory fails to remember these 'margins', literature steps in and provides a counter-discourse that transcends an elitist cultural vision prevalent throughout Dominican history (see e.g., González et al. (1999b); Torres-Saillant (1994); Záiter (1999)).[38]

4.2. *Palomos* by Pedro A. Valdez: Popular (Youth) Culture from the *barrio* as an Alternative Discourse of Dominicanness

In comparison to Santos's novel, Pedro A. Valdez's *Palomos* includes many more elements that can be considered typical for coming-of-age narratives, such as school or family problems. It is particularly striking that, while equally insisting on the marginalization of the *barrio* as an alternative cultural space in Dominican society, *Palomos* offers a by far more sophisticated view of the situation of adolescents living at the margins of Dominican society, as I elaborate in the following.

Contrary to Santos's text, in which Soto Soto acts as an outside observer inclined to patronizing moral comments, Valdez's novel is told from the first person perspective of the

[36] For the central role of political and social elites in Dominican culture see e.g., González et al. (1999b); Gewecke (1996); for the exertion of influence of Caribbean ruling elites on the process of imagining the Caribbean nations in general see e.g., Baronov/Yelvington (2009).

[37] "Esa patria, que muchos defendían, a ellos les decía nada, no se sentían parte de ella, y, ante todo, no cabían en ella, no eran bienvenidos en ella" (*PC*, 85). Fernández Vázques (2003, 116-119) names such an experience of alienation as characteristic of the situation of protagonists in postcolonial coming-of-age narratives in general, which is why, in these texts, the integration of the subject into the social structures of the community often remains impossible. This is also the case for Santos's protagonist who comes from the 'peripheries' of Dominican society and, thus, belongs to a marginalized cultural space that is excluded from an elitist collective identity.

[38] For Santos's beliefs in the power of literature as a means to denounce the grievances of society see Redacción El Día (2012).

adolescent character Antonio, called MC Yo, who is also the main protagonist of the novel. He has recently moved to the *barrio*, where he has become friends with Lacacho, the leader of the gang *Los Fox Billy Games*. *Palomos* describes the everyday life of these boys, how they dream of becoming famous, like playing computer games, and have to deal with problems typical for their age such as narrow-minded school teachers, restrictive parental behavior et cetera.

Correspondingly, with respect to the representation of the youth 'gang', *Palomos* adopts a very different tone to that in Santos's texts, with the 'gang' being depicted as a possible space of belonging for adolescents living at the margin of society (see Messina/Valdez (2011)) rather than as a criminalized group such as *Los Broders* in *Princesa de Capotillo*. However, a closer look at the text shows how the *barrio* is not presented as an ordinary space where the characters only have trivial problems that might be considered as common for the years of adolescence. Though much less obtrusively than Santos, Valdez, too, describes the *barrio* as a "rotten universe" (*P*, 103; my translation)[39] caught in continuous decay (see e.g., *P*, 132) and populated by the disillusioned (see also Valerio-Holguín (2013, 202)). Furthermore, the story of their everyday life is consistently interspersed with episodes (e.g., of violence and drugs) that have Valerio-Holguín (2013, 204) relate the novel to the literary trend of 'dirty realism' and that remind the reader of the *barrio* as it is depicted in *Princesa de Capotillo*: There are degenerated drug addicts on the streets such as the cement-sniffing group of the so-called *Güelecemento* (see e.g., *P*, 25; 152), police officers are described as brutal and corrupt (see e.g., *P*, 46; 107; 157) and violent deaths are omnipresent (see e.g., *P*, 44-45; 67; 121; 157).

It is in particular these testimonies to violence that shape the coming-of-age process of the novel's main protagonist Antonio. In contrast to *Princesa de Capotillo*, however, it is not a violence related to criminal activities but rather a violence related to degenerated interpersonal relations.[40] The first event of this kind is the murder of the minor character Tatú's sister, who was killed by her husband because she wanted to leave him.[41] The sight of her mutilated body at the morgue is the initial step in a process of disillusionment that has Antonio lose his naivety – particularly as, by watching two journalists voyeuristically filming the dead body, he realizes society's indifference to the suffering of others (see *P*, 44-46):

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[39] "universo podrido" (*P*, 103).

[40] It is consequently no surprise that the sexual initiation of the protagonist Antonio takes place in a brothel in an atmosphere of social, moral, and bodily decay; see *P*, chapter 4. For the significance of the brothel in Valdez's novels in general see Valerio-Holguín (2013).

[41] For the prevalence of violence against women committed by (former) intimate partners in Dominican society see UNODC/World Bank (2007, 12).

> The worst was the two journalists […] that were there [at the morgue; J.B.]. […] 'Record it slowly, so that you can see everything […]. Focus the camera for a moment, here, on the neck… get the mark of the rope', directed the thin one. […] Suddenly, the thin one instructed the fat one to concentrate on the corpse. […] Disgusted, he put aside a strand of hair from the neck of the deceased, uncovering a round and brutal hole, ripped open by a bullet. 'Stay here with the lens. (*P*, 45-46; my translation)[42]

Other events that have Antonio question the moral integrity of society even more are the unpunished murder of the adolescent prostitute Judy Ann by her jealous and rich client *El Viejo* (see *P*, 121) and the violent death of the boy Américo; the latter carries the disrespectful nickname *el Aborto* ('the abort') and is constantly bullied by Lacacho and the other boys. Although it is said that Américo just fell from a tree, Antonio firmly believes that Lacacho forced the boy to climb higher and higher so that in the end the he slipped and fell to his death (see *P*, 160-162).

Whereas the adolescents in Santos's novel act as real perpetrators, the protagonists in *Palomos* rather watch and testify.[43] Especially Antonio –who unlike the other boys of the gang is described as rather cultivated (see e.g., *P*, 12)–[44] is able to adopt a critical perspective on the brutalization of the *barrio* community. As the story is told from his point of view, the reader has access to an interior development of critical awareness that is missing in *Princesa de Capotillo*, where the narration from the perspective of the adult character Soto Soto gives a biased and one-sided account of how young men are misled by crime.

In the course of the novel, Antonio learns that the displays of force by Lacacho and gangsterism in general are not forms of empowerment of the unprivileged but more a sign of their powerlessness. Consequently, the protagonist realizes that Lacacho is an erroneous mentor figure: his 'HATE'-tattoo, his bragging about having a gun and a brother in jail,[45] his

[42] "Lo peor eran dos periodistas […] que se encontraban allí. […] 'Grábalo despacio, que se vea todo […]. Deja la cámara un rato ahí, en el cuello… capta la marca de la soga', dirigía el flaco. […] De pronto, el flaco indicó al gordo que enfocara el cadáver. […] Apartó con asco un mechón de pelo de la nuca de la difunta, dejando a la vista un hueco redondo, brutal, abierto por un cartuchazo. 'Pon el lente aquí'." (*P*, 45-46)

[43] Although the boys of Lacacho's gang are fascinated by gangsterism (see e.g., *P*, 14; 96), they are still shown as rather harmless kids who hurry home when their mothers call for dinner (see *P*, 18-19). However, the reader can also find marginal stories of drug-addicted, homeless, criminal, and violent kids in *Palomos* (see e.g., *P*, 25-26).

[44] Interestingly, Antonio's education is exemplified by his enthusiastic reading of Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra's *Quijote*, a Spanish and <u>not</u> a Dominican classic (see *P*, 12).

[45] The story of Lacacho's brother, Manso, also plays an important part in Antonio's disillusionment as it shows that the adolescents' ideas about gangsters 'doing their time' as role models (see *P*, 96) has nothing to do with the sad reality of jail (see *P*, 154-155).

willingness to become involved in whatever kind of misdoings (see e.g., *P*, 180),[46] his whole posturing are unmasked by the narrator as being the misguided strategies of an adolescent who has been disadvantaged and rejected his whole life. As the narrator's account of Lacacho shows him not only as ruthless and indifferent to others but equally as a child deprived of motherly affection (see *P*, 18-19; 100) and socially disadvantaged, for, unlike Antonio, he, for instance, is illiterate (see *P*, 94).

In the end, Antonio successfully emancipates himself from the group and states: "I would like to tell him [Lacacho; J.B.] that the Fox Billy Games are nothing […]. I have discovered that Lacacho is a coward." (*P*, 193)[47] By using the term 'coward' the narrator alludes to the fact that, in his eyes, Lacacho has resigned to a predetermined life of misery and crime. Antonio consequently critically reflects his own social status and consciously chooses not to give in to a life of violence – a decision that, by contrast, the protagonists in *Princesa de Capotillo* do not seem capable of. This is why, unlike Valdez, Santos leans towards perpetuating stereotypes about the *barrio* and its criminal youth rather than consistently destabilizing them, while Valdez's novel, by offering the reader a perspective of critical self-reflection, embraces an option of self-empowerment for the *barrio*'s inhabitants and consequently adopts a less fatalistic tone and a more differentiated view than *Princesa de Capotillo*.

Apart from Lacacho, another character trying to lead Antonio astray appears in the novel: it is the son of a powerful and rich assemblyman and one of Antonio's schoolmates whose actual name is not mentioned in the text, but who is called *Número 15* ('Number 15') by the main character. While at first glance the rich boy seems to help Antonio to rebel against the authoritative headmistress at school, if one has a closer look, it becomes obvious that *Número 15* only takes advantage of the protagonist.[48] What is interesting is that, while Lacacho's gang is described as rather harmless, *Número 15* is the most ruthless and misanthropic of the characters: He incites others to get involved in criminal acts just for his amusement and feels entertained by seeing women from the lower classes humiliated in porn movies (see *P*, chapter

[46] There is a significant scene at the end of the novel when Antonio refuses to execute the plan of his rich and manipulative schoolmate called *Número 15*. He tells Antonio to fire a gun at their school, whose refusal Lacacho comments as follows: "'What's the fuss? To fire some damn shots from a pistol?', intervenes Lacacho. In his eyes, there is a profound hate. 'Do you dare to do it?', the host [*Número 15*; J.B.] challenges him. 'I will empty a whole chamber of a pistol on whoever', he confirms determinedly. […] 'And what else would you dare to do?' asks the voice of the adult. '[…] Would you participate in an assault? Would you shoot at somebody?'. Lacacho approves decidedly." (*P*, 180; my translation) ["'¿Cuál es el biberón? Hacer unos malditos tiros con una pistola?', interviene Lacacho. En sus ojos hay un odio profundo. '¿Tú te atreves a hacerlo?', le reta el anfitrión [Número 15; J.B.]. […] 'Le vacío el peine de la pistola a quien sea', afirma con determinación. […] '¿Y qué más te atreverías a hacer?', inquiere la voz del adulto. '[…] ¿Participarías en un asalto? ¿Le darías un par de tiros a alguien?'. Lacacho aprueba con decisión."]

[47] "Tengo ganas de decirle [a Lacacho; J.B.] que los Fox Billy Games son nada […]. […] He descubierto que Lacacho es un cobarde." (*P*, 193)

[48] See in particular *P*, chapter 18.

18). Not an adult yet, *Número 15* already displays the attitude of those in power who know that they will not be punished for their deeds. It is through his character that Valdez criticizes the Dominican society and the hierarchical social structures that this essay has already studied in *Princesa de Capotillo*.

In the end, Antonio frees himself from the bad influences of Lacacho and *Número 15*, his life seems to go back to normal, and his future is described as filled with very ordinary adolescent activities: "On Monday, high school exams will start; I will be very busy preparing the subjects." (*P*, 190; my translation)[49] Yet, this successful act of emancipation from a future life of crime leaves a bitter aftertaste for the reader, who can read that soon Antonio's family will move to a big house, probably away from the *barrio* (see *P*, 190). However, whether there is also a future without crime for those less privileged, such as Lacacho, who cannot just leave a life of poverty, is left open in the novel.[50]

Yet, the coming-of-age process in *Palomos* is not only characterized by an experience of violence but also by an experience of marginalization. Interestingly, being marginalized here does not only mean living in the *barrio*, but also means being young. Both –the *barrio* and adolescence– are shown by Valdez as spheres excluded from an official discourse about Dominican culture.[51] From the perspective of the marginalized, the novel challenges the validity of a mainstream and elitist discourse on a collective Dominican identity (see Gewecke (1996, 205)) that excludes many realms of life in the country. In *Palomos*, representatives of state institutions, such as the headmistress of Antonio's school, represent such a discourse, which is characterized by both blind patriotism and a glorification of the past and the country's national heroes, which are not supposed to be questioned.[52] The novel shows, however, that this vision of Dominican identity has nothing to do with the reality of adolescents in the *barrio*. Antonio therefore refuses to blindly perpetuate such a discourse.[53]

By substituting the national anthem by a *reguetón*[54] song at a school meeting (see *P*, 60-62), the protagonist reminds the other characters –as well as the reader– of the fact that there

[49] "El lunes empiezan los exámenes del colegio; estaré muy ocupado preparando las materias." (*P*, 190)
[50] That Antonio is privileged can for instance be seen in his affective (though not unproblematic) relationship to his parents. While the other boys such as Chupi-Chupi can tell horrible episodes about how their parents have severely mistreated them, Antonio has to make up such a story about how his father allegedly tried to set him on fire after having poured gasoline all over him (see *P*, 76-77).
[51] See also Valerio-Holguín (2013, 202). For the passive role attributed to adolescents in Dominican society see Valdez's statement in Messina/Valdez (2011).
[52] See the censorship in Antonio's school whose library only includes books the headmistress has approved of (see *P*, 149).
[53] See in particular *P*, chapter 2, 5, 9 and 14.
[54] *Reguetón* –or *reggaeton*– is a current music style with lyrics in Spanish (see Rivera et al. (2009a, 3)) "[d]rawing on reggae, hip-hop, and a number of Spanish Caribbean styles and often accompanied by sexually explicit lyrics

are different symbolic systems describing different realities of Dominican culture in the present (see also Valdez (2013, 315)), that is realities that are not part of the official image of –as the author has his narrator Antonio say– "la *fucking* Patria" (*P*, 65-66). When the headmistress asks Antonio who he thinks he is to make fun of 'la patria', he says 'the National Hero', "El Prócer" (*P*, 63). By using these words, Valdez has his character express serious doubts about how far the glorified Dominican independence heroes still have any relevance for young people today. For in the novel, these former heroes seem more like relics of an outdated patriotism that glorifies a long gone past – a patriotism criticized in *Palomos*; one that tends to forget that the present in the *barrios* is not glorious at all but characterized by problems of social injustice not overcome since colonial times.[55] The character of the so-called 'charlista' also plays an important role in this context, as he puts this critique of an elitist understanding of Dominican culture into words when he is supposed to fill in for another speaker and give a patriotic speech to the students at Antonio's school. Instead, the 'charlista' argues that national historiography urgently needs to be challenged and that young Dominicans and popular forms of expression – such as video games, music et cetera– need to be included into this process of re-construction of Dominican identity (see *P*, 147).

Whereas an elitist understanding of Dominican culture does not provide space for youth culture or a reality of poverty and violence –as described for instance in some of the song lyrics quoted throughout the novel (see Valerio-Holguín (2013, 203))–, the novel's aim is to make these marginalized voices heard. It does so not only by telling their stories but also by appropriating their symbols: Valdez uses slang (e.g., 'palomo', 'tíguere', 'tecato', 'singar', 'cloro' et cetera) and includes numerous references to *reguetón* music as a socially stigmatized form of popular culture (see Messina/Valdez (2011); Valerio-Holguín (2013, 203-204)).[56] As Valerio-Holguín rightly states, "[i]n *Palomos*, the nation is imagined and constructed not only from the neighborhood […], but also through music, specifically Rap, reggaeton, and hip hop lyrics" (Valerio-Holguín (2013, 203)). By writing *Palomos* as if boys like Antonio have told the story, laced with slang and *reguetón* quotes, Valdez reminds Dominican society that these

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and a provocative dancing style know as *perreo* (doggy style)" (Rivera et al. (2009a, 1; original emphasis)). It surfaced in the late 1990s and is fairly popular in Latin America, the Caribbean and –more recently– the U.S. (see Rivera et al. (2009a, 1)). For more detailed information see e.g., the essays in Rivera et al. (2009b) and –concerning *reguetón* in the Dominican Republic and Dominican influence on this genre– in particular Pacini Hernández (2009).

[55] See also Antonio's lack of understanding for the enthusiasm of his teacher when they read a glorifying poem on the patriotism of the poet Pedro Henríquez Ureña (see *P*, 145-146).

[56] Hereby, Valdez continues a tradition in Dominican culture that introduces popular music into literature; on this topic and the importance of music for Dominican (popular) culture in general see e.g., Serrata (2012a); De Maeseneer (2006), Valerio-Holguín (2013, 202); respectively for Caribbean literature in general e.g., Meehan/Miller (2009, 359). Music in Valdez's novels is studied by Méndez (2012) and McGrath (2012). The author himself furthermore refers to *Palomos* as a "novela 'musical'" (Valdez (2013, 315)).

alternative forms of expression such as music, internet blogs et cetera do exist. But they do not only exist; they also are also worth of listening to, for they embrace a subversive potential (see Messina/Valdez (2011)) and carry central notions of what Dominican culture and identity mean nowadays.[57] Both popular culture and *Palomos* thus are spaces where aspects of reality are dealt with that are silenced by a reactive and elitist understanding of Dominican culture.[58]

5. Conclusion

My readings of *Princesa de Capotillo* and *Palomos* have shown that in both novels the coming-of-age process is narrated in the context of a harsh social criticism of present-day Dominican society. Coming-of-age is not described as an insouciant process in a poverty-stricken postcolonial society but as a traumatic confrontation with life in unprivileged areas. In the context of the protagonists' coming-of-age, the texts address pressing problems such as crime, corruption, international drug trafficking, and rampant youth violence. By focusing on the *barrio* as a marginalized urban area, Santos and Valdez thus bring up important topics such as social injustice and exclusion.

From the perspective of the adolescent, both authors furthermore challenge an elitist discourse on Dominican identity that tends to exclude peripheries of Dominican culture such as the *barrio* or youth culture in particular. By elaborating that there are other aspects of Dominican culture that need to be considered, too, if one wants to define what Dominicanness

[57] See also Messina/Valdez (2011). Moreover, the importance of traditional literary genres is challenged when Antonio, who in one episode reveals himself as the author of the text (see *P*, 129), dismisses Hermann Hesse's traditional bildungsroman *Demian: The Story of Emil Sinclair's Youth* [*Demian: Die Geschichte von Emil Sinclairs Jugend*] (published 1919 under a pseudonym) as boring and detached from his experiences and instead speaks about publishing his own text one day on an internet blog (see *P*, 128-129). Moreover, this passage also includes a rather ironic meta-reflection about the fact that it is actually Valdez himself who wrote the novel; it reads: "If I were to publish this story on my internet blog, I would not be preoccupied at all that someone doubted I had written it. What would I win if I refuted? Moreover, I would like that it wouldn't have been me who has lived and written these damn pages, but someone else, any third person, perhaps some old guy of fifty. This is the reason why it doesn't matter, mother, if in my absence you sit down at my computer to put commas, accents and rewrite sentences in what I've already written. Did I surprise you, mother? Prrraaa! But what is important is not who is writing, but what is being written." (*P*, 129; my translation, emphasis mine) ["Si yo publicara esta historia en mi blog de Internet no sintiera la menor preocupación porque [sic!] alguien dudara de que yo la hubiera escrito. Qué ganaría refutando? Además, ya quisiera que estas páginas endiabladas no las hubiese vivido o escrito yo, sino otro, un tercero que no me importe, a lo mejor algún viejo de cincuenta años. Por eso no importa cuando en mi ausencia, madre, te metes a la computadora a poner comas, acentos y rehacer oraciones en lo que he escrito. ¿Te sorprendí, madre? Prrraaa! Pero lo que importa no es quién escribe, sino lo que está escrito." (emphasis mine)]

[58] Valerio-Holguín confirms that Valdez's novels, "dealing with youth culture and written in a subversive and irreverent language, differ from mainstream novelistic practice in the Dominican Republic; not only in their topics, but also in the manner in which these are dealt with" (Valerio-Holguín (2013; 204)). When the author is asked in an interview why there are no more texts of this kind in the Dominican Republic, Valdez answers: "There is lots of snootiness in the creole universe of literature and intelligentsia. What is underclass gives us an itch. We always look upwards, never downwards, with saliva at the tips of our tongue" (Valdez in: Messina/Valdez (2011; my translation)) ["Porque hay mucha nariz parada en el universo literario e intelectual criollo. Nos da piquiña lo de abajo. Observamos siempre hacia arriba, nunca hacia abajo, con la saliva en la punta de la lengua"].

means in the 21st century, literature voices these aspects of Dominican reality and demands a more heterogeneous vision of collective Dominican identities.

Despite their critical perspective, however, it has to be pointed out that Santos and Valdez follow the traditional pattern of the genre in one aspect, for both novels privilege a male perspective (see Gutjahr (2007, 8)). They thus echo the discrimination of women in patriarchal societies, such as the Dominican Republic, by marginalizing female characters in the narration both by their inferior social status as objects of male desire –in their role as the subordinate part in a 'relationship' (e.g., Yojaira who is forced into marriage by Kiko, Tatú's sister who is murdered by her jealous husband) or as prostitutes (e.g., the adolescent Judy Ann who is abused and murdered by her 'sugar daddy')– and by their narrative status as silenced narrative voices. Considering texts that possibly challenge a male-centered perspective on coming of age in present Dominican society such as that in *Princesa de Capotillo* and *Palomos* would be a fundamental aim for future research on this topic.

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