67. Recovering from the void of exile in Julia Álvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*

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Abstract

The present article explores the articulation of the trauma of exile in Dominican-American writer Julia Álvarez's debut novel, *How The Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991). In reverse chronology the loosely autobiographical novel presents a Latino immigrant family from Santo Domingo in their tragicomic quest of Americanization, or assimilation. Revolving around the issue of the loss of cultural heritage and familial legacy during this arduous process of acculturation, the text becomes a recollection of the Garcias to save more than three decades' of memories from oblivion. According to James Holte, the ethnic immigrant *bildungs* narrative traditionally presents the transformation of the individual in four phases: (1) the childhood spent in the homeland, (2) the voyage taken from the mother country to the new world, (3) the experiences in the educational realm followed by those of the working life, (4) the final success of the individual in the adopted country and psychic contentment. However, Álvarez deviates from this scheme to present her reader a peculiar coming-of-age tale. Such literary effort is projected through the protagonist, Yolanda, in her quest to negotiate with her dual identity via the theme of language acquisition and the loss of her accent. Emphasizing the role of language as the driving force in the complex process of subject formation, the present article offers a close reading of the selected passages from the novel to arrive at the conclusion that Gloria Anzaldúa's notions of *mestizaje* (hybridity) and 'border-dweller' account for Yolanda's dual identity.

Keywords: Julia Álvarez, exile, trauma, border writing, language acquisition

Julia Álvarez'in *Garcia Kızları Aksanlarını Nasıl Kaybetti* romanında sürgünün yarattığı boşluktan çıkmak

Öz

Bu çalışma Dominik kökenli Amerikalı yazar Julia Álvarez'in ilk romanı olan *Garcia Kızları Aksanlarını Nasıl Kaybetti* (1991) eserinde işlenen sürgünün yarattığı travma olgusunun ifade edilişini incelemektedir. Otobiyografik öğeler içeren roman, kronolojik olarak geçmişe doğru akan alışılmadık anlatısıyla, Santo Domingo'lu göçmen bir Latino ailenin Amerika'daki trajikomik asimilasyon serüvenini aktarmaktadır. Bu zorlu uyumlanma sürecinde, kültürel mirasın ve aile hatıralarının yitirilmesi etrafında kurgulanmış roman, Garcia ailesi için otuz yıldan fazla bir zaman dilimini kapsayan anıların belleklerden silinmemesi adına yapılan yoğun bir hatırlama uğraşına dönüşür. James Holte etnik göçmen anlatılarında işlenen bireyin yaptığı dönüşüm yolculuğunu ardışık dört evreli bir süreç ile açıklar: 1) anavatanda geçen çocukluk dönemi, 2) anavatandan yeni dünyaya yapılan yolculuk, 3) eğitim sürecinde ve sonrasındaki iş hayatı deneyimleri, 4) bireyin yeni

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vatanındaki nihai başarısı ve tatmin duygusu. Ancak özellikle son evresinde, sunulan bu formülün dışına çıkan Álvarez, okuyucuya geleneksel olmayan bir büyüme öyküsü sunar. Böyle bir yazınsal çaba aktarılırken, ikili kimliği ile çetin bir uzlaşma uğraşı içinde olan başkişi Yolanda'nın dil edinimi veya aksanını yitirmesi süreci ele alınır. Birçok bileşenden oluşan özneleşme yolculuğu sırasında dilin üstlendiği rolün başlıca itici güç olduğu vurgusu yapılan bu makalede, romandan seçilen bölümlerin yakın okuması yapılacak, ve sonuç olarak Yolanda'nın ikili kimliği Gloria Anzaldúa'nın 'melezlik' ve 'sınır-sakini' kavramları çerçevesinde açıklanacaktır.

Keywords: Julia Álvarez, sürgün, travma, sınır edebiyatı, dil edinimi

Introduction

Arriving at the mainstream literary and academic scenes more belated than Mexican-American women (also known as *Chicanas*), US-Latina writers partake ideological and artistic concerns with their fellow Chicana trailblazers such as Sandra Cisneros, Gloria Anzaldúa and Helena Viramontes. Amongst prominent figures Judith Ortiz Cofer, Esmeralda Santiago and Rosario Ferré are from Puerto Rico; Cristina Garcia, Maria Irene Fornes, Achy Obejas and Himilce Novas are Cubans; and Julia Álvarez is the only US-Latina from the Dominican Republic. Yet unlike many Chicanas, whose cultural heritage and shared experiences have been influenced by the sociopolitical effects of the US-Mexican border, US-Latinas have focused on their own unique status of cultural liminality which initiates, in Homi Bhabha's words, "new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (1994, pp. 1-2).

In *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) Gloria Anzaldúa anchors her groundbreaking theory of hybridity in the actual U.S.-Mexican border region which she likens to an open wound where "the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture" (p.25). Yet, in the "Preface" to her book Anzaldúa does extend the mental frame of such 'physical' borderlands to encompass an open-ended variety of 'imaginative' realms where larger social forces define a series of oppressive registers within sociopolitical, psychological, cultural and economic spheres: "Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other" (n.pag.). Wandering through the symbolic borderland between their idiosyncratic Latino ethos and the dominant WASP cultural codes, US-Latina writers hence become nomadic border-dwellers in Anzaldúan sense. In other words, they denote a new breed of subjectivity-in-flux in their displacement to constantly redefine the concepts of home and belonging by transforming the symbolic borders into drawbridges to straddle between cultures. Consequently, the polarized world of these disoriented subjects presents a contradictory series of ideological concerns, emanating from "[t]he coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference" which at once merge, but also induce "a cultural collision" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p.100). The border-dweller thus has to work against the oppression of the binary mode of thinking which, Anzaldúa claims, is "the root of all violence" (p.59). Furthermore, it is also from this "new site of power," as Bhabha would describe it, the border dweller develops a set of unique skills and a new insight of hybridity, which Anzaldúa calls the *new mestiza consciousness*, to contest "the logical order of the discourse of authority" (Bhabha, 1994, p.120).

A concise list of the issues that US-Latina writers tackle comprises 1) the role of personal or familial history which is ruptured by the traumatic experience of exile owing to sociopolitical motives; 2) the nostalgia of a homeland which must be re-constructed through writing for a psychic harmony; 3) the arduous attempt of assimilation into a foreign culture with its residual deleterious effects and 4) the

sense of socialized ambivalence instigated by an oscillating position at the crisscross of ethnicity, nationality and language. As Ellen Mayock asserts: "Writing has become both the [US-Latina] author's existence in and travel to cultural locations" (1998, p.229). Thus the theoretical and literary output of these dislocated women inevitably attests to a particular threshold experience, resulting from an acute sense *unhomeliness* which Bhabha associates with "the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence" (1992, p.144). Having been forced to exile from the Dominican Republic at the age of ten, Julia Álvarez is the epitome of US-Latina writers marked by her own peculiar existence as a 'hyphenated' American which pervades her oeuvre. In her literary autobiography, *Something to Declare* (1998), the author provides a background to her native country where the political climate from 1930 to 1961 endangered the lives of well-stationed people. Moreover, Álvarez's father had been involved in an underground faction to topple the regime of Rafaél Leónidas Trujillo. When the takeover failed, though, her entire family faced the threat of persecution. With the aid of undisclosed American agents they escaped to New York where Álvarez's father gained his license to become a heart surgeon and start a new life from scratch (Álvarez, p.16).

In "Diasporas" (1994) James Clifford argues that assimilation for diasporic people is more perplexed than it is for other émigrés. "In assimilationist national ideologies," Clifford asserts, "immigrants may experience loss and nostalgia, but only *en route* to a whole new home in a new place" (p.307). By contrast, diasporic populations "whose sense of identity is centrally defined by collective histories of displacement and violent loss cannot be 'cured' by merging into a new national community" (p.307). Álvarez was no exception to Clifford's theorem. In an interview she reflects on the effects of their exile: "Our departure [...] was abrupt and we were not prepared as children [...] it was one of the most traumatic experiences of my life" (Kevane & Heredia, 2000, p.21). In another interview, Álvarez states that she overnight "lost almost everything: a homeland, a language, family connections, a way of understanding, a warmth" (Rosario-Sievert, 1997, p.32). For Álvarez the arduous process of assimilation into the signification system of the American paradigm pivots around the acquisition of the English language as she states: "I left the Dominican Republic and landed [...] in either the English language or the world of imagination" (Rosario-Sievert, 1997, p.32). The author's obsession with the ritual of writing, or telling stories, stems from her attempt to textually reanimate and negotiate the experience of exile which dominates her *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991). In "The Representative Voice" (1982) James Holte provides a four-stage formula with respect to the identity formation of the individual which has traditionally been employed by ethnic immigrant writing in America. These consecutive phases are 1) the childhood spent in the mother country; 2) the voyage taken from the native land to the new country; 3) the first experiences in the educational realm followed by those of the working life; and 4) the ultimate integration of the individual into the adopted country to become psychologically and spiritually content (pp.25-46). However, Julia Álvarez deviates from Holte's *bildungs* scheme particularly at the final stage to present a peculiar coming-of-age tale.

Caught between two languages and two cultures

As a loosely autobiographical novel of initiation, *Garcia Girls* spans thirty-three years from the familial saga of the Garcias who were abruptly forced to emigrate to America in 1959 to evade their liquidation for the father's role in a failed takeover against the despotic regime of the Dominican Republic. The novel relates the efforts of the family as they try to acclimate to a newly adopted life in New York. It is mostly through Yolanda Garcia as the locus of a series of fifteen self-contained yet interrelated chapters that the reader is presented with an episodic portrayal of the traumas that the Garcias endure as well as their blissful moments both in America and back in their homeland.

In "Reflections on Exile" (1984) Edward Said defines the phenomenon of exile as "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home" (p.159). Said further claims that the feeling of such void "can never be surmounted [...] what is true of all exile is not that home and love of home are lost, but that loss is inherent in the very existence of both" (p.159). In line with Said, *Garcia Girls* is preoccupied with the issue of identity crisis created by assimilation and alienation through lingual hybridity; and in return, the novel also presents the attempts of recreating personal and familial history through remembrance from a female perspective. Arranged in reverse chronological order *Garcia Girls* opens in 1989 as the grownup Yolanda returns to her home country to reunite with her extended family. The novel concludes also in the Dominican Republic three years prior to their exile in 1956. In this vein, Part 1 re-covers the era from 1989 back to 1972, providing a sincere portrayal of the four Garcia sisters as adults in America with their victories in their lives as well as their failures and various unresolved issues. Part 2 opens in 1970 and re-winds to the turbulent decade of 1960s, presenting the four girls now as adolescents as they undergo the difficult process of acculturation. As they prepare to leave their privileged social standing to forge a new life from scratch in New York, Part 3 opens in 1960 to re-navigate via the memories of the Garcia girls in Santo Domingo back to 1956. As the dates suggest the narrative scheme of the text is designed to mimic the mnemonic effort of the four girls in reconciling with their fainting memories. Indeed, in an interview Álvarez reveals that she "wanted the reader to be thinking like an immigrant, forever going back" (Lyons & Oliver, 1998, p.132). With its disoriented order the text seems to have a lack of spatiotemporal unity. Yet, these separate sections are intertwined as if Álvarez has weaved a tapestry, enlaced with patches of various themes, events, and characters to present a thematic unity which consists of the trauma of cultural dislocation. The story is also complemented with the post-traumatic anxieties through which the uprooted characters learn to cope with their bicultural selves in America. It goes without saying that throughout the acculturation process, the Garcia girls experience the hardships of growing up within a seemingly more 'liberal' context of American freedom. Thus their oscillation betwixt the two cultures creates a sense of ambivalence about their Latino past and their Anglo present *and* future.

In order to reflect the traumatic burdens and post-traumatic anxieties of exile in full measure, Álvarez formally experiments with narration and language. The unconventional techniques she utilizes include 1) the use of polyphonic narration; 2) a constant shift in viewpoints; and 3) code-switching through the use of bilingual locutions and idioms. While so doing, Álvarez's interplay of languages and her use of Spanish vocabulary acquaint the reader with Garcias' set of values and cultural heritage. After all, the prevalent themes of language acquisition (or the loss of one's accent, for that matter), and self-expression are crucial tropes in structuring the immigrant identity. It is a fact that Álvarez's interplay of languages manifests itself rather humorously in her manipulation of the gap between Spanish and English. For instance, Mrs. Garcia's malapropisms of the most common idioms in English amuses the reader: i.e., "When in Rome, do unto the Romans" (p.135), "It takes two to tangle" (p.135), "It's half of one and two dozen of another" (p.138), "No use trying to drink spilt milk" (p.140), "let bygones be forgotten" (p.149). Another cheerful lingual interplay occurs when the four girls make funny calques of the names of their relatives: i.e., Tio Concha and Tia Asunción become uncle *Conchshell* and aunt *Ascension*; Tio Mundo becomes uncle *World*; and cousin Paloma turns into *Pigeon* (p.111).

In *Dialogic Imagination* (1981) Mikhail Bakhtin defines such modes of hybridization as "the dialogized transmission of another's word" (p.355); and he goes on to define the term as "a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses" (p.358). Álvarez's use of hybridized linguistic forms such as Laura's malapropisms and the girls' literal translations reveal the author's intention to address mostly

to the English-speaking world as if she has undertaken the role of cultural ambassador. Moreover, these hybridizations yield a burlesque air to the text to de-authorize English as the dominant language by communicating a spectrum of tones ranging from reverent acceptance to ridicule. Indeed as the story unfolds Álvarez conforms to the anticipation that her novel is a humorous tale of acculturation. Yet, the author's use of humor often occur at the most baffling moments as the Garcias try to adapt to a new foreign life. Thus 'losing one's accent' of the title becomes a metaphor for the deleterious process of assimilation which profoundly affects the family in almost all episodes.

In "New Ways of Telling" (1996) Jacqueline Stefanko asserts that due to the unstable terrain that US-Latina writers inhibit, they reject a unitary narrator who is unable to mediate the story without the inclusion of other voices. "Polyphonic narration," as Stefanko defies it, "enables the reader and writer to participate in the breaking down of constructed, pure boundaries and to engage in complex heterogeneous dialogues" (p.51). Álvarez resorts to polyphonic narration by using frequent shifts in point-of-view which might perplex the reader. Therefore individual chapters are subtitled with the name(s) of the character(s) to inform on whom that particular section will focus as well as the identity of the narrator. An effective example as to the ploy of narrative voices occurs in "The Blood of the Conquistadores" in Part 3. Numerically split into two, the first segment of the chapter opens with the third-person view of Yolanda's father (Carlos) to bounce in a series of exhausting shifts from Carlos to Yolanda; from Yolanda to her mother; from the mother to two trivial people (Tatica and a CIA agent); from them to Carla and Sandra only to switch back to the mother and then to two officers in Trujillo's secret service; from them to Sandra; and consequently back to Carlos, who is eavesdropping from a closet he hides in. From a structural standpoint, this section provides the most pressing moment of the novel in that these rapid and *neurotic* shifts in point-of-view are thematically in perfect harmony with the volatile circumstances which hastily change in just a few hours prior to their narrow escape from the torture chambers of the dictator.

In the next segment of the chapter, the point-of-view fixes upon Sofia Garcia's first-person perspective. Switching the narration back to Sofia provides Álvarez with the adequate means to reflect the insidious impact of being uprooted from one's home, heritage and values. Due to the fact that Sofia is the youngest Garcia girl, she will grow up to be the most perplexed character with the least amount of memories of her island home. However, Sofia is also going to become the least confused Garcia in various other ways. For instance, she proves to be the most adaptive girl to acquire English, and the most maverick daughter against her father's pseudo *machismo* in America. The next voice to control the narrative belongs to Chucha, an old Haitian maid, whose story reveals that three decades ago she has also become an exile in the island to flee from the liquidation of the Haitian citizens by Trujillo's order. What is crucial about Chucha is that as the Garcias prepare to abandon the house, she brings a small wooden figurine into the girls' room with a cup of water above its head. As Chucha prays the water in the cup evaporates, and beads of water run down the face of the statue as if the talismanic figurine is shedding tears. It is at that uncanny moment the little girls also start to cry: "Chucha had finally released her own tears in each of us" (p.221), resolves Sofia, marking this voodoo farewell as her only memory about their island home. With that ritualistic figurine, which has been transported to the New World in the collective psyche of her enslaved African ancestors, Chucha gives a gnostic blessing to the four little would-be exiles. Thus the figurine becomes emblematic not only of the exile itself, but of a cross-continental remedial tool. As such, after the Garcias' rushed departure, Chucha is left all alone in the deserted compound to act as the intermediary through whom the Garcia girls will tap into the fading memories of their childhood. Chucha's final words unveil that all the stories in the text have been the sisters' fragmented memories which must be recollected for psychic survival: "They will be haunted by what they do and don't

remember. But they have spirit in them. They will invent what they need to survive" (p.223). Accordingly, Chucha allows the reader also to travel backwards in time via the girls' memories, which would, otherwise, have sunk into oblivion. Entrusting their souls, or essence, to this Haitian spiritual guide, the Garcias embark on an indefinite quest to integrate into a "nation of zombies" (p.221) as Chucha describes the United States.

The closing chapter of the novel, titled "The Drum," also presents major thematic concerns that might eventually disentangle the diegetic structure of the text. The chapter is narrated from the perspective of Yolanda, who is yet a toddler, and it is thematically constructed around Yolanda's toy drum and a kitten she rips from a mother cat. Although she has been cautioned that fetching the baby cat would be "a violation of its natural right to live" (p.285), the tomboy Yolanda harbors the kitten in her drum. When the kitten meows to its mother's call she panics, tossing the kitten away into the bushes. Evidently, the kitten is a metaphorical representation of the Garcia girls. More significantly, the reverberation of this terrifying incident stands as the prime incentive behind the stories which the grownup Yolanda is compelled to write in an effort to expel her lingering sense of remorse and to reconcile with her past. With the closing paragraph of the section, which serves as an epilogue to the novel, Yolanda emerges as the sole creator of the entire story:

> There are still times I wake up at three o'clock in the morning and peer into the darkness. At that hour and in that loneliness, I hear her, a black furred thing lurking in the corners of my life, her magenta mouth opening, wailing over some violation that lies at the center of my art. (p.290)

What is crucial about such resolution is that the formal structure of the text collapses at the moment of Yolanda's superimposition of the past over the present to create a *past-present* juncture. The reader is simultaneously positioned at the beginning and the ending of the story when Yolanda discloses herself as the mastermind of all the tales and other voices in the novel. Bhabha regards the prototypical borderline work of culture as an art which "renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living" (1994, p.7). In line with Bhabha's assertion, Álvarez gives the final say to Yolanda, letting her to directly address to the reader:

> Then we moved to the United States. The cat disappeared all together. I saw snow. I solved the riddle of an outdoors made mostly of concrete in New York. My grandmother grew so old she could not remember who she was. I went away to school. I read books. You understand *I am collapsing all time now* so that it fits what's left in the hollow of my story? (italics added, p.289)

It is a fact that amongst others Yolanda's voice dominates more than one-third of the text. However, this closing paragraph is a testimony that it has always been Yolanda as the arbiter who has controlled the voices of all characters. It is with this revelation Álvarez implodes the text "in a temporal no-man's-land [...] where an unhinged present shuttles between the future and the past" (Trigo, 2006, pp.139-40). As the novel structurally concludes the reader thematically cycles back to the first chapter to encounter adult Yolanda in a *past-present* juncture while she visits her home country, now, as an established Dominican-American writer. Having been engaged in a dynamical tension between pursuing a life of exile and yearning for repatriation, Yolanda is lost in-between two languages and two cultures. Due to the fact that Yolanda's alienation and ambivalence pivot around the theme of language acquisition or the loss of her accent, it is imperative at this juncture to return to her homecoming story, titled "Antojos," which is the first, yet chronologically the last chapter of the novel.

At the dawn of her thirty-ninth birthday in 1989, Yolanda is still seeking relief from her lifelong sense of void due to cultural displacement and lingual estrangement, which she believes is the reason why she and her sisters have led "turbulent lives—so many husbands, homes, jobs, wrong turns" (p.11). Thus Yolanda "is not so sure she'll be going back" (p.7), because "she has never felt at home in the States, never" (p.12). It is interesting to note that *Yoyo*, one of Yolanda's various nicknames, appears in this opening section where she is in agony over the loss of a nostalgic touch with her natal culture. In another context, 'yoyo' is a pendulum-like toy which can only perform the illusion of a movement with no real indication of motion, say, from point A to point B. Thus the author's introduction of such a nickname at the onset foreshadows the ambiguity which Yolanda will ultimately display towards the island of her birth and America. As such, she finds herself oscillating between the two different worlds she inhabits, since she is a product of both cultures and yet belongs to neither. This birthday scene further indicates that Yolanda has mastered English to the detriment of her linguistic competence in her mother tongue. During the reunion where Yoyo is scolded by her aunts when "she reverts to English" (p.7). A maid named Altagracia is summoned by the aunts to explain the meaning of the local word *antojo* to Yolanda who "is losing her Spanish" (p.8); their conversation is as follows:

> "Actually it's not an easy word to explain." Tia Carmen exchanges a quizzical look with the other aunts. How to put it? "An *antojo* is like a craving for something you have to eat."
>
> [...] An *antojo*, one of the older aunts continues, is a very old Spanish word "from before your United States was even thought of," she adds tartly. "In fact, in the countryside, you'll still find some *campesinos* using the word in the old sense. Altagracia!" she calls to one of the maids sitting at the other end of the patio.
>
> [...] The maid obeys. "In my *campo* we say a person has an *antojo* when they are taken over by *un santo* who wants something. (p.8)

Evidently, in the Dominican vernacular *antojo* has a double meaning; 1) to crave for something edible, and 2) the possession of someone by spirits. Thus, Yolanda's desire to return to her island symbolizes a spiritual craving for communion not only with her natal culture but also with an unsullied past prior to their exile. At the end of the discussion over the meaning of *antojo*[2], Yolanda decides to take a lonely trip in the rural side of the island to seek what her "*santo* wants after five years," which manifests itself in the form of "guavas" (p.9). Yolanda's search for such exotic fruits represents "a deep and private yearning for self-discovery, and [...] a journey to her inner self" (Yitah, 2007, p.234). The search for the guavas also prepares the setting for the ambiguous ending of the opening chapter. During her touristy drive in the mountainous landscape of the Dominican countryside Yolanda's craving for a nostalgic and pristine sense of home is undercut by two threshold instances. The first incident occurs when she gets a flat tire in the middle of nowhere. Overwhelmed by the fear of being kidnapped, raped or murdered Yolanda is paralyzed upon seeing two male farmers closing in on her. Considering herself to be an outsider, her "tongue feels as if it has been stuffed in her mouth [...] Then, as if the admission itself loosens her tongue, she begins to speak, English, a few words, of apology at first, then a great flood of explanation" (pp.19-20). In the end, the farmers assume that she is an "*Americana*" (p.20) and not a "*dominicana*" (p.22). Hence, it is a grave irony that Yolanda's instinctive strategy to switch back to English reveals her subliminal hope that her *Americana* self will fend for her. Such resolution is also sardonic that the whole purpose of her homecoming has initially been to rebuild a cordial touch with

[2] In "Julia Alvarez and the Autobiographical *Antojo*," Lisa Ortiz-Vilarelle provides another meaning of the word *antojo*, which denotes as "a distinguishing feature or birthmark" (2013, p.22). Ortiz-Vilarelle analyzes particularly the autobiographical characteristics of Álvarez's *Garcia Girls* and its sequel, titled *¡Yo!* (1997), where she claims are highlighted as the 'distinguishing features' of the author's overall style.

her home country. However, Yolanda is now placed "outside of mainstream Dominican identity [...] she is no longer an active part of the fabric of island life" (Vázquez, 2003, p.390).

The other indication to Yolanda's forlorn desire occurs as she twice encounters the image of a poster girl on a billboard for the Palmolive soap. At the beginning of her rustic journey, Yolanda describes the model as a "creamy, blond woman luxuriates under a refreshing shower, her head thrown back in seeming ecstasy, her mouth opened in a wordless cry" (pp.14-15). But after her anxious moments with the two male farmers, Yolanda reinterprets the poster girl now "as if she is calling someone over a great distance" (p.23). Thus the poster on the wall of a derelict store becomes emblematic of the close affiliation between the consumer products of the 'first world' and the rich elite families of the so-called 'third world'. Within this neo-colonial context Yolanda's craving for an unsullied home is entirely shattered. While her repatriation has initially been characterized by a search for an authentic identity, Yoyo's threshold position reveals that it is not possible to account for the complexity of her liminality from a simple *either/or* perspective. With such ambiguity to be resolved in the last chapter, the novel begins to tell backwards the tragicomic journey of acculturation of the Garcias for whom the patterns of acculturation differ according to two identity paradigms rather than ethnicity, viz. age and gender.

Marguerite Malakoff and Kenji Hakuta assert that bilingual children shift from linguistic code rather easily as if they do it unconsciously, while for the adults the process proves to be distressing (1991, p.146). Accordingly, the four Garcia girls are quick to destroy what remains of their island memories in order to substitute them with new cultural codes. Yet they will always find themselves in awkward positions where code-switching signals the dissolution of their natal language and culture. Throughout the text, language acquisition is often emphasized by such phrases as 'straightening out' or 'losing accents.' For instance, one only needs to listen to their father speak with "his broken English" (p.25) to find out that he is a foreigner. In terms of gender, Fatima Mujcinovic claims that in men's experience "exile becomes a site of disempowerment [...] It symbolizes emasculation" (2003, p.182). As such, in the last chapter of Part 2, Doctor Carlos Garcia's *machismo* is maimed when his male Anglo-American colleague presses to pay for the dinner. Later, Sandra says of his father, "[...] around American women he was not himself. He rounded his shoulders and was stiffly well-mannered, like a servant" (p.180). Additionally, in the section titled "Daughter of Invention," Carlos continues to have night terrors in his dreams that they are still on the island and dictator's the secret service is after him (p.139). In almost all chapters, though, when the female Garcias experience cultural displacement, they do develop inventive tactics of self-expression so as to conform to the mainstream with relative ease. For instance, Laura "had gotten used to the life here. She did not want to go back to the old country where ... she was only a wife and a mother [...] Better an independent nobody than a high-class house slave" (p.143).

Amongst the four sisters it is mostly through Yolanda that the reader gets the portrayal of the triumphs as well as the frustrations entangled during the *Americanization* process which revolves around the representative, creative and frequently the chaotic power of language. Lourdes Rojas states that "oral stories are no longer viable testimonies of [the exiled] women's experiences, for they can no longer endure to bear witness to a reality defined by the constant struggle to survive at the crossroads" (1989, p.l66). Accordingly, in lieu of oral forms to transmit her story, Yolanda commits to self-affirmation through the written word. It is after all the life-long dilemma she feels towards her acculturation which has prompted Yolanda to become a poet and a "*writer*-slash-*teacher*" (p.46). However, Yolanda's path to self-preservation would not always be smooth. In the briefest section of the novel, titled "Snow," the reader re-navigates back to 1962 —the year of the Cuban Missile crisis— to witness a petrifying childhood

memory. Dominated by anxiety and fear, the section vividly accounts for the cost of cultural displacement for the fourth grader Yolanda, acclimating to her newly adopted home in New York.

Calvin Hall, a prominent American psychologist whose work on dreams has led to many theoretical, methodological, and empirical contributions to the field, explicates that the three types of anxiety in the Freudian scheme are 1) reality anxiety, 2) neurotic anxiety, and 3) moral anxiety. The source of the first lies in the external world and its origin is the traumatic loss of the security of mother's womb with birth. Neurotic anxiety has its origins in the id which is a constant fear of being overwhelmed by an urge to think or act in a way that will bring harm to the self. In moral anxiety the source of the threat is the conscience of the superego system which is achieved by the identification of the individual initially with family members and then with society. The superego hence represents the social conscience which restrains the basic drives of the id (Hall, 1954, pp.61-69). The motive of Yolanda's fear principally lies in her sensation of alienation from/by the English language. Into little Yolanda's rudimentary vocabulary such direful words as "*nuclear bomb*, *radioactive fallout*, *bomb shelter*" (p.167) are now introduced. Yolanda further recalls:

> Russian missiles were being assembled, trained supposedly on New York City. President Kennedy, looking worried too, was on the television at home … At school, we had air raid drills: an ominous bell would go off and we'd file into the hall, fall to the floor, cover our heads with our coats, and imagine our hair falling out, the bones in our arms going soft. (pp.166-67)

Such anxieties obscure Yolanda's interaction with her environment, leading her to experience all three types of anxiety in the Freudian sense. Firstly, she has been forcefully taken from the security of her native home which has acted as a womb; next, the new world has baffled and belittled her; and lastly, she has not been able to find a proper role model in her family to build a sound superego system. As a result, since she has never seen snow on her tropical island, Yolanda confuses the first snowflakes of the year with the hazardous radioactive fallout. Her screams — "Bomb! Bomb!" (p.167)—wreak mayhem in her classroom. The fact that Yolanda is bewildered upon such a cozy weather phenomenon indicates the subtle impact of linguistic frenzy. She is left not only with a narrow choice of words but also with a narrow choice of emotions. The process of Americanization goes awry due to the language of fear, foreshadowing that Yolanda will never develop a sense of rootedness due to her cultural dislocation.

The chaotic and also the alimentative power of language extend to Yolanda's adolescence. In "The Rudy Elmenhurst Story" in Part 1, Yolanda recalls a custom made pencil box which is meant to be a Christmas gift for her. Although her mother orders the boutique company to engrave Yolanda's name on the pencils, the company on its own initiative has "substituted the Americanized […] *Jolinda*" (p.90). The inscription signals the dictates of the monolingual America from above unto those pushed to the margins of the establishment values. Yolanda goes on to shed light on successive eras from her formal education years. Initially, back in her prep years she links her first dating experiences with her new language: "English was then still a party favor for me—crack open the dictionary; find out if I'd just been insulted, praised, admonished, criticized" (p.87). Although this sentiment might lead to the anticipation that language acquisition will continue to be an amusing experience, Yolanda later recalls her tendency to whisper while talking to her college classmates, revealing a deep feeling of being "a greenhorn in this culture" (p.90). Despite her enthusiasm for the English class, she still feels "exposed […] around the seminar table […] profoundly out of place […] an intruder upon the sanctuary of English majors" (pp.88-89). Her collage love affair with a boy who has an equally exotic and foreign name (Rudolf Brodermann Elemenhurst, the third) further attests to the power of language in defining Yolanda's emotions and budding sexuality. When the couple is assigned to write a "fourteen-line treatise on the nature of love"

(p.92) Yolanda does not realize initially that the sonnet has been her "first pornographic poem" (p.93). It is due to her "immigrant's failing, literalism" (p.89), as she calls it, that has deterred Yolanda to grasp the connotations that Rudolf has deployed in their poem. Having finally detected the double meaning in the last line — "The coming of the spring upon the boughs" (p.93)—actually refers to ejaculation, naive Yolanda is shocked by such vulgarity to defile poetry, "a place I'd reserved for deep feelings and lofty sentiments!" (p.93). The association of language and sexual experience in love affairs reaches to a climax when she curses her "immigrant origins" (pp.94) upon missing "the jokes everyone was making on the last digits of the year, 1969" (pp.94-95); a concept which is alien to her both linguistically and experientially. In a college milieu during the decade of free love and hippies, Yolanda tries to find an answer to why she bars herself from sexual intercourse with the boy she is "so absorbed in" (p.92); for, as she reminisces, "By then I was a lapsed Catholic [...] so really, I didn't have a good excuse" (p.87). It is evident that Yolanda requires something more than drugs or vulgar invitations to be turned on. The chapter concludes with a negative prospect for Yolanda's future: "I saw what a cold, lonely life awaited me in this country" (99).

Evidenced by her collage affair, lingual impasses will continue to haunt Yolanda in her interaction with men, especially with her American spouse, John. The chapter titled "Joe" in Part 1 opens rather eerily in a mental institution, where Yolanda is fixated in a state of muteness. As she later shares the details of her breakdown with her therapist, the main motive this severe rupture clarifies that it has been the linguistic gap between John and herself which is foreshadowed in a prenuptial pillow talk scene. Here, the poetically sentient Yolanda wants to engage John in a rhyming game, during which she can efficiently pun on John's name while John cannot meet her poetic requirements. Since John is unable to traverse across the gap between English and Spanish, Yolanda becomes more frustrated with his inability to rhyme even her one-syllable nickname, *Yo* ("I" in Spanish). John's evasive rhyming—"And you're a little squirrel!" (p.71)—cracks a rift, causing Yolanda to run "like the mad, into the safety of her first tongue" (p.72) to retrieve the Spanish word *cielo*, meaning sky, to help John out:

> "Sky," she tried. Then, the saying of it made it right: "Sky, I want to be the sky."
>
> "That's not allowed." He turned her around to face him. His eyes, she noticed for the first time, were the same shade of blue as the sky. "Your own rules: you've got to rhyme with your name."
>
> "*I*"—she pointed to herself — "rhymes with the *sky!*"
>
> "But not with *Joe!*" John wagged his finger at her. His eyes softened with desire. He placed his mouth over her mouth and ohhed her lips open.
>
> "*Yo* rhymes with *cielo* in Spanish." Yo's words fell into the dark, mute cavern of John's mouth. *Cielo*, *cielo*, the word echoed. (p.72)

In this dialogue, the bivalence of Yolanda's preferred rhymes and her flight into Spanish, where John "could not catch her, even if he tried" (p.72), demonstrate her skill in crossing linguistic borders. Thus language *per se* becomes the primary rift her love cannot mend. On the far side of the gap Yolanda stands with her creative sensibility; on the other "the proudly monolingual John" (p.72) represents a detached, rational, and tedious aloofness. Strictly negating Yolanda's bicultural/bilingual self, John constantly commits, in Diane Neumaier's words, "cultural genocide" (1990, p.256) in his persistence to dub Yolanda with the *Americanized* versions of her name throughout the chapter such as Josephine, Joe or Joey. With a chauvinistic attitude John assigns himself a domineering role, taking considerable license to ultimately suggest Yolanda that she needs "a goddam shrink!" (p.73). Indeed Yolanda's sense of dual identity self is so immersed in her bilingualism that upon having acquired some of John's speech traits, she deeply resents: "My God! she thought. I'm starting to talk like him!" (p.73). In the end, Yolanda's

simple, short and cold farewell memo to John is now devoid of any creative endeavors or personal affection: "*Gone to my folks*" (p.79).

The ultimate rupture in the couple's relationship reaches a climax during a verbal fight, where Yolanda loses her entire verbal ability to communicate only to utter and hear nonsensical gibberish: "Babble babble babble" (p.78). This rather dreadful scene of mental breakdown poignantly indicates an acute rupture in Yolanda's touch with her surrounding, during which the poet Yolanda severs her vital bond with language. Now certain words such as "*Alive, love*" (p.82) literally cause "allergy" (p.82). Yet, the episode concludes with an optimistic note when Yolanda gradually rediscovers her dependency again on the alimentative power of words: "She gains faith as she says each word, and dares further: *"World … squirrel … rough … love … enough …* There is no end to what can be said about the world" (p.85). "The struggle with language," claims Joan Hoffman, "highlights the need to find the strength and self-assurance to forge an assimilated dual identity [...] that both melds and celebrates cultural and linguistic elements from the Old World and the New" (1998, p.22). Following her full recovery Yolanda is furiously irritated on being called by any of her nicknames; instead, she only "*wants to be called Yolanda now*" (p.61). On a deeper level ever since her childhood Yolanda has always suffered from being fragmented into multiple selves as evidenced by the myriad of her "bastardized" (p.47; p.81) names—Yo, Yoyo, Jolinda, Yosita, Joe, Joey, Josephine—all of which have to be reunited finally into one elemental self.

Conclusion:

With a textual return to her homeland via *Garcia Girls* Julia Álvarez manages to blur the borders between the self and the community, between the United States and Latin America, between the English language and Spanish, and between the trauma of rupture and mnemonic continuity. Having been engaged in a long dynamical tension, which emanates from a life of exile and an ongoing yearning for repatriation, the members of the Garcia family are portrayed as lost in-between two languages and two cultures all the way through. The novel is laden with instances focusing on the issue of lingual hybridity and its toilsome manifestation through the creative act of telling or writing stories as an essential means to express one's feelings about the world in order to survive. In an effort to fill the void in Yolanda's narrative, the novel eventually disentangles the reverse chronological order of the story when Yolanda ultimately superimposes her *past* memories over the *present* act of her narration by collapsing her story into a single temporal dimension in the current diegetic plane of the narrative.

That is how Álvarez resolves the novel when Yolanda's emergent voice ultimately discloses herself as the supreme architect of the entire text. On the other hand, the ambiguous stance which Yolanda displays toward the cultural paradigms of the country of her birth as well as her 'Americanized' self at the thematic ending of the text has to be reconciled once and for all in order to build a bridge between herself and her family and, by extension, her national origin. However, when the story concludes Yolanda does not achieve either the much expected wholeness or an authentic origin which she has been craving and exploring for. Instead what she has ended up with is only a receding memory of a home(land) and an un-fragmented self which she will never be able to attain. Thus, Álvarez suspends her protagonist in a symbolic borderlands position to synchronize with Anzaldúa's noted characterization of the border as a bleeding "*herida abierta*" (1987, 25), or an open wound inflicted between Latin America and the United States.

Yolanda's final destination is such an in-between space where the personal and the public spheres collide, the past and the present become one, and opposing cultures and different languages conflate.

Although this symbolic location is initially "created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p.25), which contributes to the feelings of void, indeterminacy, tension, and ambivalence, such liminal space also denotes a new intellectual territory, a new spiritual space, a new psychic and psychological terrain. It is the place where the 'exilic void' of the immigrant-self is transformed into a state of 'liminal presence' with Yolanda's personal and familial reunion through the creative act of writing. As Anzaldúa states, "The act of writing [...] is the quest for the self [...] To write is to confront one's demons" (1981, p.187; p. 190). Consequently Yolanda becomes a synecdoche for the border-dweller, who continually straddles the psychological, lingual, sexual and the spiritual borderlands, to create ultimately a new value system by way of uprooting dualistic mode of thinking. All the way through, it has been Yoyo's non-essentializing border-dweller status which has inflamed her desire to re-discover an originary moment of stability that has also been pulled back continually from her grasp.

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