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Loss, Language, and Latina Identity in Julia Alvarez's *How The García Girls Lost Their Accents*

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Abstract

Julia Alvarez's novels represent the disavowal of cultural heritage, unfulfilled cultural practices, assimilated ways of life, and profound struggle with psychological violence and adopt a critical perspective of Bhabha's concept of cultural dislocation. This article analyses the articulations and effects of cultural dislocation and trauma on the characters' construction of their female cultural identity in Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991). Using the terminologies offered by the dislocation theory, the study examines the elements and signs of linguistic assimilation and draws on the sense of loss through protracted rootlessness. The study examines how cultural dislocation and its consequences are arguably the most pronounced element in Alvarez's non-linear narrative. The present examination shows how culturally dislocated characters develop fragmented emotional distractions and insecure states of consciousness. The study concludes that the female characters negotiate their unstable or fractured identities and demonstrates how these characters imagine routes toward healing, resistance, and reconciliation with the self through thematic and formal properties.

Keywords: cultural dislocation, healing, identity, reconciliation, trauma.

Introduction

It should come as no surprise that the novel is permeated with the tension between location, language, and loss, as the work's title suggests. This tension is particularly evident in the sisters' struggles to navigate their fractured identities, which are inherently unstable. Through a non-linear narrative and the symbolic use of language, Julia Alvarez illustrates the enduring struggle of balancing dual identities and the inevitable sacrifices that come with assimilation in How the García Girls Lost Their Accents, revealing how the García sisters' migration to the United States leads to a profound cultural dislocation that fragments their sense of self. This paper explores the articulations and effects of cultural dislocation and trauma on the sisters' construction of their female cultural identity. This paper focuses primarily on Alvarez's Sandra, and Yolanda, those sisters whose sense of cultural dislocation and its consequences are arguably the most pronounced within the novel. Exploring the text's concern with the disavowal of cultural heritage, a return to cultural practices and ways of life, and the sisters' attempts to cope with extreme physical and psychological violence, this article seeks not only to map the continuities and disjunctions in how the women negotiate these unstable or fractured identities, but also to demonstrate how, through the use of thematic and formal properties, the novel imagines routes toward healing, resistance, and reconciliation with the self.

Questioning Hybridity and 'Relocation' of Cultural Dislocation

The roots of cultural dislocation are deeply embedded in the theories of identity and culture. As Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha are the pioneering figures in the theoretical zone of dispute, Alvarez's oeuvre appeared as significant representations of 'dislocation' considerably exploring how the tension between colonisation and post-colonisation and imposition and adoption of foreign cultural norms creates disrupted, puzzled or baffled identities. Even though fictional representations, her narratives "exclusively reproduce[s] arguments about race and gender identity negotiation and to bear the burden of representation that comes with such discussions" (Chandra, p.839). Although Western representations of the East or the Third World are genuinely infected with cultural marginalisation, the effects and impacts of the dislocation of the colonised are extensively foregrounded by Alvarez from a perspective within. In a way, the novelist recontextualizes the historical elements and rewrites history, providing a different perspective on history and invoking a political voice (Suárez, p. 117, p. 135-136).

Alvarez's novels adopt a critical perspective of Bhabha's concept of cultural dislocation. Bhabha's concept of "hybridity" accentuates the possibility of "negotiation" through emerging identities, whose mixture is impregnated with rich elements and brings about 'newness' as individuals negotiate between their native and dominant cultures. However, Alvarez's fiction considerably and extensively questions Bhabha's positive notion of dislocation and delves into the represented emotional and psychological aspects of cultural dislocation. Alvarez explicates the grinding oscillation between the familiar and the alien, the applicable and the adaptable, and an acute sense of loss and eternal confusion: being caught between "languages and cultures", "varying and conflicting cultural expectations", and "bewildering and alienating" (Barak, p.160). This in-betweenness critically appears in linguistic assimilation in this context, poses remarkable questions, and manifests the drawbacks of hybridity in various ways:

With its allusion to linguistic assimilation, How the García Girls Lost Their Accents is a deliberately misleading title: the past tense suggests that the narrative will offer an account of its young protagonists' successful integration within a foreign environment … Besides promoting an increased empathy with the migrant's state of mind, the regressive temporal arrangement means that readers know from the very beginning how the García girls have fared in their journey of assimilation" (Ciocia, p.131).

Cultural dislocation for immigrant characters lies beyond the realm of empathy and so needs to be represented in the arts, particularly in literature, to depict the implanted and protracted struggle to balance the side effects of profound resilience. Revisiting the issue of "home culture" that resides in and exists through the native tongue, dislocation glimpses at adaptation and loss at a time. That is not immune to a fragmented identity, which eventually ruins a sense of belonging embodied through language:

> Within the Garcia family, political immigrants from the Dominican Republic, the 1.5-generation daughters, experience this loss of language most fully. Although losing their accents is the ultimate goal of socialization into their new "home" country, Alvarez dismantles the loss of the mother tongue as a complicated process in the daughters' sense of belonging, especially since in part, this loss is emblematic of their increasing inability to communicate with their cultural heritage in the Dominican Republic. (Schultermandl, p.7)

Social pressures on the dislocated identity suffer from assimilation and bring a sense of betrayal towards the cultural background, accompanying a deeply-rooted identity crisis within the characters. The enduring influence of schools, intellectual productions, academia, and cultural structures reinforces cultural dislocation, which appears as one of the enduring themes in fiction and authors such as Alvarez, who produced significant narratives of immigrants and their emotional responses to the foreign zone of cultural dislocation from a critical perspective. The depiction of in-betweenness and its effects occur in the form of cultural anxiety, transgenerational depression, and a severe sense of rootlessness.

Linguistic assimilation as a coping mechanism and resilience, in this vein, best marks the zone of ambivalence affiliated with loss and adaptation at a time and refers to the undermined cultural realm, that is, language, which encompasses traditions, social norms, past and present at a time. Language in the culturally dislocated zone of ambivalence simultaneously corresponds to orientation and disorientation, which truly portrays the paradox of the culturally dislocated. Linguistic praxis becomes a cultural enclave for the immigrant characters, promising some sense of security and continuity; but at the same time, providing a space where reconnection with the roots can be made and distorted.

Loss, Language, and Identity in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*

Cultural dislocation through the context of immigration goes along with ambivalent realms of identity and brings about various aspects of truth. As Bess suggests, "Alvarez enables her

characters to tell many truths and to acknowledge gaps in the truth" (p.79). Adopting narration from different perspectives, the novel encapsulates the thirty-three years of the Garcia family's immigration experience from the Dominic Republic to America, yet in the reverse order, beginning with the period of 1989-1972 and ending in the 1960-1959 period. Julia Alvarez's novel is a rich tapestry of themes that weaves together the intricacies of identity, the struggles of language, and the inevitable sense of loss that comes with migration and cultural dislocation. Through the lives of García sisters, Alvarez dwells on the profound impacts of these experiences on Latina identity. The novel, structured non-linearly, temporally moves forward and backwards since their "stories about [themselves] will never be simple, linear narratives; they will always be complex spirals pulling in and twisting together the conflicts of their present lives in the U.S. and the frag-ments of their island pasts, whirling explanations of how they are caught entre Lucas and Juan Mejid" (Barack, p. 176). This non-linear narrativity parallels the fragmented yet profoundly intimate portrayal of the García family's journey from the Dominican Republic to the United States. While moving to another country, the immigrants, as Helen Atawube Yitah (2003) argues, suffer most during the immigration process when their identities transform. To be able to arrive at "the promised land" the immigrants need to go through "the unfamiliar road of reconciling multiple selves that arise out of the different cultural heritages of the native culture and the new one" (p. 235). Existing in-between Latina and North American cultures, the García sisters embark on a search for identity. Therefore, the sudden, violent rupture of the García sisters from familiar physical and cultural topographies exposes the immediate effects of dislocation, which are primarily echoed in the equally radical fracturing of Sandra and Yolanda's identities.

The novel can be read as a depiction of "the complexity of memory" since "migration, loss, and trauma are central themes" (Suárez, p. 117, p. 120; Lovelady, p.33). As William Luis (2000) suggests, the novel is "an attempt to understand memory, the past, and a time before the sisters lost their innocence and accents" (p. 840). The fragmented characters, on the one hand, benefit from social and economic privileges in the foreign zone of cultural dislocation and enjoy social status with good income and thus enrol them on the best institutions of education to lose their accents and speak English like native speakers. On the other hand, they are regarded as ordinary Hispanic immigrants in the USA where they are discriminated against due to their immigrant status. The novel therefore portrays the Latina identity as fluid and evolving, shaped by the experiences of immigration, cultural assimilation, and the pressures of living in a predominantly white society. The sisters frequently reject one culture in favor of the other in an attempt to define themselves but they soon realize that they only partially belong to both. This in-betweenness is a central aspect of their Latina identity, where they are constantly negotiating who they are and where they belong. Yolanda's struggles with her identity are particularly illustrative of this theme. Her return to the Dominican Republic as an adult is characterized by a feeling of cultural ambivalence. In the United States, she is seen as an outsider due to her ethnicity, in the Dominican Republic, on the other hand, she is considered to be Americanized and thus disconnected from her heritage.

Alvarez's novel begins with its temporal ending, Yolanda's prodigal return to the Dominican Republic, the country of her birth, after living more than two decades in the United States. While outwardly joyous, the scenes that follow are laced with a subtle discourse of cultural

dislocation, displacement, and fracturing. At the family gathering, the novel relates that "in halting Spanish, Yolanda reports on her sisters. When she reverts to English, she is scolded, '¡En español!" The more she practices, the sooner she'll be back into her native tongue, the aunts insist. Yes, and when she returns to the States, she'll find herself suddenly going blank over some word in English" (Alvarez, p. 7). The passage immediately positions language, or rather its lack, at the crux between Yolanda's Dominican and American identities, contrasting the aunt's characterization of Spanish as Yolanda's "native tongue" with the sense of physical impediment she feels in her "halting" attempts to speak it, and her refuge in switching back into English where she can express her(self) with ease. The loss of language is most evident in the character of Yolanda, who, in spite of her love for words and writing, finds herself increasingly cut off from Spanish. Her struggle to articulate herself in Spanish during a visit to the Dominican Republic highlights this disconnection. The language that once flowed naturally now feels foreign and challenging, which reflects her broader sense of alienation from her culture. This loss of language is not just about words but also about losing a part of her Latina identity.

In the novel, language serves as both a bridge and a barrier. For the García sisters, language is a significant aspect of their identity, and their relationship with it is complex and multifaceted. Spanish, their mother tongue, links them to their Dominican roots, whereas English symbolizes their newfound American identity. However, as they become more fluent in English, they start to struggle with Spanish, which represents their gradual alienation from their cultural heritage. The novel, as Ricardo Castells (2002) observes, is set in the Dominican Republic both at the start and the end. Yolanda is shown in the first chapter visiting her relatives in Santo Domingo, but her attire, mannerisms, and most importantly, her language, all indicate that she is no longer a native of her country. She could have kept enough cultural ties to her home country as a member of the 1.5 generation, but these ties have weakened over time. It is understandable why Yolanda's cousins greet her with an off-key version of "Here she comes, Miss America!" when they first meet her (p. 35). It would be easy to locate Yolanda's experience in this passage as one of overt Americanization or assimilation, a position that has been taken up by many critics of the novel. Yitah (2003) states that a great deal of criticism has drawn attention to Yolanda's search for identity based on the presumption that her actual aspiration is, as her cousins say in the first chapter, to be "Miss America". She contends, however, that such kinds of interpretations disregard the schisms the García girls, and their parents are exposed to when they confront life as immigrants in America. The García girls "represent the kind of discourse that Jacqueline Stefanko refers to as 'participation in colonizing gestures that attempt to occlude the border-crossings that are occurring'" (p. 236-7). This sense of schism and perpetual border-crossing is indicative in Yolanda's lament that, like the eponymous loss of her Spanish accent in America, any re-habituation to her "native tongue" in the Dominican Republic also necessarily comes at a cost, in this case "going blank over words in English" (p. 7). The quote counters Ellen C. Mayock's (1998) assertion that the García girls demonstrate an "unfolding ability to move with ease between the two realms […] an indication of their comfort of their own beings" (p. 227). In fact, the novel eschews the colonizing trope of the American Dream and its narrative of linear progress from immigration toward acclimatization and assimilation by positioning the adult Yolanda in an unstable linguistic and identarian position, as well as structuring the novel in a backwards trajectory. Rather than moving seamlessly between two cultures, Yolanda thus remains in a liminal

place between both, neither Dominican nor American, English nor Spanish; a no-space where the embracing of one self is hinged on the loss of another.

This tension is further encompassed by the thematic significance of the Antojo, to which Yolanda's aunts refer in the first chapter. Chiding Yolanda for her cultural and linguistic ignorance of the word, "a very Old Spanish word 'from before your United States was even thought of'" (p. 8), the family defines antojo as a craving for rich food, as well as the deeper spiritual craving when one is said to be "taken over by un santo who wants something" (p. 8). While Yolanda publicly expresses an antojo for guavas, she reveals a private craving to the reader for a sense of existential and cultural belonging, a stable mooring point: "[L]et this turn out of be my home, Yolanda wishes" (p. 11). Yitah (2003) emphasizes this connection, stating that "the craving (the antojo) for guavas that has seized her is the manifestation of a deeper and more private yearning […] a journey toward her inner self" (p. 234). Notably, however, it is this search for guavas that equally complicates Yolanda's yearning for self-identity, or rather, serves as the catalyst for exposing its fractured nature. Therefore, while Yolanda's return to the island is haunted by the internal struggle between her Dominican and American identity, it can be read as a crucial step in the journey toward reconciling her selfhood. Yolanda, as William Luis (2000) observes, had lost her memory of her native tongue; she could not communicate in Spanish and had to rely on English. The retroactive travels of Yolanda and her sisters symbolize a need to locate the lost original accent and language. Yolanda could not recall the definition of an antojito. The word "antojito" has two meanings in the Dominican language: it can refer to both an object of desire that you can't get enough of and the spiritual possession of a person's body. Yolanda is a representation of both the Spanish and the North American referents. She is as much or more North American than Dominican, as evidenced by her return to the island after a twenty-nine-year exile. Yolanda, however, is caught between two worlds; she is a part of neither one nor both. Her wish to visit the island again in 1989, the novel's most recent period, represents a spiritual quest for communion - not with Dominican culture, which is apparent in the novel's present - but with a legendary past connected to her early years (p. 843).

Driving toward the coast, the text relates that "[a]ll around her are the foothills, a dark enormous green, the palms below, rustling their branches, so they whisper like voices. Here and there a braid of smoke rises up from a hillside – a campensino and his family living out their solitary life. This is what she has been missing. Standing here in the quiet, she believes she has never felt at home in the States, never" (p. 12). While Yolanda herself characterizes the scene as one of 'authentic' self-affirmation, the passage is tinged with the very romantic idealism and voyeuristic gaze of the outsider or tourist, for whom the essence of the island lies in the 'untouched' beauty of its landscape. Echoing colonial travel writing, Yolanda conflates the campensino with the landscape, transforming him into a symbol of quiet simplicity amid the turbulence of the modern world. Utterly denying him subjectivity, Yolanda also reduces the reality of the campensino's social and economic hardship to the R/romantic retreat into 'solitary life'. The characterization betrays an ignorance that is both intimately related to her upbringing in the Dominican upper classes, in which choice, leisure, and lack of interaction with the lower classes pervaded daily life, but also her privileged position as an American citizen, dislocated from any significant social or cultural understanding of the island: "It is hard to believe the poverty the radio commentators keep talking about. There seems to be plenty here to eat" (p. 13).

The novel further reinforces Yolanda's dislocation from her "homeland" by juxtaposing this idyllic scene with one of an altogether different emotional tenor. Having gotten lost searching for the guavas and with night falling rapidly, Yolanda's descriptions of the landscape alter drastically. The rich, "enormous green" of the canopy becomes the skeletal "latticework of branches", and the "rustling" of "palms" that beautifully "whispered like voices" now "echo warnings of her old aunts: you will get lost, you will get kidnapped, you will get raped, you will get killed" (p. 17). Having initially ignored her aunts' gendered warnings that "[t]his is not the States […] a woman doesn't just travel alone in this country" (p. 9), Yolanda's abstracted, romantic musings on campensino life are also radically re-shaped when her car breaks down and she is discovered by two working-class Dominican men. Initially, the threat of rape looms at the periphery of the text, a phallic violence reinforced by the "machetes [that] hang from their belts" (p. 19). However, upon re-reading, Alvarez's writing carefully exposes the extent of Yolanda's own projection unto the scene: "[T]he two men exchange a look – it seems to Yolanda – of collusion", the "short man […] gives the impression of being quite large", the tall man's "good looks" which "anywhere else, Yolanda would find extremely attractive […] seem dangerous, a lure to catch her off guard" (p. 20). Alvarez contrasts these depictions with the campensino's actual dialogue: "Señorita are you alright?", "Is there some problem?", "Can we help you?", "Nuestro placer" (pp. 19-21). Yolanda has indeed "sized them up", rapidly misreading their intentions based on the signifiers of working-class poverty, their "ragged work clothes stained with patches of sweat" (19), but also crucially those of race. In fact, Yolanda's initial description of the men is immediately fixated on colour, one "short and dark, and the other slender and light-skinned" (p. 19), while she repeats the phrase "the darker one" several times throughout the exchange. Without trivializing or dismissing the threat of rape, Alvarez's inclusion of this scene seems to serve a supplementary, if not decidedly different purpose. Ibis Gomez-Vega (1991) echoes this belief, emphasizing that:

> The scene that takes place between the campesinos and Yolanda stresses the feeling of displacement with which the returning dominicana finds herself in the Dominican Republic. […] The ominous feeling presented by the scene is the result of Yolanda's new way of seeing the men in her old country. She is no longer a dominicana, capable of identifying her own people as ordinary people who are both good and bad […] The two men become sensual symbols of evil, men from whom the returning dominicana needs protection. (p. 93)

Despite her own doubly emphasized assertion that "she has never felt at home in The United States, never" (p.12) the novel takes pains to reveal her similar unease and sense of displacement within her 'homeland' as well. Here, Yolanda's romanticised campensino is drastically reconfigured upon her forced interaction with this social group, and yet Alvarez stresses that this second depiction of the men is equally problematic in its flattened stereotyping and vilification. The scene thus functions to expose Yolanda's utter dislocation from her "native" culture, its customs, and its people, not only in her depiction of them, but in the impunity, she exercises as a foreigner in trespassing social mores, "to do what she wants" and "let the mighty wave of tradition roll on through her life and break on some other female shore" (p. 9).

Notably, like the opening exchange of the novel, this scene is equally pervaded by a loss of language, an utter silence which mirrors Yolanda's fear of rape or kidnap: "[H]er tongue feels as if it has been stuffed in her mouth like a rag to keep her quiet" (pp. 19-20). It culminates specifically, however, in her inability to speak Spanish and a retreat once again into the caricatured identity of the white, American tourist. Puzzled by her silence, the campensino suggests "'Americana?" whereupon "she clasps her hands on her chest – she can feel her pounding heart – and nods. Then, as if the admission itself loosens her tongue, she begins to speak, English" (p. 20). The novel stresses that it is Yolanda's admission of being American which "loosens her tongue", an act of confessional self-identification with her host country in the wake of the trauma of dislocation. For Gomez-Vega (1991) it painfully recalls the "school girl who curses her immigrant origins [and] internalizes a self-hatred so intense that it renders her speechless, inarticulate in the face of the "Other". While this transformation into 'whiteness' does function as a kind of currency, "rendering the men docile" and subservient to her – they "look down at the ground" (p. 21) – it is a tactic equally predicated on loss. Not only must Yolanda renege any association with Dominican identity to exercise this power, in her strategic rejection of racial and cultural identity she also reifies the same racial power relations under which she suffered rejection, shame, and disempowerment as an immigrant within in the United States.

The relationship between language, culture, and identity are also at the very core of Yolanda's emotional breakdown in a later chapter, a collection of scenes which serve as an important foil with which to better understand and contextualize the previous one. In a poetic retelling of her failed marriage to American husband John, Yolanda experiences a radical splitting of her subjectivity, demonstrated through the vast catalogue of names she is given by others. The novel explains that "Yolanda was nicknamed Yo in Spanish, misunderstood as Joe in English, doubled and pronounced like the toy Yoyo" (p. 68); on keychains she is "Joey", on 'personalized' pencils "Yolinda", to her husband, "Josephine" and "Violet after shrinking violet" (pp. 74, 76). Written in a tone reminiscent of the biblical genesis story – "in the beginning, we were in love […] it was the beginning of time" (p. 70) – the act of naming takes on immense symbolic significance as an act of creation with the power to define and control Yolanda's identity. It is crucial then that her true name, "her pure, mouth filling, full-blooded name" (p. 81) is absent, replaced by English substitutes which erase the specificity of her cultural background and racial identity: her bloodline, and lifeblood. The non-existence and de-validation of her name, "what rhymes with Joe-lan-dah?" (p. 71) her husband remarks snidely, once against situates Yolanda in a no-space, outside of the ability to construct a stable identity within the linguistic constraints of English that pattern her relationship to John and American life. However, in direct opposition to the first chapter, Yolanda's response to this traumatic dislocation is a retreat into the refuge of Spanish, where she counters John's erasure of her identity and his attempts to de-validate her agential act of self-naming. In asserting that she can indeed identify with the sky, as "Yo rhymes with cielo in Spanish", she "was running, like mad, into the safety of her first tongue, where the proudly monolingual John could not catch her if he tried" (p. 72). Here the novel attempts to open a space, not only of resistance, but of possibility. Rather than a fracturing of the self, it represents the positive potential for the multiplication of selfhood and knowledges, in which several languages present more possibilities for self-expression. However, Yolanda's attempts at self-identification and multiplication are literally swallowed up, "[her] words fell into the dark, mute, cavern of

John's mouth" (p. 72); possibility denied by the perversely "proud" insularity of "monolingualism". The breakdown in language and identity which characterizes Yolanda's relationship culminates in her inability to understand her husband's declarations of love in English, disintegrating into a hollow "babble babble" (p. 78). Yolanda's ensuing psychological breakdown is also intimately linked to her relationship to the English language, she "talked too much, yakked all the time. She talked in her sleep, she talked when she ate […] she ranted" (p. 79), quoting and misquoting texts in English, as if in an attempt to "talk back", to counter the dislocation, silence, and negation of self she experiences as immigrant inundated and interpellated by an unfamiliar, dominant language. Words, as Joan M. Hoffman suggests, are essential to Yolanda's identity and are an essential part of both her history with John and her present in this institution, among a mix of memories, emotions, names, descriptions, rhymes, and word games. Nevertheless, her life and her language have become uncontrollable due to all of the yakking and talking. But in a curiously language-conscious way, she is reminded that we have to reframe our priorities on a regular basis. As Yolanda discovers the power of language in her life throughout this forced self-examination, words were a part of the issue and will be a part of the solution (p. 24).

While Alvarez's careful prose is written in impeccable English, and her sparse use of Spanish is generally translated immediately, she also plays with the possibility of language, indicative in the following passage: "Yo wrote a note […] I'm needing some space, some time until my head-slash-heart-slash-soul – No, no, no, she didn't want to divide herself anymore, three persons in one Yo" (p. 78). Playing off the double-meaning of Yo, as both Yolanda's name, and the Spanish word for 'I', Alvarez is able to communicate the splitting of Yolanda's subjectivity on both a thematic and linguistic level. Moreover, by refusing to translate this word game for a monolingual audience, she enacts a small resistance crucial to the scene by refusing to fragment Yolanda further, and permitting those who understand the word to enter into shared space of identification with the character's struggle. Alvarez also uses form to resist hegemonic assimilation into American culture by writing the story of the García sisters backward. Rather than explain the "how the Garcia girls lost their accents", this formal decision complicates the narrative of linear "progress", instead opening a rhizomatic map of experiences that inform and individualize the women's complex bicultural identities.

Language and racial identity are also crucially positioned at the center of Sandra's psychological breakdown. However, for Sandra, these issues become physically embodied through her severe anorexia, exacerbated by her inability to do anything other than read. In a childhood memory, the novel reveals that Sandra stands "looking at herself in the mirror, she was surprised to find a pretty girl looking back at her. It was a girl who could pass as American, with soft blue eyes and fair skin […] she was pretty" (p. 181). In this passage, beauty is not only intimately linked with the physical, racial markers of whiteness such as "blue eyes" and "fair skin" but also Sandra's ability to "pass", to escape the markers of 'otherness'. Alvarez emphasises that Sandra's act of identification with pretty "whiteness" is therefore implicitly an act of dis-identification, a reneging of racial and cultural identity: "being pretty, she would not have to go back to where she came from" (p. 182). Rather than symbolize the reflection of her true self, when Sandra "regards her image in the mirror [she] splits herself in two" (Mayock, p. 226), echoing the fragmentation Yolanda also undergoes. Therefore, while the novel seems to present the promise of beauty as a

universal identity, a signifier outside the linguistic – "pretty spoke both languages. Pretty belonged in this country to spite La Bruja" (Alvarez, p. 182) – it is in fact deeply embedded within the discourses of racism and internalized racism, echoed in Sandra's mother's bewildered statement, "but imagine, she wanted to be darker complected like her sisters" (p. 52). Sandra's sense of identity is closely linked to her experience of loss, especially in regard to her appearance and the expectations that her family and society have about her. Sandra's beauty and artistic ability make her the family's 'golden child' even in her early years. However, such praises turn out to be a burden, which exacerbates her psychological fragmentation. The pressure to keep up with this idealized image forces her to develop a distorted self-perception, which leads to a struggle with anorexia and other mental health issues as she gets older.

Sandra's extreme anorexia, fueled by excessive reading, is at once the elaboration of her obsessive control over her outward appearance, as well as a violent rejection of her body as marker of her selfhood. Celebrated for her beauty and whiteness, Sandra turns now toward solely intellectual pursuits, fueling her brain while starving the body in which she feels confined. However, in her belief that she is regressing into a monkey, Alvarez gestures once more towards racial discourses, especially the fear of bloodline pollution that circulates widely in the novel. In addition to the use of "monkey" as a racial slur against Carla (p. 153), the family's own obsession with their pure, conquistador/Spanish bloodline (p. 192), their one Swedish ancestor, and Sofi's angelic "pink and blonde" children (p. 59), Sandra's self-identity is revealed to be ultimately patterned on the denial of her Dominican heritage. Neither American in culture and language, nor Dominican in appearance, Sandra is unable to healthily express her multiple identities; rather she turns against her body, the outward signifier of the self. Sandra's inability to express the various conflicting markers of her identity thus leads to a radical withdrawal from her body. The novel suggests that as Sandra becomes increasingly integrated into the American culture, she loses not only her connection to her native tongue but also her voice - her ability to articulate her identity and struggles. Her loss of language serves as a metaphor for a broader identity crisis. As her mental health deteriorates, Sandra appears to retreat from both Spanish and English, in contrast to Yolanda, who actively struggles with her relationship to both languages. This retreat into silence, or the inability to effectively communicate, reflects her growing alienation from her family, her culture, and herself. Being stuck in a psychological state of uncertainty, Sandra is unable to fully embrace or reject either aspect of her identity.

In conclusion, Sandra like Yolanda is stuck between two cultures: those being Latina and North American ones. They, as a result, "exist in liminal spaces, constantly negotiating boundaries and borders" (Adams p. 3), which fractures the experience in their inability to assimilate into either culture and thus attempt to negotiate their fractured identities in the process of reconciliation with the self. As Joan M. Hoffman points out, the novel offers "a sprawling, backward spiraling journey into memory and self-discovery" for Garcia girls who possess dual languages, cultures and memories which they need to negotiate in their journey from the Old to the New World (p. 21). Thus, for Alvarez, literature serves as a tool for resistance as well as a way to process the cultural displacement that her characters go through. Alvarez is able to envision or elaborate strategies of resistance and healing that are suggested, unrealized, or beyond the confines of her novel by utilizing a variety of postmodern techniques like non-linearity, multilingualism, magic realism,

genre switching, and multiple perspectives. How the García Girls Lost Their Accents captures the complex and multifaceted process of cultural displacement and identity development experienced by the García family, particularly as seen through the perspectives of the sisters. In the novel, Julia Alvarez explores loss, and it is through this exploration that she unearths the significant emotional and psychological impacts of immigration and assimilation in terms of loss of language, cultural heritage, and identity. The non-linear structure of the novel highlights the fragmented nature of the sisters' identities, as they struggle with the duality of belonging to both Dominican and American cultures yet feeling fully part of neither. By intertwining the themes of loss, language, and Latina identity, Alvarez offers a poignant commentary on the immigrant experience, highlighting the complexities of navigating a hyphenated existence. The García sisters' journey is a testament to the resilience required to maintain a sense of self amidst the pressures of cultural integration, making the novel a compelling exploration of identity in a world that demands constant adaptation and negotiation.

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