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Character Representation in How the García Girls Lost Their Accents, In the Time of the Butterflies, and ¡Yo! by Julia Álvarez

by

Renée Marie Rasmussen

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APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE:

Maarten van Delden, Associate Professor, Chair Hispanic Studies

Beatriz González-Stephan, Lee Hage Jamail Chair of Latin American Studies Hispanic Studies

James A. Castañeda, Professor Hispanic Studies

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ABSTRACT

Character Representation in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *¡Yo!* by Julia Álvarez

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In her first and third novels *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and *¡Yo!*, Julia Álvarez writes about the Dominican-American experience through the lives of an immigrant family. Her personal understanding of the context results in a complex and believable set of hybrid characterizations. In her second novel, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, there is a purely Dominican context. In translating this history of the Mirabal sisters, Álvarez is unable to avoid the influence of her Dominican-American experience. Therefore, these characterizations are less believable, stereotypical and not reasonably justified given their context. Unconvincing and sudden moments of conversion are a further consequence of Álvarez's failure to correctly reflect Dominican culture in her translation of the story.
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Introduction

What happens when authors and poets are forced to leave their native lands for religious, political or economic reasons? Questions of immigration, migration and post-national states create a new situation. The diasporic masses have created a new level of complexity and heterogeneity. Immigrants and migrants live outside of their native territory, but retain parts of their home culture and possibly their native tongue. Julia Álvarez is one of many writers trying to define and legitimize this hybrid space. She offers her first arguments towards legitimacy of the hybrid space in her first novel, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. In this work and in her third novel, *¡Yo!*, Álvarez writes about the Dominican-American experience through the lives of the García family. The conversion of autobiographical moments augmented by a personal understanding of the context into novelistic scenes and characters results in a complex and believable set of characterizations. In Álvarez's second novel, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, she offers a different context – a purely Dominican and historical one. In translating the story of the main characters, the Mirabal girls, she uses the inevitable lens of her Dominican-American experience. Proof of her worldview affecting the characterizations abounds, as there are several unexpected similarities between the characterizations, reactions and events across the three novels – despite the contextual differences in both temporal and spatial terms. Although they did not participate in the migration process that helped shape both the Álvarez family and the García family, the Mirabals still exhibit many Americanized traits. These characterizations are less believable and not reasonably
justified given their Dominican experience. Rather, they are based largely on the unconvincing and abrupt conversions towards rebellion, a result of Álvarez's failure to correctly reflect Dominican culture in her translation of the story.

In *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and *¡Yo!*, we see the four García sisters exploring matters belonging to the private sphere, such as sexuality, art, coming of age, language, family, romantic relationships, and most importantly, duality and cultural displacement. Together, these define the identities of the main characters as examples of hybrid Dominican-Americans. The characterizations for the García girls draw heavily on their immigrant experience, the resulting duality, and the resulting struggles with language, culture and expectations. Each of the sisters has particular interests or talents that help redefine her identity within the framework of newly found American independence. The girls employ strategies such as storytelling, the manipulation of language, and psychological analysis.

In *¡Yo!*, Álvarez explores similar themes from a different optic. Álvarez presents visions of Yolanda García's character that include both hybridity and duality seen from the varied perspectives of people in her life, most of whom are Dominican or American, but not Dominican-American. Through descriptions, opinions and stereotypes, from the people that come into contact with Yolanda, Álvarez achieves a more complete view of the U.S./Dominican divide.

In the novel *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Álvarez again introduces a family with four daughters, the Mirabals. However, the characterizations are much less believable and more stereotypical than those for the Garcías. Each Mirabal sister fits a certain type: religious, pragmatic, rebellious and innocent/romantic. Within these types, each sister has
a sudden moment of conversion, where her traditional values give way to revolutionary resistance. In each instance, Álvarez’s portrayal of conversion does not accurately reflect the expected Dominican reaction of her characters. Each conversion is too sudden and simple for the sister involved, and fails to elicit the expected responses from surrounding Dominican characters. This weakness in the construction of the Mirabal sisters reveals Álvarez’s inability to capture an era of the Dominican Republic she was never able to fully experience firsthand.

The independence and rebellious attitudes that the Mirabal sisters display are unconvincing and out of context because the reactions to their defiance by other characters do not show a fundamental struggle between traditional and revolutionary view points. One should compare this to the García girls, who struggle with their reservations about authority and patriarchal, traditional values. Whether or not they show their rebellious sides, a conflict is clear. When the García girls follow old rules or traditions, their American friends, boyfriends and husbands criticize them. However, when they fail to follow customs or traditional Dominican ideals, they instead receive criticism from their relatives and countrymen, especially their father. The way in which the Mirabals break away from tradition to become central figures in the clandestine resistance movement against Trujillo does not resonate. In their more traditional, purely Dominican context, one expects that their non-revolutionary family and friends would have objected more stridently to their rejection of the Trujillo regime and their revolutionary actions. Their characterizations, therefore, appear too modern and too American. Had their journeys from traditional, religious girls to independent revolutionaries shown more complexity and more societal resistance from the non-
converts, their characterizations would have blended more naturally with the temporal and spatial context of the 1940’s–1960’s Dominican Republic. As the Mirabals are depicted, Julia Álvarez’s Dominican-American viewpoint and position as an outsider to the Dominican experience affect the characterization and translation of the Mirabals from Dominican history to fiction.
Julia Álvarez – Mapping a New Country

In order to analyze her works within a larger literary framework, it is important to look to Álvarez’s literary inspirations and where she feels this hybrid space is located. In a collection of autobiographical essays entitled *Something to Declare* (1999), she argues “although I am from a tropical island, I am also a Vermont writer.”1 “What finally bridged these two worlds for me was writing.”2 Thus, we see that Álvarez inhabits the hyphen in Dominican-American in her writing. She does not want to be defined as either Dominican or American exclusively, nor forced to define her self only as a Latina. Instead, Álvarez has made a conscious decision to “shy away from simplistic choices that will leave out an important part of who she is or what her work is about.”3

Further clarifying her position, Álvarez responds to criticism, which Aída Cartagena Portalatín, a prolific poet, fiction writer and essayist from the Dominican Republic, aimed at her at a meeting of the Caribbean Studies Association in Santo Domingo. A co-keynote speaker at the conference, Portalatín chided Álvarez for writing in English, for being on the other side of the polemic about national literature - for choosing to write in English. She reproached Álvarez as follows, “Eso parece mentira que una dominicana se ponga a escribir en inglés. Vuelve a tu país, vuelve a tu idioma. Tú eres dominicana.”4 This attack suggests that Portalatín felt that a “real” Dominican writer would write in Spanish. However, Álvarez consciously chooses to place herself on

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1 Álvarez, *Something to Declare*, “A Vermont Writer from the Dominican Republic”, p. 195
2 Álvarez, *Something to Declare*, “So Much Depends”, p. 167
3 Álvarez, *Something to Declare*, “So Much Depends”, p. 169 – Italics indicate grammatical change (mine)
4 Álvarez, *Something to Declare*, “Doña Aída, with Your Permission”, p. 171
the opposite side of this debate. She is not exclusively a Dominican writer. She is also not exclusively an American writer. She is a Dominican-American writer. “That’s not just a term. I’m mapping a country that’s not on the map, and that’s why I’m trying to put it down on paper. It’s a world formed of contradictions, clashes, comminglings – the gringa and the Dominican, and it is precisely that tension and richness that interests me.”

Álvarez understands that she does not live on the island, she does not speak the island’s Dominican Spanish, and that if she did,

in fact, I would tell a different story and write poems with a different rhythm... if daily what I heard was Ay instead of Oh, if instead of that limited palette of colors in Vermont, gray softening into green, what I saw were colors so bright I’d have to look twice at things to believe they were real.

Julia Álvarez’s literary productivity is, as Silvio Torres-Saillant suggests, an important and visible part of the Dominican American literary diaspora. However, she is not purely Dominican. Her literary background is diverse and

not restricted to a single cultural viewpoint. Álvarez is a remarkably well-read person. Furthermore, all her readings have influenced her. Therefore when one attempts to trace her literary lineage, it spans across cultures, nationalities, and languages.

For example, in *Something to Declare*, Álvarez admits that she has “taken lessons from Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman and Toni Morrison and William Carlos Williams, whose Mami was Puerto Rican” And she has read and mentioned Pablo Neruda, César Vallejo, Julia de Burgos, Ana Lydia Vega, Áida Cartagena Portalatín, Rimbaud, Chaucer,

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5 Álvarez, p.822
6 Álvarez, *Something to Declare*, “Doña Aída, with Your Permission”, p. 172
7 Torres-Saillant, p. 251
8 Sirias, p. 6
9 Álvarez, *Something to Declare*, “Doña Aída, with Your Permission”, p. 172
Bharati Mukherjee, Marjorie Agosin and Maxine Hong Kingston among her influences. She gives special credit to “Maxine Hong Kingston’s Woman Warrior for showing her that a writer coming from outside of the mainstream can still write about the American experience. Woman Warrior allowed Julia to believe that there was a place in US Literature for her unique outlook on life.”

Part of this unique outlook revolves around the unique bicultural situation of most immigrants, including Álvarez herself. She speaks Spanish but has “not studied (it) deeply enough to craft…. Just the subjunctive would throw me off. I know the tender mouth of English, just how to work the reins.” Since the majority of her schooling took place in English, she is most comfortable when writing in English, and yet still has a connection to and a communicative ability in Spanish. Even if Álvarez chose to write in English simply because she could “ride its wild horses” she still is a hybrid figure between two cultures. Writing in English is one of her most important links to the Americanization process. “So Doña Aída, I’m a mixed breed, as are many of us USA Latino/a writers. With our finger-snapping, gum-chewing English, sometimes slipping in una palabrita o frase español. With our roots reaching down deep to the Latin American continent and the Caribbean where our parents or abuelitos or we ourselves came from.” In fostering the growth and confidence of the Latino community in the United States through their writings, hybrid authors, such as Álvarez, need to treat this unique cultural identity carefully. For Álvarez, this bicultural in-between identity is a sense of loss and nostalgia for what was left behind coupled with the eager embrace of newfound freedoms. Álvarez has fostered an acceptance of her writings by being remarkably open

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10 Sirias, p. 6
11 Álvarez, Something to Declare, “Doña Aída, with Your Permission”, p. 172
12 Álvarez, Something to Declare, “Doña Aída, with Your Permission”, p. 173-174
and forthcoming with reasons and rationales for her literary choices. She chooses to write in English, but while retaining a deep connection to her pan-American, gringa-Dominicana consciousness. After all, Álvarez concludes, “We’re a mobile world; borders are melting; nationalities are on the move, often for devastating reasons. A multicultural perspective is more and more the way to understand the world.”

The cultural and political defining of America’s identity will necessitate an inclusion of the Latino. As a rapidly growing demographic and cultural sector of the United States, their language and cultures need to be legitimized. Part of this legitimization process is the inclusion of authors of the immigrant diaspora within the US literary discipline. “At present excluding Dominicans from the literary history of US Latinos seems hardly defensible given the visibility enjoyed for over a decade now by Julia Álvarez...”

This struggle for Hispanics to accept their language and create their identity is echoed by Ed Morales in his book, *Living in Spanglish: The Search for Latino American Identity in America*, and by Juan Flores and George Yudice in their article, “Living Borders/Buscando America: Languages of Latino Self-formation”. Morales maintains that,

> Latino culture, particularly our Spanglish American variation, has never been about choosing affiliation with a particular race – it is a space where multiple levels of identification are possible. It may be what Michel Foucault calls a heterotopic space – ‘a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which all the other real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneous represented,

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13 Álvarez, *Something to Declare*, “Doña Aída, with Your Permission”, p. 173
14 According to the US Census, in 2000, 12.5 % of the United States’ population was Hispanic or Latino. This was an increase from 9.09% in 1990. In addition, 17.9% of the population five years old and over spoke a language other than English at home. This is an increase from 13.8% of the population in 1990. Moreover, in some counties in Florida, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California, over 60% of the population spoke a language other than English at home.
15 Torres-Saillant, p. 251
contested and inverted.' It is a Spanglish space.\textsuperscript{16}

Morales underscores the difficulty imposed on the Latinos trying to locate or create an identity while living in the "in-between" of the Spanglish territory. At the same time, he reaffirms Gloria Anzaldúa’s claim that dominant powers have bundled Latinos together into one homogeneous group, bound by a common language. Racial affiliations are not central to creating this new Hispanic identity; linguistic bonds, however, are central.

Yudice and Flores also agree that language has an important role in the conceptualization of America and American identities. "Language has been accurately characterized as an automatic signaling system, second only to race in identifying targets for possible privilege or discrimination."\textsuperscript{17} Latinos are discriminated against because of their language. Whether they speak Spanish, Spanglish or English, they internalize the idea that they speak the language poorly. This negatively impacts their self-formation of a Hispanic American identity.

Flores and Yudice maintain that while Latino identity is related to linguistic identity, it is not in the strict one-to-one relationship that Anzaldúa envisions.

This is not to say that Latino identity is reduced to its linguistic dimensions. Rather, in the current sociopolitical structure of the United States, such matters rooted in the "private sphere", like language (for Latinos and other minorities), sexuality, body, and family definition (for women and gays and lesbians), etc., become the semiotic material around which identity is deployed in the "public sphere."\textsuperscript{18}

Flores and Yudice contend that language is the centerpiece around which Latinos’ public identity is formed, but that there are also other components. It is easier to speak about

\textsuperscript{16} Morales, p. 17
\textsuperscript{17} Flores & Yudice, p. 61
\textsuperscript{18} Flores & Yudice, p. 61
language instead of other identifying characteristics, such as race, country of origin, or migration experiences. It is easier to use language as the central meaning around which to interpret the Hispanic identity, although it is by no means the only facet.
The García Girls– Hybrid Identities and American Independence

*How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) is Julia Álvarez’s first novel. She describes the story as being an account of four sisters immigrating to the US with their parents. On Álvarez’s own website she continues to summarize the plot as follows,

Suddenly, they are swept up in the freewheeling American culture of the 60s (then, the 70s and 80s) with its dizzying choices and challenges. Somehow, they have to try to straddle this life with their Island/Latino culture as represented by Mami and Papi. What is lost, what is gained when a family leaves an old world to come to a new?\(^{19}\)

Along these lines, we see a family caught between their old world and their new world. They grapple with decisions on how to blend their patriarchal, traditional values with their more independent and rebellious American surroundings. Regardless of the choices that they make, there is a struggle. When they choose to retain elements of their Dominican culture, their American friends are critical and perplexed. Likewise, when they choose to discard a Dominican value and replace it with an American one, disapproval from family members is nearly unavoidable. The sisters and their parents each have a unique way of handling this question of how to create a new identity using the fabric of their two worlds. An exploration of the characterizations of the García girls reveals four believably complex Dominican-American women who are challenged throughout their coming to terms with the impossibility of return to the Dominican Republic and the resultant linguistic and cultural hybridity.

In the title of the novel, the phrase “Lost Their Accents” refers to the immigration to the United States, which causes the sisters to “Americanize” and to lose some of their Dominican-ness in the process. By using a linguistically-charged term such as “Accents,” to describe the difficulties of immigration, Álvarez is lending credence to the ideas of Anzaldúa, Yudice and Flores that Latino identity is related to linguistic identity.

“Although the title specifically refers to the “loss” of a Spanish accent, it is symbolic of the larger cultural losses suffered by immigrants as they struggle to survive in the United States. The loss of homeland, relatives, family, house, food, music, clothing – in essence, the loss of a way of life – can rarely, if ever, be reclaimed or replaced.”

Thus, this title focuses the reader on a key component in the entire novel: language.

Sin lugar a dudas, la lengua es un elemento crucial y central en la percepción de la identidad del individuo.... El idioma (es) uno de los signos de otredad más obvios en la nueva cultura, se convierte en un instrumento inesperado de anclaje y supervivencia.

Through the challenges and difficulties of immigration and a resulting hybrid existence, we watch the García de la Torre family in fifteen intertwined stories, cope with their loss of privileged status, being perceived as the “Other,” struggling with English, and searching for their identities all the while.

The structure of the novel is as important as the content. Each set of five stories spirals backwards in time; first from the adult lives of the four girls in 1989-1972, then the decade of their immigration and adolescence from 1970-1960 and finally their childhoods in the Dominican Republic from 1960-1956. This reverse travel through time in the narrative of the novel, calls to mind the short story Viaje a la semilla by Alejo

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20 Kevane, p. 17
21 Henao, p. 177
Carpentier, a Cuban novelist, essay writer, and musicologist. William Luis also noted this similarity when he writes, "Even though How the García Girls Lost Their Accents is written in English and appears to have more in common with North American than Hispanic literature, the novel's structure recalls that of Alejo Carpentier's Viaje a la semilla." Translating the title "Viaje a la semilla" into English, we are left with two possibilities one literal and one more connotative, "Travel/Journey to the seed" or "Travel/Journey back to the source." It seems that the protagonist embraces both of these possibilities. In Carpentier's short story, Marcial, the protagonist travels back in time, from his own death, back to his childhood, infancy, and culminating in a return to his mother's womb. As the title's dual translation attests, Marcial was searching for a link to his past, a connection to his origins, both literal and cultural. In the same way, in How the García Girls Lost Their Accents, Yolanda makes a journey, both literal and figurative back to the Dominican Republic to find a link to her past, a way to make her origins connect with her present. She visits her homeland, the land of her literal birth, with a sincere hope, that she will discover that she truly spiritually belongs there on the island. In one of the book's earliest scenes, Yolanda is about to make a wish on the candles on her welcome cake.

As the singing drawsto a close, the cousins urge her to make a wish. She leans forward and shuts her eyes. There is so much she wants, it is hard to single out one wish. There have been too many stops on the road of the last twenty-nine years since her family left this island behind. She and her sisters have led such turbulent lives—so many husbands, homes, jobs, wrong turns among them. But look at her cousins, women with households and authority in their voices. Let this turn out to be my home, Yolanda wishes.23

22 Luis, p. 840
23 Álvarez, How the García Girls Lost Their Accents, p. 11
Hoping that the Dominican Republic will serve as her home, spiritually, literally and otherwise, Yolanda begins her journey from the present back into the Dominican Republic/United States mix of her adolescence, teen years, and childhood. Ultimately, she discovers that the Dominican Republic cannot be her home and she chooses language to be her new, stable homeland.

Given the novel’s structure, as we might expect, seven of the fifteen stories focus on Yolanda, or at least on events viewed from her perspective. The perspectives used in creating the characters and the storyline are compelling. Sometimes, the stories are narrated in first person singular, such as in the final chapter, *The Drum*, where Yolanda recounts, “There are still times I wake up at three o’clock in the morning and peer into the darkness.” Many of Yolanda’s stories are told in first person singular, as well as childhood recollections of each of the sisters. Other times the stories are narrated in first person plural perspective which serves to characterize the collective identity and the collective struggle to live in a hybrid, Spanglish space. An example of this “we” voice occurs in *A Regular Revolution*, where all four sisters recount events from their teenage years. For example, “…we had more than adjusted. And of course, as soon as we had, Mami and Papi got all worried they were going to lose their girls to America.” and “It was a regular revolution: constant skirmishes. Until the time we took open aim and won, and our summers – if not our lives – became our own.” Other chapters still are narrated more with a third person omniscient perspective, such as the chapter *The Blood of the Conquistadores* which tells the story of the entire García de la Torre family.

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24 Álvarez, *García Girls*, p. 290
26 Álvarez, *García Girls*, p. 111
immediately before they had to immigrate to the United States due to political pressure and lack of safety. For example, “So which of you girls live here?,” the tall one asks. Carla raises her hand as if she were at school. Sandi also raises her hand like a copycat and tells Yoyo and Fifi to raise their hands too.”

These alternating viewpoints allow us an opportunity to better understand each of the characters that has their first person singular perspective highlighted. “In employing this narrative structure, Álvarez embraces what many contemporary Latina writers have acknowledged; there is no one official Latino history or diaspora experience. All of the characters in the García family experience their exile in a different manner.”

The many voices show us a multiplicity of experiences, opinions, thoughts and feelings. They speak to the idea that one cannot define bicultural, bilingual or in-between experiences narrowly. A range of experiences is natural, expected and necessary, and through these distinct, yet related, viewpoints, the reader is able to expand his/her understanding of the trials associated with being a family in exile, voluntary or otherwise.

The novel could also be considered a journey for each of the sisters from a privileged existence in the Dominican Republic through the decades of forging their own Dominican-American identities, a process that is not easily accomplished by any of the García girls. Another important element to consider is that the journey is uni-directional. Despite summers back in the Dominican Republic and scattered trips to visit family members on the island, their immigration and related Americanization process is permanent. Many episodes throughout the work “serve to underscore the impossibility of return for all four sisters, as they precariously straddle two disparate cultures in the

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27 Álvarez, *García Girls*, p. 199
28 Kevane, p. 17
undefined borderland that is the immigrant’s legacy.”29 Even though the girls feel
nostalgia and at times attempt to return to the Dominican Republic, they discover each
time that they cannot return permanently despite their wishes.

Perhaps Yolanda, the third of the three sisters feels this duality most strongly. She
experiences a feeling of otherness when she moves to the United States, a feeling that
persists long into her permanent change of address. However, all of the sisters, and their
parents felt as if they did not belong or fit into the United States in the way they had
hoped they would. Part of their feeling of being outsiders in the United States was foisted
upon them by “authentic Americans” such as a neighbor of the family’s in New York. La
Bruja, as the girls not-so-fondly refer to her, often showcases her ignorance and bigotry
when dealing with the García family. La Bruja constantly complains to their building’s
superintendent about the Garcías, highlighting things that make them different, and
therefore in her opinion, bad neighbors. She does not understand and does not appreciate
their language, food, or their culture. For example,

The old woman in the apartment below, who had
a helmet of beauty parlor blue hair, had been complaining
to the super since the day the family moved in a few
months ago. The García’s should be evicted. Their food
smelled. They spoke too loudly and not in English.30

One of the things that made complaints such as this particularly difficult to cope with was
that they were not being inconsiderate neighbors; they were just living their lives. Mrs.
García internalizes this part of the complaint when she defends herself and her children to
the building’s Puerto Rican superintendent, Alfredo. “If I keep them any more in line,”
their mother began – and then Sandi heard her mother’s voice breaking. “We have to

29 Castellucci Cox, p. 144-145
30 Álvarez, García Girls, p. 170
walk around. We have to breathe.”31 What more could they reasonably do to keep their neighbors happy? Nothing. The lack of sympathy was also surprising to the family. They could not understand how behavior such as this was an unfortunately commonplace occurrence, especially for immigrant or hybrid families in the United States. But, this was a “truth” that Alfredo was already familiar with. “It is a difficult place, this country, before you get used to it. You have to not take things personal.”32 That a fellow immigrant’s advice on how to handle such a bigoted neighbor was to get used to it and to not take the vitriolic comments personally was disheartening. No one would want to, or should have to get used to “institutionalized otherness.”

Carla, the eldest daughter, experiences several moments of extreme confusion and otherness upon her arrival to the United States. In order to avoid being moved down into the same grade as her younger sister, Sandi, because the seventh grade is full and she needs extra help with her English skills, Carla lobbies to be allowed to attend a different Catholic school. She avoids the humiliation of being demoted to her sister’s level, but she encounters even more painful incidents of humiliation and confusion at her new school. A gang of boys chases after her in the hallways and playground of the school peppering the air with mean and intolerant names and phrases, such as “Go back to where you came from, you dirty spic! ... “No titties!” ... “Monkey legs!” ... “Stop!” Carla cried. “Please stop.” “Eh-stop!” they mimicked her. “Plees eh-stop.”33 Having customary preteen puberty based insults coupled with ethnic slurs increases Carla’s feelings of self-doubt and of placelessness in the world. Even after the boys stop tormenting her because her mother accompanies her on the way to school, she still feels violated, bothered by the fact

31 Álvarez, García Girls, p. 170
32 Álvarez, García Girls, p. 170
33 Álvarez, García Girls, p. 153
that their taunts had some truth to them; perhaps she did not belong in the United States. The boys “…now ignored her, their sharp, clear eyes roaming the classroom for another victim, someone too fat, too ugly, too poor, too different. Carla had faded into the walls.”34 It appears that the boys were searching for liminal figures to harass – any students that were different from the expected norm, whether in size, looks, wealth, language, ethnicity or country of origin. In the harassed, such as Carla, their games only served to reinforce and highlight those differences. “She recognizes that the boys attacked her because she is different, and their attacks serve to emphasize just how different and foreign she is in her new country. To the boys, she is the “other,” the person so different that he/she does not merit respect or understanding.”35 This otherness is something Carla internalized, experiencing self-doubt, isolation and confusion, and ultimately resulting in her becoming a psychologist and analyzing her sisters and their family.

Making excuses for her lack of belonging, Carla would blame her command of English when someone would ask her for directions or the time. “…I don’t speak very much English,” she would say in a small voice by way of apology. She hated having to admit this since such an admission proved, no doubt, the boy gang’s point that she didn’t belong here.”36 Therefore, when she encounters an adult male who exposed himself to her on her walk home from school, her self-doubt and insecurities grow. The incident seemed another linguistic frustration at first; “The man spoke up.

Whereyagoin?” he asked, running all his words together the way the Americans always did. Carla was, as usual, not quite sure if she had heard right.

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34 Álvarez, Garcia Girls, p. 164
35 Gómez-Vega, p. 89
36 Álvarez, Garcia Girls, p. 156
‘Excuse me?’ she asked politely, leaning into the car to hear the man’s whispy voice better. Something caught her eye. She looked down and stared, aghast.\textsuperscript{37}

However, in the end, it was closer to emotional violation. Her linguistic uncertainty leads Carla to feel hesitant and unsure even though she was the victim of this sexual harassment and deserved to tell the police her story. But, English betrayed her; Carla did not have the words to say what she wanted to say. “They had come to this country before she had reached puberty in Spanish, so a lot of the key words she would have been picking up in the last year, she had missed. Now, she was learning English in a Catholic classroom, where no nun had ever mentioned the words she was needing.”\textsuperscript{38} In specific and in general, Carla was overwhelmed with feelings of helplessness, displacement, being in-between two places but belonging to neither. There was a correspondence between her feelings on her emerging sexuality/teenage years as well as her doubts and struggles regarding Americanization. In both processes there was no return. One cannot go back to childhood after puberty, and Carla cannot really go back to the Dominican Republic after immigrating to the United States. The revolutions on the island kept the political situation unsure enough to rule out the García family’s permanent return, and thus Carla was kept on the path towards “losing her accent”. Thus, she is incapable of returning and yet cannot find a way to feel comfortable in her new situation. The “irreconcilable cultural and gender messages.. confound their identities… Carla retreats into psychological study, cloaking her confusing dualities with protective, clinical names.”\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{37} Álvarez, García Girls, p. 157
\textsuperscript{38} Álvarez, García Girls, p. 163
\textsuperscript{39} Castellucci Cox, p. 145
Sandra, the second daughter, also experiences a cultural divide upon immigrating but in a different way than her sisters. Blessed or cursed to be the only García girl who inherits blue eyes and light skin from her Swedish ancestors, she does not look like the rest of her family, so her anxiety and desire to fit in present themselves differently in her character formation. Still a young girl when her family moves to New York, with typical childlike and incisive observations, Sandi notices the awkward dynamic between the two cultures, the paternal American culture and the desperate Dominican culture... [Her observations] realistically portray the growing awareness of the family that they no longer hold the privileged position of an affluent Dominican family. Rather, they have entered a new category of immigrants.40

The insight that Julia Álvarez offers into the character of Sandi occurs almost entirely in the section entitled Floor Show. Here readers find out about the García family’s outing to a restaurant named El Flamenco where they meet up with an American couple, Dr. and Mrs. Fanning, who are associates of Mr. Garcia. Sandi offers commentary, comparing American and Dominican society, as well as comparing the actions and reactions of her family within Dominican culture and within their struggle to find a place within American culture.

The García family was experiencing multiple crises of identity. When the family veered from their new stateside patterns and called for a cab instead of walking to the restaurant,

Sandi realized with a pang one of the things that had been missing in the last few months. It was precisely this kind of special attention paid to them. At home there had always been a chauffeur opening a car door or a gardener tipping his hat and a half dozen maids and nursemaids acting as if the health and well-being of the de la Torre-García children

40 Kevane, p. 20
were of wide public concern. Of course, it was usually the
de la Torre boys, not the girls, who came in for special
consideration. Still, as bearers of the de la Torre name, the
girls were still made to feel important.\textsuperscript{41}

The lack of a privileged status in the United States frustrated, confused and sometimes
embarrassed the girls. "La base de la identidad de los Garcías [sic] en la República
Dominicana había sido la posición privilegiada con la que siempre gozaron."\textsuperscript{42} The
children were used to living in a family compound, separated from the lower class
Dominicans, being waited on by several maids, having several family employees show
them deference, even having their name alone be recognized as a sign of status. In their
eyes, it was more palatable to be the daughter, niece or cousin, of a well-respected, well-to-do Dominican man, than to be an independent and gender-equal American woman
without the automatic privileges.

In the United States, things were not the same for the family. Even though they
immigrated to the United States as political exiles, and were therefore financially better
off than many immigrants, it was still a difficult transition. The sisters collectively
protested,

You can believe we sisters wailed and paled, whining
to go home. We didn't feel we had the best the United
States had to offer. We had only second-hand stuff, rental
houses in one red-neck Catholic neighborhood after
another, clothes at Round Robin ... cooped up in those
little suburban houses, the rules were as strict as for Island
girls, but there was no island to make up the difference.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{41} Álvarez, \textit{García Girls}, p. 174
\textsuperscript{42} Henao, p. 177
\textsuperscript{43} Álvarez, \textit{García Girls}, p. 107
This mourning of the privilege lost shows the lack of maturity of the girls. They did not fully comprehend the trade-off and decisions that their parents, Carlos and Laura, had been forced to make. They did not seem to acknowledge that their parents, especially their father as a doctor, must have felt humiliated and defeated for having to reestablish his professional reputation and credentials in a new country while not being able to provide the same kind of lifestyle or economic security to which they were all accustomed. Ultimately, Carlos decided that there were too many revolutions on the island of the Dominican Republic. He would travel back for trial visits, to see if the political climate was more receptive to his family’s return, and he consistently determined that it was not. Revolutions meant instability, risk and possibly even danger because of his participation in the movement against Trujillo’s military dictatorship.

Papi went down for a trial visit, and a revolution broke out, a minor one, but still. He came back to New York reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, and saying “I am given up, Mami! It is no hope for the island. I will become un dominican-york.” So, Papi raised his right hand and swore to defend the Constitution of the United States, and we were here to stay.44

Carlos determined that the positive from avoiding revolution and instability was worth the negative of a permanent life on the hyphen, in the in-between. The girls’ complaints indicated that they were not yet reconciled to the idea of their immigration as a permanent change. They held on to the element of thinking they would eventually go “home”, that their move and the resulting uncomfortable duality were just temporary. They were more comfortable with the idea that the family was in the United States “for now” or “until it is safe to return” even though, it had been decided that the United States

44 Álvarez, Garcia Girls, p. 107
was to serve as their new and permanent home. Many years later, Carlos echoed these same feelings.

In the cramped living room, surrounded by the dark oversized furniture from the old house they grew up in, they were children again in a smaller, simpler version of the world. There was the prodigal scene at the door. The father opened his arms wide and welcomed them in his broken English: “This is your home, and never you should forget it.”

To him, home was not a fixed, permanent place. It was neither the Dominican Republic nor New York, nor the apartment in which the girls were raised. Home was also not language, as Yolanda decided it was. To Carlos, home was close family. Even though he and Laura had moved to a smaller apartment now that they were entering their seventies, wherever he and his wife were was to be a welcoming home for the girls.

Sandi felt stifled by her parents' desires to fit into American culture upon immigrating and she was criticized for expressing her own needs and desires. However, the one evening with the Fannings at El Flamenco moved her towards disillusionment with American virtue as well as pride in her Hispanic heritage. She was able to relate to some portion of the Spanish identity and claim it as her own. So, even though her duality persisted, she was able to make several adjustments towards “losing her accent.” Sandi saw the choice of eating at a Spanish restaurant as a source of pride from the onset. The Fannings had seen the restaurant touted in a magazine and thought it would be the perfect setting for this welcome party to celebrate the García's arrival. “They could have eaten anywhere, Sandi thought, and yet they had come to a Spanish place for dinner. La Bruja

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45 Álvarez, García Girls, p. 25
was wrong. Spanish was something other people paid to be around." That an American couple would happily regard a Spanish restaurant appropriate for such a party and that they would consider it luxurious and exotic was a welcome discovery for Sandi. Up to that point, she had only seen and heard the negative American viewpoints regarding Hispanics such as those from the boys at Carla’s school and their mean downstairs neighbor.

Before the Fannings arrived at the restaurant, Carlos and Laura set up ground rules for the meal. The girls should not order off the menu. They would split meals in two that their parents chose for them. They should not order extras; nothing that would make the Fannings’ expense for the evening larger than necessary. These rules had two purposes; to help assuage the shame and discomfort Carlos had from not being able to afford this kind of a luxurious night for his family at this early stage of their acclimation to the United States, and to try to fit in as American colleagues without any embarrassing situations or unexpected surprises throughout the evening. However, the girls did not understand the reasoning behind the rules. They felt glad to be released from the fear of possibly having to eat shrimp which they did not like, but did not understand the power relationship between their father and Dr. Fanning, nor did they understand why keeping the bill low was a priority. Carlos did not want to lose any face to Dr. Fanning. Even after his wife, Laura, reminds him that he treated the Fannings like royalty on their visit to the Dominican Republic, Carlos does not want to accept any more “charity” than absolutely necessary in the situation.

That evening, after flirting with the busboy thereby drinking numerous glasses of water, Sandi learned a lot about the difference between being an American and a

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46 Álvarez, García Girls, p. 179
Dominican-American. Carlos, Sandi and Mrs. Fanning left the table to visit the restrooms. "Papi looked down at his feet. Sandi had noticed before that around American women he was not himself. He rounded his shoulders and was stiffly well-mannered, like a servant." Her father lost his swagger and behaved in a way that let his insecurities shine through. Carlos was caught in a position of subservience. If it were not for the aid of Dr. Fanning in helping him secure his medical fellowship in New York, the Garcías would still be in the Dominican Republic, in danger of being discovered as agitators against Trujillo's dictatorship. Therefore, the Fannings had a certain power over him. He owed them his family's safety and was beholden to them for this night of celebration as well since he could not yet afford it. As a recent political immigrant, Carlos understood that he and his family were best served by maintaining a positive relationship. He must show gratitude for what help he has received, without requesting too much further help. However, the stiffness in Mr. García's well-mannered behavior hints that although he may understand that it is necessary, he is not happy conceding his pride. Mrs. Fanning leaned towards Carlos and kissed him, which shocked both him and Sandi alike. However, his ultimate reaction to the incident finalized the characterization of his position.

That woman is drunk, he whispered, crouching down beside Sandi. "But I can't insult her, imagine, our one chance in this country." He spoke in the serious, hushed voice he had used with Mami those last few days in the old country. "Por favor, Sandi, you're a big girl now. Not a word of this to your mother. You know how she is these days."

\[47\] Álvarez, García Girls, p. 180
\[48\] Álvarez, García Girls, p. 182
Simply observing this scene and being asked by her father not to disclose it, Sandi felt powerful. "She felt beyond either of her parents: she could tell that they were small people compared to these Fannings." This new viewpoint and feeling of control made Sandi look at and define herself differently from that moment on. "After looking at herself in the mirror in the restaurant bathroom, Sandi decided she was good looking. "Being pretty, she would not have to go back to where she came from. Pretty spoke both languages. Pretty belonged in this country to spite La Bruja." Although she too was a new immigrant, neither the Fannings nor her parents had control over her. Minutes before she was a polite and beholden Dominican immigrant, but a realization hit her; with her fair skin and soft blue eyes, she could pass for an American.

In spite of this new connection with her American side, Sandi was not rejecting her Dominican, Hispanic heritage. Instead, she redefined that side of her as well while she watched the flamenco dancer's floor show at the restaurant.

The dancers clapped and strutted, tossing their heads boldly like horses. Sandi’s heart soared. This wild and beautiful dance came from people like her, Spanish people, who danced the strange, disquieting joy that sometimes made Sandi squeeze Fifi’s hand hard until she cried or bullfight Yoyo with a towel until both girls fell in a giggling, exhausted heap on the floor that made La Bruja beat her ceiling with a broom handle.

By celebrating and eating at a Spanish restaurant where boldly attractive flamenco dancers artfully performed, Sandi’s opinion on the value of Hispanic heritage soared along with her heart. She saw that being Hispanic in America could be beautiful, bold, expensive and well respected. Sandi appropriates some of this Spanish identity as her

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49 Álvarez, *García Girls*, p. 184
50 Álvarez, *García Girls*, p. 182
51 Álvarez, *García Girls*, p. 185
own as a way of coping with duality while still esteeming her Dominican roots. Sandi feels a kinship with this artistic, dance-inspired pride, but she continues to bear the burden of living the hybrid life of an immigrant. Sandi’s thoughts about herself continue to split and show more duality as she matures.

One of the more intriguing things about the characterization of Sandi is how all of these elements of identity formation crash around her in her adult life. She becomes anorexic, is hospitalized and shortly afterwards, her parents admit her to a mental hospital. Part of this character disintegration is rooted in her inability to express herself artistically or personally in her life, which leads to an eventual mental breakdown, characterized by her belief that she is moving backward through evolution and is losing her humanity. The loss of her humanity is both literal and figurative. She lost her artistic muse as well as her sense of an identity, but she also began to behave animalistically as her adult breakdown occurred. All she wanted to do was read “all the great books of man” feverishly because she felt she needed to remember what it was like to be human before she is no longer human.

Her artistic inability of expression was rooted in an experience as a child when she disobeyed the art teacher, Doña Charito, and was snooping around the teacher’s home during their lesson. She saw Don José, the artist’s husband, naked and chained in a workshed sculpting wooden statues, in particular one of the Virgin. The shock at her spying-related discovery caused Sandi to fall off the tree stump she was standing on, resulting in a broken arm. After the arm healed, her art was “lost.” This loss while pertaining to her artistic talent on the one hand, was also part of a loss of innocence. She saw a naked man and was scared by his physicality in maneuvering his chisel on the statues. And months
later, the incident also gave her “one moment of triumph” along with a big question of identity. At the Christmas Eve midnight mass unveiling of Don José’s statues,

the congregation surged forward to touch the infant Jesus for good luck in the coming year. But, my eyes were drawn to the face of the Virgin beside him. I put my hand to my own face to make sure it was mine. My cheek had the curve of her cheek; my brows arched like her brows; my eyes had been as wide as hers, staring up at the little man as he knocked on the window of his work shed.\(^{52}\)

Don José’s portrayal of the wooden face of the island’s virgin as Sandi’s face gave her a connection to the island. As an interracial couple, Julie Barak suggests that “Dona Charito and Don José represent both a mind/body and a colonizer/ colonized duality. It is possible, too, that they may be playing out a version of the Caliban/Ariel controversy, an important theme in the search for a Caribbean identity.”\(^ {53}\) Seeing her own, typically fair-skinned face strikingly portrayed on the dark wooden face of the virgin indicated that Sandi was a hybrid figure long before her immigration to New York. The additional dualities that she gained as a migrant were the root of her inability to express herself personally. She had a lack of security in her identity and searched for a unified self, something noble, true, and singular; something her divided Dominican-American self would not find. She wanted to be exceptional, not just “an anonymous de la Torre child, second daughter to a second daughter.”\(^ {54}\) She internalized the lack of belonging and the difficulty of dealing with a continually hybrid existence, leading to her ultimate breakdown.

The youngest of the García sisters, Sofía, or Fifi as she is often called, is only three or four years old when the García family immigrates to the United States. She has

\(^{52}\) Álvarez, *García Girls*, p. 255

\(^{53}\) Barak

\(^{54}\) Álvarez, *García Girls*, p. 241
not had as much time on the island, and thus does not feel as much of the longing related to cultural displacement as her older sisters. However, Fifi too embodies a hybrid nature because although the girls are immersed in American culture, attending American schools and developing American values, their parents, especially Carlos, continue to impose the island rules and values on their daughters. Trying to reconcile her newly-minted values with ideals her father held dear, Sofía becomes the most independent and rebellious of the four sisters. She is also the least developed character of the four sisters. Fifi only lends her perspective to one of the fifteen chapters in the novel, while Sandi, Carla and Yolanda each have at least two sections in their voices.

Her one real memory of the island from before the family left for America is a ceremonial voodoo farewell from the family’s Haitian maid, Chucha. Fifi’s recollections of Chucha highlight her tendency towards strange idiosyncratic habits, such as choosing to sleep in a coffin, her ethnic makeup, and her voodoo beliefs. Fifi describes the maid as follows,

Chucha was super wrinkled and Haitian blue-black, not Dominican café con leche black. She was real Haitian too and that’s why she couldn’t say certain words like the word for parsley or anyone’s name that had a j in it, which meant the family was like camp, everyone with nicknames Chucha could pronounce.  

This recollection about Chucha serves also to show the existence of racism in the Dominican Republic. In the novel, racism is not isolated to attacks on the girls, especially Carla, in the United States; it transcends both nations and cultures. Fifi also recalls how the other maids in the family compound were afraid of Chucha. They did not want to

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55 Álvarez, García Girls, p. 218
sleep in a room with her, they said “she got mounted by spirits” and were uncomfortable with her sleeping in a coffin and practicing voodoo in the home. As Silvio Sirias points out, “Álvarez contrasts Chucha with another maid named Nivea (a Spanish synonym for ‘white’).” That Nivea would fear and look down on Chucha for being dark rather than light, Haitian rather than Dominican, and a practitioner of voodoo rather than being Christian, highlights Nivea’s judgmental nature with regard to these racial, ethnic and religious characteristics, all of which are closely associated with Afro-Caribbean culture. Nivea’s fears give context to the historic Dominican racism towards Haitians regardless of race. Her fears are culturally cultivated as it is typical for Dominicans to define and assert their character as an exclusion or repudiation of all things Haitian.

“Dominican cultural identity emerges as a negation of Haitian culture, by means of a primitivization of its customs. As a result, racial, linguistic, and cultural differences are erected as markers of “internal borders” among subjects as a way of dealing with the terror and anxiety caused by the instability of certain racial categories.” Fifi’s retelling of her memories does not show disgust or distaste for Nivea’s racially discriminatory opinions. Perhaps this is because her island upbringing and the values her family attempted to transfer to the United States included an acceptable separation between the rich and the poor, the Dominicans and the Haitians, those of white European ancestry and those of indigenous, black and mestizo roots.

After the Garcías depart from the Dominican Republic, Chucha is left without a family to look after. Most of the help is dismissed and she is entrusted with tending to the house. In this section of narrative in the chapter entitled The Blood of the

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56 Álvarez, García Girls, p. 219
57 Sirias, p. 39
58 Valerio-Holguín, p. 788
Conquistadores, the perspective shifts briefly to Chucha. Being the only person who is not an immediate member of the García family who garners this opportunity, her words are important. She predicts, “I see their future, the troublesome life ahead. 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.” The words of their voodoo-soaked Haitian maid are profound and prophetic. All of these girls – Carla, Sandra, Yolanda and Sofía – do come to some trouble in the New World.

Part of this trouble for Sofía was embracing her newfound, American freedom more than her parents’ would have liked. “By the end of a couple years away from home, we had more than adjusted. And of course, as soon as we had, Mami and Papi got all worried they were going to lose their girls to America.” Losing their accents in English and adjusting to America was desirable, but “more than adjusting” was taking it too far. Adjusting too much was a scary prospect to the García parents because it meant their daughters potentially rejecting their roots, and their Dominican values. Their relatives on the island were in agreement. “It’s not good,” Tía Flor says. “You four girls get lost up there.” Smiling, she indicates the sky with her chin.

The aunts, uncles and cousin in the Dominican Republic always viewed the girls as very American when they came back for visits. From their perspective, the girls had changed so much. This difference of opinions created tension. The García sisters had to attempt to find a balance between assimilating enough to thrive while not appearing to adjust too much to disappoint or scare family members and have them intervene. “It was a regular revolution: constant

59 Álvarez, García Girls, p. 223
60 Hoffman
61 Álvarez, García Girls, p. 109
62 Álvarez, García Girls, p. 7
skirmishes. Until the time we took open aim and won, and our summers – if not our lives – became our own.ʻ63 Ironically, the García left the Dominican Republic to escape revolutions and ended up creating their own familial revolutions. The girls and parents had many differences as they each traversed the hybrid cultural terrain. The tension between parental Dominican expectations and the girls’ acceptance of American feminisms and freedoms was rigid and continual.

Growing up largely in New York in the 1960’s, Fifi experienced the typical American counterculture of the time during her teen years. She experimented with marijuana, boys, and “began to develop a taste for the American teenage good life.”ʻ64 This was ironic since the girls’ parents had sent them away to all-girls preparatory schools to ensure that strict rules were enforced and that their daughters would “meet and mix with the ‘right kind’ of Americans”ʻ65 rather than develop rebellious autonomy. Despite their parents’ best efforts, the girls

learned to circumvent (the strict rules) in their efforts to shed their island identities and the strictures constraining traditional behavior for Dominican women… The girls negotiated their freedom in physical spaces and then through their social and sexual autonomy, metaphorical spaces of womanhood accessible only in escaping the physical confines of the apartment, the school, and even the family.ʻ66

In one of Fifi’s more rebellious scenes, she stashes a bag of marijuana behind a bookshelf before she and her sisters leave for a summer in the Dominican Republic. Primitiva, the family’s maid, later discovers this stash after the girls leave. Their mother then flies down to the Dominican Republic to confront them about the marijuana,

ʻ63 Álvarez, García Girls, p. 111
ʻ64 Álvarez, García Girls, p. 108
ʻ65 Álvarez, García Girls, p. 108
ʻ66 Johnson, p. 15
resulting in an admission of guilt from sixteen year old Fifi, and then each of the daughters, rallying to the side of their guilty sister. Ultimately, the eldest three girls went back to the States with their mother, but Fifi stayed behind for her punishment of one year on the island at Tía Carmen’s. The old threat of “Maybe what you need right now is some time back home to set you straight.”\(^\text{67}\) was put into practice with Fifi.

In her time on the island with her aunts, uncles and cousins, she changed inwardly and outwardly. Inwardly, Fifi “suppressed the feeling of liberty she had developed in the United States and accepted the customs of a Dominican woman: that is, traditional, passive, and obedient.”\(^\text{68}\) Outwardly, she changed by adding cascades of beauty parlor curls, black mascara and big gold barrettes to her style repertoire. However, even though she looked like the “hair and nails cousins” Fifi was still somewhat of a maverick. She was dating Manuel Gustavo, one of her illegitimate cousins.

However, their relationship was an unhealthy one since Manuel was like a little tyrant. “Fifi can’t wear pants in public. Fifi can’t talk to another man. Fifi can’t leave the house without his permission. And what’s most disturbing is that Fifi, feisty, lively Fifi, is letting this man tell her what she can and cannot do.”\(^\text{69}\) Fifi again experienced a cultural marooning. According to Dominican tradition, the sexist ideal was that girls ought to be subservient to men and that having their male relatives guarding their innocence and virginity is the proper way to prepare them for life. In contrast, the mainstream American culture of the 1960’s tempted the girls with the vision of freedom, equality and romance. Disorientation, resulting from mismatched expectations, no doubt, accounts for parts of Fifi’s outright rebellion. The other three sisters

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\(^\text{67}\) Álvarez, García Girls, p. 109  
\(^\text{68}\) Luis, p. 846  
\(^\text{69}\) Álvarez, García Girls, p. 120
using the sexist double standard of the Island to their advantage, deliberately leaving their once-feminist sister unchaperoned, thus damaging her “good reputation” and exacting her permanent release from the upper-class dominicana’s circumscribed fate. The girls’ liberty is dubiously won, however, in that the sisters are required always to enact double lives, those of self-reliant Americans, on the one hand, and obedient Island innocents, on the other, if they are to gain any portion of personal independence.70

Their mother was furious. Fifi was furious. Everyone was yelled at, but the end result was what the elder girls were hoping for. “Mami shakes her head conclusively. “If she can’t behave herself here, she goes back with us, period! I’m not going to send them anymore to cause trouble!”71 In her anger, Fifi does not explain what happened and gives her sisters the silent treatment. “We look at each other as if to say, “She’ll get over it.” Meaning Manuel, meaning her fury at us, meaning her fear of her own life. Like ours, it lies ahead of her like a wilderness just before the first explorer set foot on the virgin land.” 72

Her teenage rebellions were just the beginning of clashes for Sofía. A cultural rift forms between her and her father as she makes more and more choices that go against the sexist ideologies and traditional values he believes in. When Fifi meets a German named Otto in Colombia, she ends up eloping with him because she gets pregnant. This causes even more problems between Carlos and Fifi. “He had always had problems with his maverick youngest, and her running off hadn’t helped. ‘I don’t want loose women in my family,’ he had cautioned all his daughters.”73 When her father reads the love letters that Otto had sent to Fifi, he was incensed to find that they had been intimate prior to their

70 Castellucci Cox, p. 145
71 Álvarez, Garcia Girls, p. 130
72 Álvarez, Garcia Girls, p. 132
73 Álvarez, Garcia Girls, p. 27-28
elope ment. “He is concerned because his youngest daughter has been dragging (his) good name through the dirt. In his eyes, Sofía’s behavior categorizes her as a “whore”. She has lost her purity, and thus he risks losing the respect and the esteem he enjoys in society.”

It is not until Fifi and Otto have a second child, a son whom they name Carlos, that the feud between the two, father and daughter, past and future, tradition and freedom, begins to wane. “Because the baby is the first male in Dr. García’s line of succession and is very Germanic looking, the hidebound old man relents because he not only has a male descendant, but icing on the cake for him, a descendant with ‘fair Nordic looks.’ Now he feels there is ‘good blood in the family’…”

Last but not least, Yolanda García, the third of four sisters, is the one with the most evidence of being caught between two worlds. She is an inherently hybrid, multiple being, and her struggles and perspectives are the most well delineated in the novel. Yolanda’s hybridity both linguistically and culturally make her the guiding voice throughout Álvarez’s work. Her experiences and search for identity as a Dominican-American are also explored in another of Julia Álvarez’s novels, ¡Yo! (1997) For Yolanda, more than for her sisters, language plays a big role in her attempt to reconcile her roots with her new American existence. “Back in the Dominican Republic growing up, Yoyo had been a terrible student. No one could ever get her to sit down to a book. But in New York, she needed to settle somewhere, and since the natives were unfriendly, and the country inhospitable, she took root in the language.” Language and specifically writing took on a special importance to Yolanda. It was the only way for her to bridge the gap between her two worlds: the Dominican Republic and the United States.

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74 Sirias, p. 47
75 Kafka, p. 104
76 Álvarez, Garcia Girls, p. 141
In ninth grade, Yolanda was chosen to give the Teacher’s Day address at her school. This project proved to be the beginning of Yolanda’s public literary expression, and the metaphorical passing of creativity and ingenuity from mother to daughter. To begin to understand Yolanda, one needs to explore the character of Laura García, Yoyo’s mother. Laura was an intelligent and creative woman. She enjoyed attempting to invent things to make life easier, such as a shower nozzle that had soap in it, instant coffee that was already mixed with creamer, a key chain with a timer to indicate when your parking meters would expire, a car bumper with a removable can opener attached and suitcases with wheels on them. Being inventive while taking pride in being accent-free was Laura’s way of coping with the loss of privilege she suffered in the family’s exile. All four of her daughters mocked her invention attempts and did not thoroughly understand why she was “wasting her time” inventing. Carla, the eldest figured that it was better to have a mother inventing useless things than watching too closely over her daughters.

Let her have her project. What harm could she do, and besides, she needed that acknowledgement. It had come to her automatically in the old country from being a de la Torre. “García de la Torre,” Laura would enunciate carefully, giving her maiden as well as married name when they first arrived. But the blank smiles had never heard of her name. She would show them. She would prove to these Americans what a smart woman could do with a pencil and pad. 77

Laura used inventing to show that she was smart, creative and worthy of praise. Without the instant acknowledgement and respect that she was used to receiving in the Dominican Republic simply for being born into the right family, she needed to find another way to fill that void in the United States, and for a short while, inventing was the answer.

77 Álvarez, García Girls, p. 139
When someone else “stole” her idea about the wheeled suitcases, patented it, marketed and made money off of the idea, she nearly gave up. “What use was it trying to compete with the Americans: they would always have the head start. It was their country after all.”\textsuperscript{78} But, Laura did not need to invent literally. For her character, the importance of invention lay more in its metaphorical sense. As long as she could redefine, delineate and recreate the role(s) she played in her family, community and nation, then she would be as much of an inventor as she needed and wanted to be.

“The metaphor of "invention" is also deployed in Álvarez's representation of an adult exile in \textit{How the García Girls Lost Their Accents}. Once again, invention stands for the possibilities of cultural adaptation and hybridity, as embraced by the mother, an adult exile from the Dominican Republic.”\textsuperscript{79} Laura enjoys the reinvention of her life. As she says, “Better an independent nobody than a high-class houseslave.”\textsuperscript{80} She liked being more independent, being able to voice her opinions honestly and challenge authority without having to fear Trujillo’s secret police force. She enjoyed being able to invent, and earning her praise rather than having the praise simply handed to her. Not surprisingly, she also benefited from the gender role reversal in their family upon their arrival in the United States. “Mami was the leader now that they lived in the States. \textit{She} had gone to school in the States. \textit{She} spoke English without a heavy accent.”\textsuperscript{81} In some way, Laura’s reinventing of herself as her answer to political exile in the United States was her form of rebellion. Because of her schooling in the United States and her lack of an accent in English, she had one fewer obstacle to overcome upon arrival, and a headstart on all of

\textsuperscript{78} Álvarez, \textit{García Girls}, p. 140
\textsuperscript{79} Caminero-Santangelo
\textsuperscript{80} Álvarez, \textit{García Girls}, p. 144
\textsuperscript{81} Álvarez, \textit{García Girls}, p. 176
the members of the family, most notably Carlos. "El uso del inglés o la mezcla de ambas lenguas a un tiempo, significa un rompimiento con el yugo patriarcal... Las García usan los idiomas como una forma de establecer fronteras entre las dos culturas... para rebelarse."82 English and/or Spanglish were not employed only by the García sisters, but also by their mother. It represented their desire for an increase in independence from the Dominican cultural model. They did not want to be told what to do. They wanted to be free to think for themselves and to speak for themselves. Towards these aims, Laura led the quiet, subtle charge.

Her creativity and inventiveness were useful to her in helping Yolanda with the Teacher’s Day speech. Yolanda had eventually written a speech, inspired by Walt Whitman’s Song of Myself, highlighting the line “He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher.” The way to honor the teachers without earning her classmate’s scorn was to focus on hopes that those the nuns teach will be taught so well that they will learn to assert their own individuality and authority. “When Yoyo was done, she read over her words, and her eyes filled. She finally sounded like herself in English!”83 Carlos is not happy that the girls and his wife were striving for independence and breaking down the patriarchal yoke. Representative of this rejection of their re-invention of themselves, he is outraged at Yolanda’s speech. He finds it to be arrogant, insubordinate, improper, boastful, insulting and ungrateful. He shouts and tears up her work. “As your father, I forbid you to make that eh-speech!”84 His feelings about the speech can also be seen as a symbolic denunciation of the García women’s rejection of the traditional, proper Dominican ways that put him in charge of the family, and left

82 Henao, p. 181
83 Álvarez, García Girls, p. 143
84 Álvarez, García Girls, p. 145
everyone else in a subordinate role. “Claro que habría que preguntarse hasta qué punto dicha insistencia refleja el temor del padre de perder su posición patriarcal dentro de la familia debido a su ignorancia del inglés.”85

Yoyo, in defiance at his rejection and destruction of her speech, hurls the epithet “Chapita” at her father, correlating him with the dictator, Trujillo. Laura then helps Yolanda create a polite, commonplace speech to fulfill her school obligation. The next day, Carlos reconciles with Yoyo through the gift of a new electric typewriter, indicative of her birth as a writer. Chucha’s prophetic words were correct. The girls, especially Yolanda with the help of Laura, would invent what they need to survive, whether those inventions were words or new versions of themselves.

Rather than the rolling suitcase everyone else in the family remembers, Yoyo thinks of the speech her mother wrote as her last invention. It was as if, after that, her mother had passed on to Yoyo her pencil and pad and said, “Okay, Cuquita, here’s the buck. You give it a shot.”86

Yolanda was now a writer. Her mother gifted her the creativity and consent to invent. This passing on of the creative responsibility to Yoyo was in essence a hybrid coming of age. Yolanda could be a dutiful daughter, but one that resisted authority when she disagreed. She could be a writer and (re)inventor of her own life as well as any stories she chose to tell. Part of “losing her accent” for Yolanda was realizing that she could sound like herself in English now, that independence was an option and that when necessary she could invent solutions to survive. This scene highlighting a dual coming of age is echoed again in Álvarez’s later novel In the Time of the Butterflies when Minerva gets “doubly complicated” through getting her first period at the same time that she

85 Henao, p. 180
86 Álvarez, García Girls, p. 149
becomes aware of what the Trujillo regime was really like through her friend Sinita’s revelations.

During her years in boarding school and college, Yolanda finds that her inventiveness with language was not enough to un-complicate her sexual awakening, early romantic relationships and the effect that her underlying hybridity and duality had on them. However difficult these struggles were, Yolanda seems to relish the time. She elucidates that each of the García sisters was “wild” at some point and that her years in college were her wild years. In this context, “wild” means anything from embracing feminist values, to smoking marijuana, to sneaking a cigarette or a sip from a flask, to experimenting with romantic relationships. Anything that Dr. García would define as the girls being “too-American” would fit under the category of wild. And yet, this wildness was not perceived as a negative, at least not from Yoyo’s perspective. She seems to reminisce about those “few giddy years” in a largely positive manner,

We took turns being the wildest. First one, then another, of us… Baby Sister Fifi held that title the longest, though Sandi, with her good looks and many opportunities, gave her some competition. Several times, Carla, the responsible eldest, did something crazy. But she always claimed she had done whatever it was she’d done to gain ground for us all. … For a brief few giddy years, I was the one with the reputation among my sisters of being the wild one.\footnote{Álvarez, \textit{García Girls}, p. 86}

Yolanda was a vivacious conversationalist during her collegiate experience, and ultimately, it worked against her. She was interested in getting an interesting conversation flowing because “English was then still a party favor for me – crack open the dictionary, find out if I’d just been insulted, praised, admonished, criticized.”\footnote{Álvarez, \textit{García Girls}, p. 87} However, this
strategy did not work because it highlighted to others that she was a divided individual.
What she said, and what she intended to do, were not necessarily one and the same. She
had “lost her accent” but still retained some of the culture.

By the time I went to college, it was the late sixties,
and everyone was sleeping around as a matter of principle.
By then, I was a lapsed Catholic; my sisters and I had been
pretty well Americanized since our arrival in this country a
decade before, so really, I didn’t have a good excuse. 89

In this case, Yolanda refused to sleep with Rudy Elmenhurst, a persistent would-be suitor
and classmate from her poetry class. Yo still followed some Catholic tenets while being a
lapsed Catholic, just as she still followed some Dominican patterns while being, as she
says “pretty well Americanized” at that point in time. Just because she was a lapsed
Catholic or a lapsed Dominican did not mean that she would not carry guilt and hesitancy
towards having premarital sex and thereby dragging her father’s name through the mud.
Joan Hoffman suggests that Yolanda’s college years were indeed a particularly hybrid
time for her, a “time of emotional highs and lows, preoccupations and celebrations, when
she enjoyed the reputation of being wild among her sisters despite her hard-fought battle
to keep her virginity.” 90 Part of the difficulty of this particular linguistic hybridism, is that
Yolanda did not fully understand what other people were saying to her; what was being
implied, what double entendres were being used, the sexual overtones and jokes in their
language.

She seems to think herself speaking a totally
different language from the one spoken by her
boyfriends and lovers, even when they are both
speaking English. The language of intimacy and
sex that her American boyfriends speak fluently

89 Álvarez, García Girls, p. 87
90 Hoffman
becomes a painful learning experience for Yolanda and often renders her speechless, inarticulate.\textsuperscript{91}

Yolanda recognized that part of her speechlessness and feelings of linguistic inadequacy was related to English, but another part of the equation was that the interlocutors she was dealing with all had extensively more experience than she had; more experience living in America and being American, more experience with English, more experience with the values and mores of the 1960's, more experience with sexual interactions, more experience, period. A result of her lack of experience was her unwillingness to participate in a conversation about intimacy or sex that carried a colloquial or negative connotation, partially because she did not understand all of the double entendres and connotations. However, to some degree she refused this style of language because, as a budding poet and author, she was interested in speaking about love in a gentle and poetic manner. Also, her family situation was very different from those of many of her fellow students. With a father who was trying to hold on to most of his fairly traditional Dominican viewpoints and a mother who was creatively reinventing herself as a slightly freer more independent American-ish version of herself, Yolanda would not find a font of the kind of knowledge and experience from which she wanted to draw.

For the hundredth time, I cursed my immigrant origins. If only I too had been born in Connecticut or Virginia, I too would understand the jokes everyone was making on the last two digits of the year, 1969; I too would be having sex and smoking dope; I too would have suntanned parents who took me skiing in Colorado over Christmas break, and I would say things like "no shit," without feeling like I was imitating someone else.\textsuperscript{92}

\textsuperscript{91} Gómez-Vega, p. 90
\textsuperscript{92} Álvarez, \textit{Garcia Girls}, p. 94-95
If it were not for her origins, Yolanda would be a different person, she would not be a hybrid character who struggled with cultural displacement trying to define and escape the in-between space that she had occupied since her immigration to the United States. She would not be bilingual and still experimenting and learning about the subtleties of English alongside of her Spanish refuge. Besides her origins, Yolanda must have cursed the misleading notions about and false expectations of her held by several Americans like Rudy.

He had seen through me. “You know,” he said, “I thought you’d be hot-blooded, being Spanish and all, and that under all the Catholic bullshit, you’d be really free, instead of all hung up like these cotillion chicks from prep schools. But Jesus, you’re worse than a fucking Puritan.” I felt stung to the quick.93

Yolanda did not sleep with Rudy Elmenhurst. She had some fears about the process and a lack of knowledge coupled with guilt and a desire to wait for love before she had sex. This made Rudy both angry and surprised because her feelings and reactions did not match with his expectations or assumptions about what a Dominican-American girl would do. He stereotypically assumed that she would be a hot-blooded and passionate lover simply because she was a Latina. His anger and accusation that Yo was “worse than a Puritan” hurt her because in essence Rudy was rejecting Yolanda’s identity through stereotyping. She was not a caricature or a stereotypical Latina, she was Yolanda; “a peculiar mix of Catholicism and agnosticism, Hispanic and American styles”94, and she wanted to be loved for who she really was.

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Yoyo and Rudy’s fractured relationship also suffered because of a linguistic disconnect. Rudy would use colloquial terms such as “felt up” instead of gentler, more romantic terms.

Ay, Rudy, I’d plead, don’t say it that way. ‘What do you mean, don’t say it that way? A spade’s a spade. This isn’t a goddamn poetry class.’... The guy had no sense of connotation in bed. His vocabulary turned me off even as I was beginning to acknowledge my body’s pleasure. If Rudy had said, Sweet lady, lay across my big, soft bed and let me touch your dear, exquisite body, I might have felt up to being felt up.95

This story presents the first connection between words, sexuality and relationships for Yolanda. She finds it extremely important that she and her boyfriends or lovers speak the same language and if he cannot express himself verbally in the manner that she is looking for she will not express herself physically in the way he is hoping for and expecting. Feelings and actions, according to Yolanda, must be “properly named; appropriate vocabulary must be employed.”96 Rudy’s inability to understand what Yo wanted and who she was further divided Yolanda and caused her doubts to grow. She fretted, “Now there was a worry. I’d just gotten over worrying I’d get pregnant from proximity, or damned by God should I die at that moment, and now I started wondering if maybe my upbringing had disconnected some vital nerves.”97 Yoyo was determined to find her own identity; she did not like the identity that Rudy assumed was hers, neither did she like the one his parents imposed.

He had told them he was seeing “a Spanish girl,” and he reported they said that should be interesting for him to find out about people from other cultures. It bothered me that they should treat me like a geography lesson for

95 Álvarez, García Girls, p. 96
96 Hoffman
97 Álvarez, García Girls, p. 97
their son. But I didn’t have the vocabulary back then to explain even to myself what annoyed me about their remark.98

The Elmenhursts were arrogant and imprecise. First of all, Yolanda was not a Spanish girl; she was Dominican-American. To her there was a big difference between the two terms. Secondly, the remark that dating such a girl would be an interesting opportunity to learn about cultures implies that their culture, American in this case, is superior and that the girl must not have other positive qualities worthy of mention. “Words are inseparable from Yolanda’s identity: it is absolutely crucial that she choose the accurate and appropriate word, that she constantly and properly identify, describe, define, redefine, and name everything from mere objects to relationships, even to herself.”99 It is logical that Yolanda be precise in everything she says and writes and demand that others close to her in her life share a similar respect for words because when she arrived in New York as an immigrant in exile, she needed to settle somewhere and chose to settle in the language.

English was Yolanda’s adoptive homeland and she sought to gain full command of it during her early academic career. By the time Yo was in college and was having her poems and stories praised and read aloud, she had pretty well moved in to English. This transition was not without problems though. “La búsqueda del dominio del inglés es una manifestación externa de un rechazo casi total a las raíces y cultura dominicanas. El rechazo llega hasta tal punto que las García se avergüenzan de sus padres.”100 This created an interesting generational dynamic, especially between Yolanda and her parents. When she saw a photo of Rudy’s parents, she noted that they looked so young and casual, more like friends or classmates than parents. The paradigm of the suntanned parents who

98 Álvarez, García Girls, p. 98
99 Hoffman
100 Henao, p. 179
took their children skiing or on a cruise during vacations could not have been further from Yolanda’s parents. She lamented that,

My own old world parents were still an embarrassment at parents’ weekend, my father with his thick mustache and three-piece suit and fedora hat, my mother in one of her outfits she bought especially to visit us at school, everything overly matched, patent leather purse and pumps that would go back, once she was home, to plastic storage bags in her closet.\textsuperscript{101}

The Garcías were clearly different. They wore different styles, accessorized differently, had different hairstyles and not surprisingly, they had different parenting styles and different values. While the Rudy’s of the world were encouraged to have experiences with girls but to be careful, Yolanda was being reminded to be a good daughter and not to besmirch her reputation or her father’s good name. The combination of jealousy and self-doubt left Yoyo wishing she belonged more completely in America. Meanwhile, her father, “He, who had paid to straighten their teeth and smooth the accent out of their English in expensive schools...”\textsuperscript{102} felt that Yolanda and her sisters had adjusted too well, and were entirely too independent and too eager to embrace English and America while rejecting their Dominican heritage and culture. Thus, the linguistic element to Yolanda’s identity complicated her sexual awakening, her future sexual encounters and set her up for repeated bouts with doubt, worry and feelings of inadequacy. The identity and home that she tried to embrace, one as a storyteller within the language, was questioned and rejected by members of her family as well as by members of the American other.

Yolanda-Yoyo-Yo-Joe’s inherent hybridity made it impossible for her to “choose sides”.

\textsuperscript{101} Álvarez, \textit{García Girls}, p. 98
\textsuperscript{102} Álvarez, \textit{García Girls}, p. 36
Yolanda would have to find a way to bridge the two worlds, and she continued to look to her art of writing as the answer.

As one might expect, repeatedly giving the same answer to the same question yields similar results. Her marriage with John experienced many of the same linguistic and word-to-body disconnects that her collegiate relationship with Rudy had. Yolanda’s craft of the language had matured. She was a professional writer and poet at this point, which did nothing to lessen the import and significance that words carried with them. Even in her early days with John, when they were in love,

Yolanda was afraid. Once they got started on words, there was no telling what they could say. ‘I love you,’ John repeated, so she would follow suit. Yolanda kissed each eye closed, hoping that would do. ‘Do you love me, Joe? Do you?’, he pleaded. He wanted words back, nothing else would do.103

She capitulated with an “I love you too” opening herself up to the vulnerability and possibility of getting hurt that often accompanies love. Words could cut to the core of the matter and succinctly sum up the very heart of feelings or emotions. Yolanda was not always prepared for the lack of secrecy and privacy that speaking honestly and openly would bring. Just as words caused Yolanda to be a little bit afraid as their relationship took root, words were needling her as the relationship began to languish. The couple played at rhyming words with each other’s name. John couldn’t find any rhymes for Yolanda, and he called her a squirrel instead. His lack of poetics combined with his inability to maneuver this rhyme game in Spanish made Yo uneasy. “‘Yo rhymes with cielo in Spanish.’ Yo’s words fell into the dark, muted cavern or John’s mouth. Cielo, cielo, the word echoed. And Yo was running, like mad, into the safety of her first tongue,

103 Álvarez, García Girls, p. 70
where the proudly monolingual John could not catch her, even if he tried."\textsuperscript{104} She took refuge in Spanish and in the poetic nature that she understood in English. This episode is important because it offers us an answer to a question posed chronologically later in the novel. When Yolanda is visiting the Dominican Republic in a search for her roots and her authentic self and home she meets a poet at her cousin’s party who “argued that no matter how much of it one lost, in the midst of some profound emotion, one would revert to one’s mother tongue. He put Yolanda through a series of situations. What language, he asked, looking pointedly into her eyes, did she love in?”\textsuperscript{105} Through her relationship with John, we see that Yolanda’s probable answer to the poet’s query is that she loves in English and in Spanish, in a combination of the two, in neither of the two, in the poetic register when it suits her. That her language of love is divided makes it clear that her “authentic self” is also divided. That John would not and could not comprehend things in the same way, that he had a different language of love, made their coupling doomed from the start. “She had begun to mistrust him... Because he believed in the Real World, more than words, more than he believed in her.”\textsuperscript{106}

She left John and suffered a breakdown, but in this breakdown, she talked all the time, spewing forth words, quotes, misquotes, tears, only to find that at the core of her problem was the simple fact “We just didn’t speak the same language.”\textsuperscript{107} Words may have confused her and hurt her, but they did not abandon her. Yo concludes that there are “so many words. There is no end to what can be said about the world.”\textsuperscript{108}

\textsuperscript{104} Álvarez, García Girls, p. 72
\textsuperscript{105} Álvarez, García Girls, p. 13
\textsuperscript{106} Álvarez, García Girls, p. 73
\textsuperscript{107} Álvarez, García Girls, p. 81
\textsuperscript{108} Álvarez, García Girls, p. 85
Even after years of living in the United States after her family’s migration, with experiences in school and experiences with men, Yolanda had not yet found her complete authentic self. She continued to feel displaced, in-between two locations without properly belonging to either. Something was missing and she felt that she might be able to find what she needed to fill that void by making a trip back to the island to find her roots.

"Esta necesidad que siente Yoyo de visitar su país de origen en busca de sus raíces, después de haberlas negado y rechazado por tantos años, encuentra eco en la opinión que expresa Carole Boyce Davies en cuanto al efecto contradictorio que tiene la emigración sobre el individuo: a veces añora su “casa/patria” mientras que otras, la rechaza."\textsuperscript{109} Thus, she traveled back to the Dominican Republic in search of the intangible answer to ease her duality/multiplicity. "Yolanda ‘believes,’ in stereotypically exilic fashion, that she can only be "at home" in the land of origin."\textsuperscript{110}

All around her are the foothills, a dark enormous green, the sky more a brightness than a color. A breeze blows through the palms below, rustling their branches, so they whisper like voices. Here and there a braid of smoke rises up from a hillside – a campesino and his family living out their solitary life. This is what she has been missing all these years without really knowing that she has been missing it. Standing here in the quiet, she believes she has never felt at home in the States, never.\textsuperscript{111}

This “never feeling at home in the States” was a symptom of the otherness that Yolanda felt. She had needed to learn and master English as a way to try to assimilate. She had accepted many American values and rejected Dominican ones, but she could not escape her immigrant origins. The novel opens, therefore, with Yolanda’s attempt to embrace her origins rather than summarily rejecting them.

\textsuperscript{109} Henao, p. 182  
\textsuperscript{110} Caminero-Santangelo  
\textsuperscript{111} Álvarez, Garcia Girls, p. 12
Upon her arrival, she is asked to express any little *antojo* that she has. She can’t even remember that *antojo* is a fancy, a whim, a craving, let alone express in Spanish, at least at first, her desire to eat some freshly picked guavas. Eventually, she convinces her overly-cautious Dominican aunts and relatives that she would be fine borrowing a car and driving to the north of the island to pick some guavas. “At her insistence she is allowed to do so, but only because her relatives acknowledge that she has become too Americanized. A woman who has lived her entire life on the island would never be allowed to undertake such a journey.”

When she reached her destination of Altamira, just shy of a descent to the coast, she enters a cantina and finds a young boy, José Duarte Sánchez y Mella, who along with a flock of his friends helps her to find guavas. In contrast to the guava picking children, there is a Palmolive soap advertisement on a pole near the cantina featuring a “creamy, blond woman luxuriating under a refreshing shower, her head thrown back in seeming ecstasy, her mouth opened in a wordless cry.”

The entire episode focuses subtly on the fact that Yolanda has as much in common with the local Dominicans as she does with the wealthy, happy American woman in the advertisement. She is not at home in either setting. Perhaps, she’s more like the Palmolive ad than like her “hair and nails cousins” or their neighbors. Highlighting this otherness is a brief excerpt detailing what happens when her car gets a flat tire on the return trip from guava picking.

Two men, one short and dark, and the other slender and light-skinned, emerge. They wear ragged work clothes stained with patches of sweat; their faces are drawn. Machetes hang from their belts. ... Both – she has sized them up as well – are strong and quite capable or catching her if she makes a run for it. ... Anywhere else, Yolanda would find him extremely attractive, but here on a lonely road, with the sky growing darker by seconds, his good

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112 Sírias, p. 49
113 Álvarez, *García Girls*, p. 15
looks seem dangerous, a lure to catch her off her guard.\textsuperscript{114}

Yolanda shows that in this case, she uses a very American mindset; she is afraid of and intimidated by two Dominican men that happen by purely because of their physical appearance and dress. Had she seen the same two men wearing suits, on a street in New York, her reaction towards them would have been completely different. She is reminded of her aunts' warnings about incidents and guerillas in the mountains. The men assume she is American when her explanation comes in a flood of English. Spanish failed her in that moment of fear; she could not find the words. This is an inversion of the experience Carla has when she does not have the words in English to describe the exposed pervert to the policemen. Carla did not yet have the command in English, but here Yolanda has lost her command in Spanish. This linguistic difficulty is further proof, in Yolanda's eyes, that she is an outsider, not only to others but also to herself. As if to drive the point home without a shadow of a doubt, Yolanda's otherness in the Dominican Republic is put in clear light when José, who had gone for help with the flat tire returned.

Ahead, her lights catch the figure of a small boy. Yolanda leans over and opens the door for him. The overhead light comes on; the boy's face is working back tears. He is cradling an arm. The guardia hit me. He said I was telling stories. No dominicana with a car would be out at this hour getting guayabas.\textsuperscript{115}

Yolanda's actions were so far outside of the island norms that the guardia civil assumed that the young boy must be lying. It was easier for them to believe the child was untruthful than it was for them to believe that a Dominican woman would really drive her car to a deserted guava grove and want to pick guavas at this time of night.

\textsuperscript{114} Álvarez, Garcia Girls, p. 19-20
\textsuperscript{115} Álvarez, Garcia Girls, p. 22
This displacement, the feeling of being in-between and not pertaining to either world is central to Yolanda’s character. She shows herself to be a deeply hybrid being, even in her own definitions of herself. “She was a Dominican-American-USA-Latina – or whatever she had explained she was during the first class.”

Even her name, and its many iterations show Yolanda’s dual nature. She is called Yolanda, Yo, Yoyo, Joe, Jolinda with additional nicknames of Yosita, Cuquita, Violet, Josephine and Miss America. She is also “Yo”, the Spanish first person pronoun or “I”, which helps seat her firmly as the intended narrator for most of the novel’s exploration of identity and hybridity. The fact that seven of the fifteen stories focus on Yolanda, or at least on events viewed from her perspective coupled with her long list of names and nicknames establishes that “there is little doubt that the frustrated wordsmith, divided as she is into so many versions of herself, is meant to be our primary guide and interpreter through this cross-cultural, bilingual exploration of identity that is the life of the García sisters.”

With Yolanda as our guide, we are able to read into the potentially autobiographical perspective that Julia Álvarez brings to both _How the García Girls Lost Their Accents_ and _¡Yo!_. Yolanda is Julia Álvarez’s literary alter ego, and not surprisingly, the most complex and complete character in the novel. “Yolanda suffers most deeply from the cross-cultural balancing act of expatriation. Experiencing herself as a divided person, first as a “writer-slash-teacher” on official documents and then as a “head-slash-heart-slash-soul” in a goodbye note to her husband, Yo struggles throughout her adolescence and early adulthood to locate a whole, authentic self.”

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116 Álvarez, _¡Yo!_, p. 171
117 Hoffman
118 Castellucci Cox, p. 146
Of course, her search for such a whole, authentic self was a failure because there is no such whole self. Yolanda is essentially hybrid. She “discovers instead that spending years abroad has shaped her feminist beliefs to such an extent that she can never reintegrate satisfactorily into her previous life…”119 Coming from a childhood in the Dominican Republic where life was in Spanish and having to immigrate during her school-age years to the United States and an English existence, she is straddling two worlds. This duality is permanent. Yo cannot ignore the United States or English in order to live and thrive within their boundaries. At the same time she also cannot completely reject and cut all ties and bonds with the island because she still has family, friends and memories there.

I suggest that Yolanda should redefine her identity to be her art of storytelling because it was crucial to her formation as a character. As a young girl, she discovers a cat with kittens. One kitten is particularly cute, with white paws and a white spot on its head, as though it were wearing socks and a hat. Yoyo wanted to keep this kitten, and even though it was too young, she steals him from his mother and names him Schwarz, after the New York City toy store FAO Schwarz. But, then the mother cat starts looking for the kitten and Yolanda gets nervous and feels guilty, worrying about being attacked by a vengeful mother cat. She throws the tiny, too young kitten out the window in a panic and never finds out what happened to him. She has nightmares about the mother cat coming after her. Silvio Sirias proposes “her removal of the kitten, tossing her into the bushes, and the subsequent nightmares form the foundation of her existential displacement and of her need to purge her demons through storytelling.”120 This need to replace demons and

119 Castellucci Cox, p. 144
120 Sirias, p. 26
confusion with stories is the center of her craft, her art. So, it follows that her character’s central defining point would follow her as she immigrated.

... we moved to the United States. The cat disappeared altogether. I saw snow. I solved the riddle of an outdoors made mostly of concrete in New York…. 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.¹²¹

Just as Yoyo violates the kitten’s natural right to be with its mother and siblings when it was very young, she too was violated. Tearing a too-young Yolanda away from the Dominican Republic, the United States stole her “natural” childhood from her. Again, storytelling and the words that make up the stories came to her rescue and helped her to purge her demons through a constant retelling and redefining of her identity and her world.

¹²¹ Álvarez, García Girls, p. 290
¡Yo! – External Perspectives on Hybridity

Julia Álvarez’s third novel, ¡Yo! continues to follow the story of Yolanda García from a range of different perspectives. In this novel, the character of Yolanda serves as the inspiration or starting point to begin stories told by Yoyo’s friends, family members, former teachers, strangers and so forth. Over the course of a Prologue and fifteen chapters, each with a different point of view, we meet those in Yolanda’s life who want to tell their story instead of allowing hers to be the voice that literally records their tales. “In the course of telling their stories, these characters often reveal more about their own yous ("I" in Spanish) than about Yo.”¹²² But, at the same time, they are making revelations about Yo because she is transformed into “the subject of sixteen different characters who seek to paint the portrait, unflattering at times, of the artist.”¹²³

Several of the portraits of Yolanda touch on hybridity and duality. We see how Yolanda’s choices and inventions relating to Americanization affect the people in her life. In this way, the novel continues the characterization of Yolanda as a complete and multifaceted person to whom language and words are very special. The novel also continues to paint the divide between Dominican and US culture as it is seen from each side, truths, opinions and stereotypes alike.

Laura García Yo’s mother narrates one section, offering the reader a largely positive view of Yolanda as a brave daughter with a large talent for writing and

¹²³ Sirias, p. 89
storytelling using episodes from the family's first year in the United States. When Laura finds out from a social worker who visits their home that Yolanda has been telling “disturbing stories” about children being locked in closets and bears mauling little kids, she feels envious of Yoyo’s ability to bend reality into a story as a coping mechanism. “...suddenly I am feeling such envy for my daughter, who is able to speak of what terrifies her. I myself can’t find the words in English – or Spanish. Only the howling of the bear I used to impersonate captures some of what I feel.” 124 Yolanda was able, even during her first year in English, to speak her mind, her fears, and her stories. Laura also offers some insight into the impact of Trujillo’s dictatorship on their family. The social worker from the school summed their situation up as “Trauma/dictatorship/family bonds strong/mother devoted.” 125 Laura however knows the more detailed version, she recalls the sacrifices they had to make, the lives they had to leave behind as they fled the SIM and the other dangers that Carlos’s political activity placed on their family. “For a moment I feel redeemed as if everything we are suffering and everything we will suffer is the fault of the dictatorship. I know this will be the story I tell in the future about those hard years – how we lived in terror, how the girls were traumatized by the experience...” 126 But, she doesn’t fully believe what she said. It will be her story to tell to other people, but it is not the whole truth. While the dictatorship did cause a tremendous amount of fear and change for the García’s, not all of the change was negative. The girls and Laura were able to reinvent themselves within an American framework, which allowed for more independent, feminist women. Laura was able to escape the strict and confining patriarchal structure of island life, to establish her own identity in New York.

124 Álvarez, ¡Yo!, p. 34
125 Álvarez, ¡Yo!, p. 34
126 Álvarez, ¡Yo!, p. 35
In the recollections Laura offers about Yo, we are reminded from where Yolanda inherited her creativity, inventiveness and ability to tell stories. Laura was the family’s first storyteller; Yolanda was the refined and talented continuation.

As readers, we see Yolanda through unique cultural lenses of the varied narrators. One lens is that of her spousally-abused American landlady, Marie, who rents the upstairs part of her house to Yo and her friend Tammy so that Yo can have somewhere quiet to work on a book to earn tenure. Marie does not understand Yolanda and has not been exposed to multicultural, hybrid figures before. The idea of it makes her uncomfortable. However, she does appreciate and latch on to the “accommodation” that Yolanda has made by giving herself an easily pronounceable and understood nickname in Yo.

Only when she signs the lease do I finally get what her name is, Yolanda García, but she says she likes to go by Yo. Tammy, Yo – that sure makes it easier. One thing I appreciate about these foreigners – and the two I’ve met in a day are two more than I’ve known all my life – is how willing they are to go along with the way we do things in this country. I mean they should, I know, but things aren’t always the way they should be.  

Marie has ideas about what a foreigner would be and what they should be. Her stereotypical views on immigrants in general and Hispanics or Dominican-Americans in specific are showcased in this section. For example, Marie is pleasantly surprised that Yolanda speaks English so fluently and without an accent. She had assumed that foreigners would be poorly educated and speak English poorly as well. “So I say, “You sure picked up English,” and she looks at me a moment and says, “Language is the only

\[127\] Álvarez, ¡Yo!, p. 156
homeland. This poet once said that. When there's no other ground under your feet, you
learn quick, believe me.” “You bet,” I say.”

Yolanda’s response to Marie is a reference to exiled Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz. Julia Álvar
Álvez quotes this poet often, especially regarding language as a homeland. This quote drives
home Yolanda’s self-determined identity. She had chosen to take root in the
language when she arrived in New York, finding it the only way to bridge the gap
between her two worlds. When Marie “attacks” Yolanda’s identity as being outside the
norm, an English mastering immigrant, Yo’s quick fire response is to define and defend
her choice. By using Czeslaw Milosz’s words to explain herself, Yolanda is sneaking in
her perspective in Marie’s part of the narrative. Through the casual quote, she is implying
that she too is an exiled poet/author and that she too saw language as her best choice for a
homeland.

Different perspectives on what constitutes Yo’s home are offered by an ex-lover,
Dexter, as well as by her third and current husband, Doug. When dating Dexter, Yolanda
traveled back to the Dominican Republic for the summer as a literary retreat. He hoped to
visit her there, but she kept resisting, saying that the cultural displacement would be too
great an obstacle. He urged her to return to him instead if she would not allow him to
visit.

‘Come on home to ole Dex, honey.’ ‘What do you
mean, home?’ she snaps. Her English has already picked
up the lilt of an accent. ‘This is my home.’ He’s not going
to touch that one with a ten-foot pole. She hasn’t lived there
for a quarter of a century. She works here, makes love here,
has her friends here, pays taxes here, will probably die here.
Seems to him all she goes down there for is to get confessed
or disowned. Still, when she talks about the D.R., she gets all
dewy-eyed as if she were crocheting a little sweater and booties

128 Álvarez, ¡Yo!, p. 153
for that island, as if she had given birth to it herself out of the womb of her memory.\textsuperscript{129}

Dexter figures that Yolanda’s home is the United States because she has lived there for the last twenty-five years and has more connections there in her personal, familiar, and business lives that her home must logically be there. Yolanda argues back that her homeland is the Dominican Republic, which is somewhat in conflict with the idea that language is her true home. However, since she often returned to the cradle of the island to recharge and take retreats for writing, the Dominican Republic is intertwined with both her past and her present, as a land of origin and literary inspiration. When Dexter suggests that Yo sees the island as a baby from “the womb of her memory”, it strikes a chord with the reader. This is basically what her father suggests when he says “I do not mention that I know anything of her feelings. I try to say my praise so that she sees that her books are her babies, and for me, they are my grandbabies.”\textsuperscript{130} In this sense, Yolanda “gives birth” to her literary works, many of which do handle the Dominican Republic as a theme or a backdrop.

This idea of writing as procreation is also very important with Yolanda’s role as Julia Álvarez’s literary alter ego. In \textit{¡Yo!}, Yolanda comes to “the realization that being a writer instead of a mother does not mean she is inferior, it is simply another alternative. In different ways, motherhood is presented as a possible alternative, rather than the sole focus of a woman’s life.”\textsuperscript{131} This realization of Yo’s is echoed in Julia Álvarez’s life as well. In her essay “Imagining Motherhood”, Álvarez is in her mid-forties and childless.

\textsuperscript{129} Álvarez, \textit{¡Yo!}, p. 193
\textsuperscript{130} Álvarez, \textit{¡Yo!}, p. 295
\textsuperscript{131} Herrera Postlewate, p. 167-168
She considers having a child for the sake of being a mother and using that experience to make herself a better writer. But, a friend reminded her,

> What is the imagination for if everything requires life experience? She’s right. I can imagine motherhood. … and when my tías inquire after my sister and her new baby, and winking at Bill, ask us if we don’t feel inspired, I will have to say, “Yes, I feel inspired.” Inspired that is, to come home and write about it.\(^2\)

Álvarez used a fictionalized account of her own experiences in both *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and *¡Yo!* Álvarez even admitted in an interview that there were many autobiographically inspired characters and incidents. Things were based partially on her own experiences, but “there is a lot of fictionalizing, using the material of your life but being primarily interested in making a good story. It’s the combining, the exaggeration, the redoing, the adding on, that makes it original rather than autobiographical.”\(^3\) Essentially *In the Time of the Butterflies* is a re-birth or a translation of a moment in the history of the Dominican Republic through the lens of Álvarez’s memories, coupled of course with copious research. However, the research seems to be more in the style of an anthropologist than as a Dominican author’s homecoming. Álvarez is more of an outside observer than a fellow Dominican who shared a similar resistance experience.

Yolanda’s third husband, Doug Manley, continues the exploration of the theme of Yolanda as a hybrid character. He relates an episode where he is talking to Yo about his daughter, her step-daughter, Corey trying to indicate that Corey is beginning to come around to the idea of Yo and her father being married, two years after the fact. When

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\(^2\) Álvarez, *Something to Declare*, “Imagining Motherhood”, p. 100-101
\(^3\) Rosario-Sievert, p. 35
Doug cites Corey's choice to visit Spain for the summer as evidence towards her change of heart, Yolanda explodes.

‘How is that supposed to be coming around? ... I'm not Spanish! I'm from the D.R. People in Spain would probably think of me as a... a savage!’ Her face looks savage. The dramatic, overdone expressions.  

Part of Yolanda's anger comes from her husband's poor choice of words. He was imprecise. Although Yolanda does have a Hispanic heritage, she is not Spanish but rather Dominican-American. This mirrors some of Yo's earlier difficulties with romantic relationships and marriages. Her insistence on an accurately worded definition of herself is crucial to her character. However, in this case, Yo also reveals a superior/inferior dichotomy. Reminiscent of the way that her family felt superior to their maids, the way that her mother's relatives on the island felt superior to and separate from the economically and educationally disadvantaged islanders, she thinks that a Spaniard would find a Dominican to be savage, hearkening back to colonial times and Spain's power over much of the Caribbean.

The civilization/barbarism dichotomy was established before, but with respect to Haiti, but this time it is reintroduced in the shape of the Dominican Republic vis-à-vis Spain as the hegemonic center. This displacement goes hand in hand with Yo's own ambiguity, who, in the presence of these two Americans, defines herself as a savage.  

We first see the theme of civilization and barbarism in relation to their Haitian maid, Chucha. The de la Torre family and even some of the other maids find her to be barbaric and of an inferior race, culture and religion. Now it is Yo who has internalized some of this dichotomy. During her process of acculturation, she felt like the “other” at many

\[ ^{134} \text{Álvarez, } ¡Yo!, \text{ p. 262} \]
\[ ^{135} \text{Valerio-Holguín, p. 793} \]
points. She was made to feel that she was from an inferior culture and language.

Throughout ¡Yo! we see narrators who color their telling of their stories with stereotypical and negative/racist images, even when they are very unexpected. An excellent illustration of this is the priest that marries Yo and Doug. At their wedding, which took place in a field next to a sheep farm, an argument developed just as the ceremony was about to begin. The false assumptions that the priest has color his thoughts about what Dominican culture and its people are like.

The shouts grow in intensity. Maybe his mere presence will calm whatever hot tempers have flared or frayed nerves have snapped in this unseasonably hot weather. But surely, Yolanda’s tropical-island family – for he assumes the problem has arisen among her guests – surely they are used to conducting themselves civilly in much hotter weathers.136

He figures that Yolanda’s family and childhood friends are the ones with short tempers, the ones likely to break into an argument. He also figures that they are used to the hot weather, even though it is unseasonably warm and many of Yolanda’s relatives, just like her, are also several decades into their Dominican-American existences. Fernando Valerio-Holguín suggests that such examples offer the reader insight into Julia Álvarez’s ideology regarding civilization and barbarism, as well as the inferiority/superiority that comes with being an immigrant, a speaker of Spanish in an English dominant society, or a wealthy or poor person in an economically divided land.

¡Yo! is filled with stereotypes, negative images and false conceptions of Dominican culture. On many occasions, this inferior/superior dichotomy goes beyond the characters’ points of view, and so it seems to be part of an omniscient narrator’s postcolonial imaginary, expressing the author’s ideology.137

136 Álvarez, ¡Yo!, p. 236
137 Valerio-Holguín, p. 793
Valerio-Holguín seems to be denoting Homi Bhabha’s notion of the ‘postcolonial’ here. Instead of calling to mind the entire legacy of colonial rule in the Americas and the Caribbean, his suggestion that Álvarez’s own postcolonial ideology is revealed in the one-to-one dichotomies that many of her characters introduce is plausible. The creation of a hybrid ‘in-between’ category for immigrants like the García de la Torres is certainly related to the dilemma of developing their identities in the wake of their migration or exile. That many of the non-hybrid characters in the novel ¡Yo! approach the world in a binary manner where everyone is either an American or a foreigner (or a Dominican or a foreigner) plays into this opposition. Yolanda’s attempt to inhabit and embrace the hyphen, to warm to her dual and multicultural identity is part of Álvarez’s answer to the postcolonial dilemma as she sees it. Just as colonized peoples have historically responded to post-colonialism by writing their own histories and stories in the “Colonizer’s tongue”, so too has Yolanda the character and the alter ego embraced her new language of English and used it in the telling of her stories.

Sarita, the daughter of Marfa Trinidad (aka Primitiva), the García family’s maid offers her viewpoints on Yolanda through the lens of a sort-of-adopted-sister relationship. Sarita sees Yolanda as the older sister that she would like to emulate, but at the same time she is jealous. Although Sarita now lived in the United States with the Garcías and attended school in New York, she always felt the palpable separation. In the United States, she was not only an immigrant and a Dominican-American ‘other’ from the viewpoint of a typical Caucasian American, but she was also on the losing end of a class separation between her family and the García family. She shared much in common with them, but the economic and social divide created on the island accompanied her in her
new life, and affected her relationships, especially those with her “sisters.” Years later, after Primitiva passed away, Sarita attended Yolanda’s third wedding with the realization that,

the truth is these four García sisters are the closest I’ve got to family, to people who are like me: all of us caught between cultures – but with this added big difference, I’m also caught between classes, at least when I go back to the island to visit.138

The rigidity of the cultural divide is startling. Even though Sara earned her bachelors degree, went on to medical school and became a successful physician with her own sports medicine clinic, she still feels resentment for her class position. She takes great pleasure in her success as compared to Yolanda’s struggles, divorces and lack of children. Her resentment is well placed though because when we see a portion of the wedding scene narrated by Tía Flor, the wife whose deceased husband probably fathered Sarita, she is harsh in her rejection of Sara. “So even if she has the de la Torre dimple in her chin and the hazel eyes from the Swedish great-great-grandmother, even so, she is still the maid’s daughter, no relation to my family at all!” 139

One incident narrated by Sarita involves a report that Yolanda writes for college about the then high-school-aged Sarita’s acculturation process and that of other working-class Dominicans. She accompanies Sarita to school when she is home on break, and observes Sarita’s life. When the report is written, Sarita steals it and reads it, feeling violated.

Everything was set down more or less straight, for once. But I still felt as if something had been stolen from me. Later, in an anthropology course I took in college, we read about how certain primitive (how I hate that word!)
tribes won’t allow themselves to be photographed because they feel their spirits have been taken from them. Well, that’s they way I felt. Those pages were... a part of me. 140

Sarita’s attitude towards Yoyo’s project suggests a certain jealousy. She is jealous that Yolanda could possibly write such a recognizable version of Sarita’s life so well and so accurately despite several fictionalizations. At the same time, that Yolanda even considered her to be a subject worthy of research was both pride-inducing and anger-inducing. Pride that Yolanda would want to write a report about her, but anger that Yolanda felt the separation between them was so great. Why not write about her own acculturation process rather than appropriating Sarita’s as a way of understanding her own immigrant experience?

But, the noteworthy thing about this choice of Yo’s to write about Sarita’s acculturation process, complete with fictionalizations, was that it mirrored one of Sarita’s choices. Sarita had allowed her classmates to assume that she was a mysterious, rich Italian or Greek girl from an island that her wealthy parents owned. These misinterpretations were a way for Sarita to escape her situation as the recently immigrated daughter of the maid. “These were their misinterpretations, and I didn’t have enough English to catch them in time. ...So I let these lies ride, and they became the official story of my life.” Lies aside, Sarita did know who she was. She knew she was the daughter of a maid and an unknown father, which relegated her to a lower class and lower economic strata in the eyes of Dominicans. Her mother often warned her not to put on airs or to consider crossing the rigidly drawn lines between classes. Essentially, Sara was the victim of socially and culturally accepted socioeconomic discrimination. As a result Sara is resentful, but accepts the goodwill of the García sisters especially since she,

140 Álvarez, ¡Yo!, p. 66
in a way, feels sorry for them that they cannot find their place in the world. “Did the García girls themselves really know who they were? Hippy girls or nice girls? American or Dominican? English or Spanish? Pobrecitas.” Sarita’s questions were particularly apt in relation to Yolanda. While Yo never specifically voices these concerns, they are a strong thematic motif throughout *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, and to a lesser extent *¡Yo!* This cultural lack of surety demonstrated by the García girls is echoed again and again in episodes throughout their lives. “Even well into adulthood, Yo does not travel with ease between cultures.” When Corey, Yo’s step-daughter with her husband Doug has some fears about re-acclimating to the United States after her summer abroad in Spain, Doug remarks that Yolanda “always says that the first few days of re-entry are the hardest. You’re neither here nor there.” His observation gives the reader the impression that Yolanda is most sure about her hybrid identity when she is completely immersed in either the US or the Dominican Republic for a while. She has two slightly different identities, based in part on her surroundings and her own feelings, but also on the opinions and definitions of those around her. For example, Marie, the landlady considered Yo to be a definite foreigner, but a pleasant and accommodating one who fit in well in the US. Corey considers Yo to be her definitely Hispanic step-mother, the wrong ending to the story she wanted to live where her mother and father got back together. Meanwhile, José, the night watchman at Don Mundín’s guest house on the island and his family, find Yolanda to be strangely unconventional and egalitarian. They repeatedly say that she is not at all like other rich dominicanas. For instance, Yolanda

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141 Álvarez, *¡Yo!* p. 64
142 Sirias, p. 105
143 Álvarez, *¡Yo!* p. 263
asked that José and the rest of the workers call her by her name, instead of referring to her as Doña.

‘José, I’ve asked you all not to call me that. Why can’t you just call me Yolanda?’ He kept quiet, not knowing what to say. She had corrected him several times, but her bare name did not seem respectful enough. Finally, he recalled what Sergio always said when the lady made her unusual request. ‘You’re the one who knows’ – ‘If one more person tells me I’m the one who knows, I’m going to scream!!’ she threatened. 144

Yolanda is different than the other wealthy Dominicans because she treats everyone as an equal. Her time in the United States made it nearly impossible for her to tolerate one group’s dominance over another. “The poor, unaccustomed to wealthy people who are kind, consider Yo eccentric. She engages them in conversation. Yo also objects to the customary phrase “You’re the one who knows.” Both the ruling class and the poor have become immune over the centuries to the subservience implicit in this expression. Yo, though, visibly recoils every time she hears it.”145 Because of the different ways in which she is perceived and received, Yolanda herself is different in the two locales. Part of this character bending is what makes traveling with ease between the two worlds very difficult.

Sarita also takes note of the symbolic importance of the typewriter to Yolanda.

Then it was pound, pound, pound upstairs on the typewriter her father had given her that she didn’t let anyone else use, not even her mother to fill out Dr. García’s Workman’s Compensation forms. ‘That’s a selfish way to be with that typewriter,’ Mrs. García accused her. ‘It’s my one and only special thing,’ Yo fought back. Just that would have gotten me a slap on

144 Álvarez, ¡Yo!, p. 248
145 Sirias, p. 104
the mouth.¹⁴⁶

To Sarita, the typewriter showed the Americanization of Yolanda as a girl who discarded the Dominican tradition of subservient women and children showing complete respect and never questioning their parents or husbands. Sarita never would have fought her mother like this because it was not appropriate or proper according to her upbringing. Seen in another light, Yolanda’s selfishness with the typewriter is further proof that writing and the tools of the writer are personal and important to her. The typewriter, as the tool which immortalizes her writing, represents her only way to bridge the gap between the worlds that she is caught between; both the English/Spanish divide and the US/Dominican separation. Yolanda is fierce about wanting to be the voice that tells the stories. She wants to have the unique and solitary viewpoint. She wants to be the one with the power to selectively choose which experiences and memories are revealed, thereby defining the past, as well as herself and her family members through the things she chooses to say and chooses to omit. Being ardently defensive and possessive about her typewriter is in line with this element of her character’s identity. This selfishness is also a motivating factor for the novel’s untraditional structure. Those in Yolanda’s life who have had their life stories unfold in Yo’s books are tired of being “plagiarized into fictional characters.”¹⁴⁷ The prologue ends with Sandi talking to Yolanda’s answering machine, filling her sister in on all the news that went on while they were not on speaking terms. “I suppose it’s her one chance to say all she wants without someone in the family cutting in with their version of the story.”¹⁴⁸ This argument between the Garcías feeling violated and Yolanda defending her art and her need to tell stories that she is familiar

¹⁴⁶ Álvarez, ¡Yo!, p. 65
¹⁴⁷ Álvarez, ¡Yo!, p. 7
¹⁴⁸ Álvarez, ¡Yo!, p. 18
with is summed up by Yo as she speaks to Fifi: “What's art going to mirror if it isn’t life? Everybody, I mean everybody writes out of his or her own experience!” And so, the prologue sets the rest of the novel up for just that. Key characters in Yolanda’s life seek “revenge” by using their art to mirror Yolanda’s life. They each voice a section of the story based on their experiences with Yo. Through each of the different perspectives, new facets to Yolanda’s life are revealed and a more complete picture of the character of Yo comes together, but this time, without her editorializing. This more complete, honest and vulnerable version of Yo is exactly the kind of character she would counsel her creative writing students to create. Lou Castellucci, a former student in Yo’s Contemporary Novel class, recalled that

In conference she explained she meant writing stories out of his own life. He pushed his cap back and looked down at his palms as if to reassure himself of a lifeline. ‘That's kind of personal,’ he told her. ‘Yeah-yeah,’ she nodded enthusiastically, ‘stories are personal.’ The way she said it was like he was Helen Keller and she’d finally gotten through to him that water meant water. _150_

Yo wanted her students to write personal stories, ones they understood and had a stake in. She did the same in her own writing. She wrote fictionalized versions of her life, and while this trait was excellent under literary metrics, it was much harder to sell to family and friends who saw versions of themselves in her books.

Another narrator who ‘translates’ Yolanda for us is Carlos, her father. He concludes the novel and crafts his narrative in the form of a blessing. He understands that for Yolanda words are of the utmost importance and that stories are imbued with a sense of magic that can save. He recalls an incident from before the family was exiled to the

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_149_ Álvarez, _Yo!_, p. 9
_150_ Álvarez, _Yo!_, p. 172
United States. Yolanda and her sisters were visiting with a neighbor of theirs, General Molino. They were watching a cowboy movie and Yoyo boasted that her father had a bigger gun than the cowboy and that he was going to kill all the bad people with those guns. “She gives the general a big serious liar’s nod and says, yes, and El Jefe and maybe you, too, if you don’t stop tickling me.”¹⁵¹ This story endangered the family because her father actually did have an illegal gun hidden because he was part of the underground resistance against Trujillo. He silenced her with a severe belt lashing and demanded that she learn a lesson and never tell stories again. Years later, her father understood that Yo was sad and that she was having second thoughts about being a writer and a professor, but not a mother. He knew, the best way to reach her was through a story, a special blessing of his own design. “I have promised her a blessing to take the doubt away. A story whose true facts cannot be changed. But, I can add my own invention – that much I have learned from Yo. A new ending can be made out of what I now know.”¹⁵² It was Yolanda’s fate to be a storyteller and with her natural talent, it was also a blessing to be able to carry out and live her destiny. Carlos had reached a conclusion that “writing was important for the preservation of memory and identity.”¹⁵³ For his grandchildren and great-grandchildren to understand their heritage, their culture, their past and their relatives is important. He sees that Yo is uniquely equipped to ensure that the story is not forgotten or discarded. It is in this spirit that he offers her his blessing,

We left everything behind and forgot so much. Ours is now an orphan family. My grandchildren and great grandchildren will not know the way back unless they have a story. Tell them of our journey. Tell them the secret heart of your father and undo the old wrong. My Yo, embrace your

¹⁵¹ Álvarez, ¡Yo!, p. 305-306
¹⁵² Álvarez, ¡Yo!, p. 308
¹⁵³ Valerio-Holguín, p. 790
destino. You have my blessing, pass it on.\textsuperscript{154}

With the blessing of her father, the readers are able to assume that Yolanda casts her doubt aside and is renewed in her interest and ability to write, to write what she knows. Recalling earlier difficult times such as the disintegration of her first and second marriages, failed romantic relationships, trouble with the tenure process, insecurity about whether to pursue further graduate studies or pursue writing, and of course, her political exile and immigration to the United States, what helped her through each of these trials was writing. She felt safe within the language, and it helped her to prevail. A former student recalled, “What saved her was she could write books, and she just kept writing them and writing them, until something inside settled down.”\textsuperscript{155} This salvation quality to writing is a theme for Julia Álvarez, not just with Yolanda García. We also see this in her novel \textit{In the Time of the Butterflies}, where the youngest sister finds that writing in her journal or diary is very therapeutic and it helps her to get through rough patches, both at school and later while in prison. With this idea in mind, I recall a scene from Yolanda and Doug’s wedding,

> And in the midst of this clamorous clan, this kaleidoscope of colors, wanders the bride herself, Yolanda García in a gray tunic and pants. She seems almost subdued amid this tintinnabulation and emotional commotion as if she were trying to put all of these people together in her head, a quilting of lives, a collection of points of view.\textsuperscript{156}

Even as a bride, preparing to embark on another journey in her life, Yo was crafting and inventing a story, a collection of points of view that makes something that matters clear.

This quote explains Julia Álvarez’s narrative style and character creation process in these

\textsuperscript{154} Álvarez, \textit{Yo!}, p. 309
\textsuperscript{155} Álvarez, \textit{Yo!}, p. 175
\textsuperscript{156} Álvarez, \textit{Yo!}, p. 216
three novels. She varies the perspective and point of view chapter by chapter. In *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, the novel is constructed of three sections with five chapters each. The header of each page indicates whose perspective is being used or who is the main focus of that section or chapter. Sometimes it is one of the sisters; Carla, Sandi, Yoyo, or Fifi, sometimes it is several or all of the sisters, or their parents. In the novel *In the Time of the Butterflies*, again we have three sections, but this time with four chapters each – one for each sister; Dedé, Minerva, Patria y Maté; in different time periods leading up to the moment that is foreshadowed throughout – the murder of three of the Mirabal sisters. And, finally, in *¡Yo!* there are also three sections with five chapters each. As mentioned earlier, each chapter is named for the person from whose perspective this part of the story of Yo’s life is being told. Álvarez quilts together the varied lives of fictionalized people that relate to her experiences, a collection of distinct points of view, just as she suggests that Yo would. In doing so, the readers are shown that identity formation, at least for Yolanda, is a dialogue; a negotiation between the individual person and those that observe them from all sides. We see part of Yolanda in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and many of the gaps in our understanding of the complexity of her character are filled in with the help of the newly voiced perspectives in *¡Yo!* If you ask the individual who they are, what culture, language or other group they pertain to, you are shown part of their identity. Álvarez shows now that another part of identity is revealed through the viewpoints and conclusions of others. Whether the individual agrees with the varied conclusions or not, being aware of them and experiencing them is an altering experience that affects identity. Thus necessitating that the experience of exile
and immigration must play a role in forming identity because this type of experience shifts many of the external perspectives.
In the Time of the Butterflies: Dominican-American Translation

When reading Julia Álvarez's second novel, In the Time of the Butterflies (1994) alongside of ¡Yo! and How the García Girls Lost Their Accents, the similarity in the representation of the main characters is striking. There is a surprising and unconvincing consistency – the identities of several of the main characters are related to or similar to the characters in Álvarez's aforementioned early novels, especially in the construction of their rebellious natures. The García sisters were crafted in the forge of hybridity, immigration and autobiography, and yet they share much in common with the Mirabal sisters even though In the Time of the Butterflies does not focus specifically on those themes and stays within a purely Dominican context. The novel is constructed using a similar technique to How the García Girls Lost Their Accents and ¡Yo! in that there are multiple narrators and multiple voices seen both in first-person and third-person. Each of the novel's three chronologically separate sections has a chapter narrated by one of the four Mirabal sisters – Patria Mercedes, Dedé, Minerva and María Teresa. In the postscript to the novel, Álvarez indicates that through the novel she is trying to use the differing perspectives of the sisters to cumulatively voice the history of the Mirabal girls and what it must have been like to live under Trujillo's political dictatorship. At the same time, Álvarez admits that she did not trust herself to write a non-fiction account of this important incident in Dominican history, which shifts focus on to the fact that the characters, although based in fact, are completely fictitious.

The actual sisters I never knew, nor did I have access to
enough information or the talents and inclinations of a biographer to be able to adequately record them. As for the sisters of legend, wrapped in superlatives and ascended into myth, they were finally also inaccessible to me. I realized, too, that such deification was dangerous, the same god-making impulse that had created our tyrant. ...So what you will find here are the Mirabals of my creation, made up but, I hope, true to the spirit of the real Mirabals.\textsuperscript{157}

Through Álvarez’s essay “Chasing the Butterflies” in \textit{Something to Declare}, we learn that not only is she hesitant to write an account of the Mirabals for fear of inadequately representing them, but that the story is one very close to her own. The martyred Mirabal sisters were part of the same underground resistance against Trujillo’s dictatorship that Álvarez’s father (and not coincidentally, Dr. García) was a part of. Her father abandoned the movement in order to keep his family safe by seeking political exile in a migration to the United States. “Here, just four months after we had escaped, they were murdered on a lonely mountain road... And so it was that my family’s emigration to the United States started at the very times their lives ended.”\textsuperscript{158} The Mirabal, García and Álvarez families all had similar histories due to their Dominican roots and involvement in the underground resistance movement seeking to unseat Trujillo from power. The crucial difference occurred when the Álvarez and García families opted to leave the Dominican Republic and move to the United States to avoid peril and save themselves. The Mirabals did not choose this option; it may not have even been available to them given their lack of (known) international connections and their middle-class rather than upper-class status. Álvarez indicated that she was very much moved by the story of the girls, their bravery, what inspired them to rebel, and the knowledge that had things been slightly different,

\textsuperscript{157} Álvarez, \textit{In the Time of the Butterflies}, p. 324
\textsuperscript{158} Álvarez, \textit{Something to Declare}, “Chasing the Butterflies”, p. 198
she or members of her family could have shared their fate. "The story seemed to me almost impossible to write. It was too perfect, too tragic, too awful. The girls’ story didn’t need a story." However, Álvarez obviously changed her mind. She traveled to the Dominican Republic and met with several of the six Mirabal orphans, the sons and daughters of Patria, Minerva and Maté, as well as an aunt of theirs, other surviving members of the underground movement who knew the girls, and later, Dedé, the surviving sister. After these meetings, Álvarez put aside her fears to write the novel because for her “keeping the Mirabal sisters’ stories from being forgotten is significant.” The story had to be preserved because without it, the healing process and a wide public and private understanding would never develop.

I wanted to understand the living, breathing women who had faced all the difficult challenges and choices of those terrible years. I believed that only by making them real, alive, could I make them mean anything to the rest of us.161

Because of the genesis of the novel, there is a self-reflexive aspect to the story and the characterizations. The story opens with a Dominican-American woman returning to the island in order to understand and discover the real Mirabal sisters so that she can separate them from myth and write a book about them. This gringa-dominicana interviewer is “the presence of the author’s alter-ego or fictional self”162, a “thinly-veiled, self-reflecting, self-deprecating representation of the author Julia Álvarez herself.”163 By contrasting her history via a representation of herself with the Mirabal sisters, we see two alternatives to opposing Trujillo’s rule; becoming the exiled Dominican-American or

159 Álvarez, Something to Declare, “Chasing the Butterflies”, p. 202
160 Gómez Vega, “Radicalizing Good Catholic Girls: Shattering the ‘Old World’ Order in Julia Álvarez’s In the Time of the Butterflies.”, p. 96
161 Álvarez, Something to Declare, “Chasing the Butterflies”, p. 203
162 Sirias, p. 69
163 Zakrzewski Brown, p. 100
staying on the island and becoming the martyred victims of the dictator’s murderous regime. Zakrzewski Brown proposes that the role of the gringa-dominicana is an attempt to characterize the situation of the other Dominican … by mediating with the past, attempts to exonerate her own guilt for not having shared and experienced the past with her Dominican compatriots.164

This is significant because as the one who is entrusted with hearing Dedé’s story and conveying it literally, that the interviewer/novelist is a Dominican-American, puts the novel in the hands of someone who inhabits and views things from a culturally hybrid space. Perhaps this construct is to blame for some of the novel’s unconvincing character representations. Fernando Valerio-Holguín suggests “Álvarez’s cultural-hybrid condition allows her, in English and from the United States, to attempt a “double articulation” as a way of incorporating herself in Dominican culture and discourse formation processes.”165 Once inside the process, she can try to alter or change the discourse through her retelling of the Mirabal story. Álvarez endeavors to replace the traditionally male history with a feminine version through giving “real” voices to each of the revolutionary sisters. In a sense, this characterization is effective in denouncing Trujillo’s dictatorship from both political and gender exploitation lines. On the other hand, entering the discourse and allowing the story to be told through the filter of a Dominican-American individual causes many of the characters, especially those of the Mirabals to be stereotypical versions of themselves endowed with some unexpected characteristics of duality and hybridity.

164 Zakrzewski Brown, p. 100-101
165 Valerio-Holguín, p. 798
In trying to avoid lionizing the Mirabals, Isabel Zakrzewski Brown suggests that Álvarez

informed by social constructs characteristic of conventional occidental perceptions of ideal women, fashions stereotypes, rather than real people. These include: the pious one Patria, the pragmatic one Dedé, the rebellious one Minerva and the innocent one Maté.¹⁶⁶

These four sisters take on the Trujillo regime in different ways owing to their formulaic characterizations. As the pragmatic one, Dedé never allowed herself intimate involvement in the underground movement. Being the practical one, Dedé did not see the logic to openly shunning Trujillo, even though she too shared much of her sisters’ revulsion and hatred. An example of her inability to see the sense behind joining the resistance is a scene where she is asking Virgilio Morales, one of the leaders of the underground movement and a former boyfriend of Minerva’s, where he found his courage to perpetrate such dangerous plans against the government.

‘Why Dedé,’ he said, ‘it’s not courage. It’s common sense.’ ‘Common sense? Sitting around dreaming while the secret police hunted you down!’¹⁶⁷

She, being more logical felt that the risks outweighed the benefits and that it was not wise to join the efforts. However, this is not to say that Dedé did not sympathize with her sisters’ cause. In fact, she had come to the same realizations about Trujillo’s rule,

The regime was going insane, issuing the most ludicrous regulations. A heavy fine was now imposed on anyone who wore khaki trousers and shirts of the same color. It was against the law now to carry your suit jacket over your arm. Lio was right; this was an absurd and crazy regime. It had to be brought down.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ Zakrzewski Brown, p. 110
¹⁶⁷ Álvarez, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, p. 77
¹⁶⁸ Álvarez, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, p. 78
Dédé starts to think for herself and she understands the need to remove Trujillo from power, but fear, logic and her soon-to-be husband prevent her from ever acting on her understanding. Her cousin/fiancé, Jaimito discounted her fears and offered party-line explanations as to why every ridiculous thing that El Jefe proposed was perfectly reasonable.

‘Why are you so worked up, my love?’ Dédé burst into tears. ‘Don’t you see?’ He held her as she cried. And then in his bossy, comforting voice he explained things. Same-color khaki outfits were what the military wore, and so a dress distinction had to be made. A jacket over the arm could be hiding a gun, and there had recently been many rumors about plots against El Jefe. ‘See my darling?’

Jaimito patronizes Dédé with his explanations and even though she does not agree with his rationalizations, she is a more typically traditional character and she would not risk acting against the wishes of her soon-to-be husband. She concedes to his actions despite her sharing of her sisters’ ideology.

Her sisters get more deeply involved in the underground movement, eventually leading to the imprisonment of Minerva, Maté, their husbands, and other resistance leaders and sympathizers. The ultimate consequence of their challenging the rule of Dominican patriarchy and dictatorship is the Trujillo-ordered murder of the resistant and resilient Mirabal sisters, Las Mariposas. They were killed on their return trip from visiting their husbands in a remote prison. Their deaths paint the most important element of Dédé’s identity, that of the survivor. As the surviving sister pragmatic even in loss, Dédé “can find no meaning in their sacrifice because she never shares their revolutionary zeal. Dédé sees only the waste in the loss of her sisters’ lives.”

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169 Álvarez, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, p. 78
170 Gómez Vega, “Radicalizing Good Catholic Girls”, p. 106
Dédé spoke with the gringa-dominicana author and revealed that she had been the one that people came to, to tell their stories of loss. As the surviving sister, she became the repository for all the fragments of stories of personal loss caused by Trujillo. She began as the sympathetic listener but had become the oracle, the one that needed to tell the story about her sisters, hoping that "through the tale of the Butterflies’ sacrifice, the people of the Dominican Republic can come to terms with their personal losses."\(^{171}\)

After the fighting was over and we were a broken people – she shakes her head sadly at this portrait of our recent times – that’s when I opened my doors, and instead of listening, I started talking. We had lost hope, and we needed a story to understand what had happened to us.\(^{172}\)

To respond to the void that was left in the wake of the Mirabal murders and the end of the Trujillo regime, Dédé had taken on the role of oracle to tell the story that needed to be told. In this way, Dédé is like Yolanda, using words and stories to help heal. There is a power to her words that mirrors the actions of her sisters and their comrades. The power is a “liberatory power of speaking out in response to a dictatorship that attempted to silence all resistance.”\(^{173}\)

While helping the people of the Dominican Republic overcome their ideological losses, Dédé and her remaining family, especially her six now-motherless nieces and nephews, Noris, Nelson, Raúl Ernesto, Minou, Manolito and Jacqueline, had more personal losses to cope with.

The complete list of losses. ... Maybe these aren’t losses. Maybe that’s a wrong way to think of them. The men, the children, me. We went our own ways, we became ourselves. Just that. And maybe that is what is means to be a free people,

\(^{171}\) Sirias, p. 67
\(^{172}\) Álvarez, In the Time of the Butterflies, p. 313
\(^{173}\) Rich, p. 180
and I should be glad?^174

Dedé realizes that although she, their mother, the spouses (Manolo, Pedrito, Leandro) and the children of Las Mariposas survived it was not the same. They had to work through the horrible crime and heal the wounds of their great losses – sisters, daughters, wives, sisters-in-law, mothers, aunts and friends.

With the help of Virgilio Morales, an exiled leader of the underground movement, Dedé sees that in the eyes of the ideological, Las Mariposas, her sisters’ sacrifice made huge differences for the Dominican Republic.

> The nightmare is over, Dedé. Look at what the girls have done. He gestures expansively. He means the free elections, bad presidents now put in power properly, not by army tanks. He means our country beginning to prosper, Free Zones going up everywhere, the coast a clutter of clubs and resorts. We are now the playground of the Caribbean, who were once its killing fields.”^175

Seeing what the rebellion and sacrifice of her sisters meant to others and how important the resistance to oppression was for them, showed a different viewpoint than her own interpretation where the loss of her sisters’ lives were nothing more than horrible losses for her family. This contrast is also seen between the Dominican-American writer and Dedé.

> The writer may want to romanticize history to invest it with meaning; she may want to argue that freedom is worth the sacrifice of human life, but the people who survive the wreckage of history know better than to think that there is anything more important than the loss of their loved ones.^176

To relieve Dedé of the exhausting and permanent role she accepted as both listener and oracle of the story of Las Mariposas, the thinly fictionalized version of Álvarez steps in to

^174 Álvarez, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, p. 317
^175 Álvarez, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, p. 318
^176 Gómez Vega, “Radicalizing Good Catholic Girls”, p 108
share the burdens of making sure the story gets told and that the Mirabal sisters’
resistance and sacrifice are not forgotten.

Patria, the eldest Mirabal sister, is represented as the pious one. Much of her
character’s identity is formed by or related to her religious beliefs. As a schoolgirl, Patria
felt that she had a calling to religious life. It was a trait that was obvious to all that came
in contact with her; her parents felt that she was intensely spiritual and the nuns at her
school invited her to join their order. However, Patria felt torn between a religious life
and the desires of her flesh. When she met Pedro, her future husband, the conflict
resolved itself – she could marry a man without having to give up God or her devotion to
helping the Church.

At first, her religiosity prevented her from understanding the outrage that Minerva
and the rest of the underground resistance felt.

I couldn’t understand why Minerva was getting so
worked up. El Jefe was no saint, everyone knew that,
but among the bandidos that had been in the National
Palace, this one at least was building churches and
schools, paying off our debts... But I couldn’t reason
with reason herself. I tried a different tack. ‘It’s a dirty
business, you’re right. That’s why we women shouldn’t
get involved.’

Patria saw the good in the wicked regime. It may have been oppressive, but at least it was
doing some positive things for the country. Because no one could understand her
accepting perspective, she turned to traditional values to help convince Minerva that she
ought not to get involved. An underground political resistance is a dangerous, risky and
questionable activity, especially for a woman. Women were not readily welcomed into

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177 Álvarez, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, p. 51
the spheres of higher education or politics in the Dominican Republic in the mid-1900’s and Patria used this traditional gender role stereotyping to try to make her point.

What would make a traditional and dutifully religious daughter decide to join the resistance? What would sway her opinions to be sympathetic to the movement? Álvarez seems to suggest that the cause of Patria’s radicalizing conversion comes through the church. Pregnant years after her first two children, Patria is considering names for her soon-to-be-born son.

I looked down at my belly, as if Our Lord might write out the name on my cotton housedress. And suddenly, it was as if His tongue spoke in my mouth. On my own, I would never have thought of naming my son after revolutionaries. ‘Ernesto’, I said, ‘I’m going to name him Raúl Ernesto....’ Like I said, it must have been the Lord’s tongue in my mouth because back then, I was running scared. Not for myself, but for those I loved.178

This passage shows subtle support for her sisters and the ideals of the revolutionary resistance. By choosing the name Raúl Ernesto for her son, Patria evokes the imagery and ideology of the recent liberation of Cuba. Batista had fled and Fidel Castro had entered Havana to liberate the country along with his triumphant brother and comrade, Raúl Castro and Ernesto “Che” Guevara. She found strength in the Lord in order to consider naming her son as a way of letting her sisters know that she was with them, at the very least, in spirit.

However, Patria had an even more significant religion-inspired change to undergo. Patria went on a religious retreat in the mountains hoping to find answers to how to renew her faith while things in her country were so uncertain. While on the retreat, Patria witnesses an attack where a young rebel is killed right in front of her. The

178 Álvarez, In the Time of the Butterflies, p. 151
boy reminded her of her son Nelson in age and political inclination. This reminder served as a brutal realization; Trujillo and his dictatorship could hurt her by threatening the things she loved most, her children, her family, the church, her country. She learns that "when the country is in chaos, no one is safe ... there is no place to hide from injustice."\footnote{Gómez Vega, "Radicalizing Good Catholic Girls", p. 99}

Coming down that mountain, I was a changed woman. I may have worn the same sweet face, but now I was carrying not just my child, but that dead boy as well. My stillborn of thirteen years ago. My murdered son of a few hours ago. I cried all the way down that mountain. I looked out the spider-webbed window of that bullet-riddled car at brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, one and all, my human family. Then I tried looking up at our Father, but I couldn't see His Face for the dark smoke hiding the tops of those mountains. I made myself pray so I wouldn't cry. But my prayers sounded more like I was trying to pick a fight.\footnote{Álvarez, In the Time of the Butterflies, p. 162}

While her son Nelson was not literally murdered that day, armed guards with machetes and machine guns killed 49 men and boys in the mountains. The horror and brutality of their deaths was not something that Patria could ignore. She could not make sense of what happens, even when she turns to God. He is not present in this atrocity. Thus, Patria became a revolutionary; she felt she had to join the cause actively to oppose the cruel dictatorship.

As Charlotte Rich suggests, Patria thrives in "her domestic, submissive role as a wife and mother in Dominican society of the 1950's... a devotedly religious young woman... previously defined by motherhood and domesticity."\footnote{Rich, p. 170} This makes her one of the more surprising converts to the cause, perhaps the least likely sister to become a revolutionary. However, her unexpected and religiously based "revolutionary
conversion” is surprising because it is shown through the only full dimension of data that we as readers are offered. In an attempt to avoid deification and to maintain authenticity, Álvarez ends up characterizing Patria in too one-dimensional a manner. We are shown the religious aspect, the one side to Patria’s character and personality that is most easily understood and documented. However, we do not see many episodes regarding Patria or her thoughts, so it is harder to accept her sudden conversion from submissive, traditional and domestic to a courageous resister in the ecclesiastical forces without seeing more evidence. We also do not see opposition to her sudden conversion. There are some small hints that Patria is more multi-dimensional than we know. When Patria’s husband Pedro was imprisoned for involvement in the resistance, he was tortured both physically and emotionally. Captain Peña reported cruelly back to Patria,

‘Your husband was offered his freedom and his farm back – ’ My heart leapt! ‘– if he proved his loyalty to El Jefe by divorcing his Mirabal wife.’ ‘Oh?’ I could feel my heart like a hand making a fist in my chest. Peña’s sharp, piglike eyes were watching me. And then he had his dirty little say. ‘You Mirabal women must be something else’ – he fondled himself – ‘to keep a man interested when all he can do with his manhood is pass water!’182

That Peña sees the Mirabals as “something else” helps the reader to understand both the sadistic nature of the dictatorship’s practices and the unique qualities possessed by the Mirabal sisters. “They are the new women of Santo Domingo, the ones who will not sacrifice their consciences to the socially prescribed roles of mothers and wives... Pedro, Manolo and Leandro know that their wives are equal partners in a revolutionary ideal for a better world.” 183

182 Álvarez, In the Time of the Butterflies, p. 204
183 Gómez Vega, “Radicalizing Good Catholic Girls”, p. 104
After Patria’s conversion, we see that her opinion about El Jefe had changed drastically. There used to be a portrait of Trujillo in their home, next to a portrait of Jesus. The family would participate in what Bridget Kevane calls the “culture of unwavering adulation.” They pledged their allegiance to Trujillo and celebrated him in mandatory parades, holidays, and parties. Patria’s opinion after she saw the rebels martyred in the mountains was now towards the other extreme. When her son, Nelson, was to be freed from prison in a ceremony,

El Jefe entered in a wash of camera flashes. I don’t know what I thought I’d see – I guess after three months of addressing him, I was sure I’d feel a certain kinship with the stocky, overdressed man before me. But it was just the opposite. The more I tried to concentrate on the good side of him, the more I saw a vain, greedy, unredeemed creature. Maybe the evil one had become flesh like Jesus! Goosebumps jumped all up and down my bare arms.\(^{185}\)

Trujillo had fallen in Patria’s esteem from a near-deity to an embodiment of the Devil.

Meanwhile, María Teresa or Maté, the youngest Mirabal sister was taking a very different path towards her contribution to the resistance. As the innocent one, Maté represents the romantic side of revolution. We see her childlike romantic notions through her diary entries. Upon receiving her first diary as a gift from Minerva, she says “Minerva says keeping a diary is also a way to reflect and reflection deepens one’s soul. It sounds so serious.”\(^{186}\) However, the sections narrated by María Teresa rather than involving intense internal monologues, begin largely as journal and diary entries together with drawings of varied things beginning with sketches of new shoes and bathing suits

\(^{184}\) Kevane, p. 30
\(^{185}\) Álvarez, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, p. 224
\(^{186}\) Álvarez, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, p. 30
and progress to diagrams of her prison and schematics for a bomb as her character
develops through the processes of coming of age and political awakening.

We see that she starts out very naïve and innocent. She does not question and happily
accepts the governmentally mandated praises for Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina. His
term as dictator began five years before Maté is born, so offering unabashed praise to him
for his leadership is all she knows.

While we’re waiting, I am taking these few minutes to
wish El Jefe Happy Benefactor’s Day with all my heart.
I feel so lucky that we have him for a president. I am even
born the same month he is (October) and only nine days
(and forty-four years!) apart. I keep thinking it shows
something special about my character.187

Through Maté’s narration we see that she is both an intellectual and a romantic.
Showing her intellectual side, she often quotes and tries to understand her sister Minerva
in her diary. For example, “Minerva says a soul is like a deep longing in you that you can
never fill up, but you try. That is why there are stirring poems and brave heroes who die
for what is right.”188 She tries to comprehend things that her sister says, especially the
political comments that are out of her grasp. She deeply respects Minerva, nine years her
elder. Maté’s curiosity and desire to understand Minerva’s secret political activities in
the underground is where her political conversion begins.

Her innocence slowly starts fading as she comes to appreciate the power and risks
involved in the resistance movement’s activities. When the police captured Hilda, a
friend of Minerva’s, Maté begins to be conscious of the dangers that her sister and her
friends are facing.

Everyone in Don Horacio’s meeting group has been

187 Álvarez, In the Time of the Butterflies, p. 37
188 Álvarez, In the Time of the Butterflies, p. 31
told to destroy anything that would make them guilty. Minerva is burying all her poems and papers and letters. She says she hadn’t meant to read my diary, but it was lying around, and she noticed Hilda’s name.... She says we have to bury you too. It won’t be forever, my dear Little Book, I promise. As soon as things are better, Minerva says we can dig up our treasure box.  

Maté has to bury her diary to avoid the possibility that her writings could incriminate her, Minerva and anyone else she mentions by name, if Trujillo’s police should find her diary. Thus, Maté agrees to bury her diary and this burial, “superimposed on the funeral of Patria’s (stillborn) child, represents the death of Maté’s innocence.” This coming of age is accelerated as Maté realizes the coming threats and chooses to become more involved in the movement. Through Minerva and the forced burial of her diary, Maté learns the importance and power behind words. Much like Yolanda in How the García Girls Lost Their Accents, Maté turns to writing to help her through difficult times and to help document the good times. She writes extensively about the two largest concerns in her life; boys and politics. She imagines dating and marrying different boys that she has crushes on going into detail to help herself cope with being single.

Berto & Maté? Maté & Raúl? Forever???? I keep hoping that someone special will come into my life soon. Someone who can ravish my heart with the flames of love! I try to put together the perfect man from all the boys I know. It’s sort of like making a menu: Manolo’s dimples, Raúl’s fairytale-blue eyes, Berto’s curly hair and smile, Erasmo’s beautiful hands, Federico’s broad shoulders and Carlos’s nice fundillos (Yes, we girls notice them too!)

Even as she is beginning to become more politically aware, she still expresses her romantic desires in a juvenile way. However, this changes when she meets Leandro

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189 Álvarez, In the Time of the Butterflies, p. 43
190 Sirias, p. 64
191 Álvarez, In the Time of the Butterflies, p. 120
192 Álvarez, In the Time of the Butterflies, p. 126
“Palomino” Guzmán Rodríguez. She falls in love with him and wants to become a full-fledged revolutionary, combining her two largest attractions – men and the revolution.

I told Minerva and Manolo right out, I wanted to join… I don’t want to be babied anymore. I want to be worthy of Palomino…. I’ve lost all interest in my studies. I just go to classes in order to keep my cover as a second-year architecture student. My true identity now is Mariposa #2.  

Maté and Minerva were later imprisoned for their involvement in the resistance movement against Trujillo. During this imprisonment, Maté changed and matured even more. “She develops a mind of her own, no longer following in Minerva’s footsteps or unquestioningly accepting her directions.” She is the voice that describes the horrors of prison life. She documents torture and humiliation of the prisoners through descriptions of electro-shock prods, hunger, a complete lack of privacy, sexual harassment and other punishments. However, we see that Maté retains some of her compassion despite the awful conditions. Maté is chosen to have an interview with the Organization of American States Peace Committee, probably because the guards think she will not complain. It would be suicide to talk openly as the prisoners are fairly sure that the interview rooms are bugged, but dropping a secret note might help the problem of violence and poor treatment in the prison. Minerva pens a memo on behalf of the 14th of June Movement and she suggests that Maté hide this memo along with pages of her journal that document their awful conditions and try to pass them on to the committee in secret. She urges Maté to be revolutionary and to do what is right in order to stop things. She tries to assuage Maté’s fears that Trujillo would find out about the journal pages and punish the guards that were mentioned as being sympathetic.

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193 Álvarez, In the Time of the Butterflies, p. 142-143
194 Sirias, p. 65
Minerva holds me by the arms. 'Revolution is not always pretty, Maté. Look at what they did to Leandro, to Manolo, what they did to Florentino, to Papilín, to you, for God’s sake. It won’t stop unless we stop it. Besides, those are just rumors about the guardias being shot.'

In the earlier parts of the novel, Maté would have unquestioningly done what Minerva had asked because of her admiration for her sister. Now, Maté chose her own path and refuses to become a subject of protest. She gives the anonymous 14th of June memo to the OAS, but decides not to reveal anything further.

The second note with my story was lodged further up in my braid. Maybe it was the sight of that ribbon Santiclé had given me when I was so broken, I don’t know. But right then and there, I decided not to drop the second note. I just couldn’t take a chance and hurt my friend.

Even though her graphic descriptions of prison life would likely have helped her situation and exonerated some of her compatriots, Maté was unwilling to take the risk that the rumors about the guards being killed for being found to be sympathetic was true. Maté’s version of what was right needed to include being free from any self-perceived betrayal of her friends or associates.

Minerva, the rebellious one, is the most educated sister, as well as “the most overtly political of the four, revealing an ambitious, brave and feminist voice.” The characteristic that most held the identity of Minerva apart from those of her sisters is that she did not need a cathartic moment of realization or conversion to become revolutionary, she was always rebellious and independent. Even as a child she challenged her parents and negotiated with them to get what she wanted. For example, when Patria was going to attend Catholic boarding school, Minerva wanted to go too, so she began to lobby. She

195 Álvarez, In the Time of the Butterflies, p. 251
196 Álvarez, In the Time of the Butterflies, p. 252
197 Rich, p. 167
did not hold much credence in the traditional, patriarchal idea that in a family of
daughters, one should stay home and help and care for her parents. Minerva was an
intellectual. She wanted an education and wasn’t going to back down until she got it.

When Papá asked which one of us would stay as his
little helper, he looked directly at me. I didn’t say a
word. I kept studying the floor like maybe my school
lessons were chalked on those boards. I didn’t need to
worry. Dedé was always the smiling little miss. “I’ll
stay and help, Papá.” Papá looked surprised because
really Dedé was a year older than me. She and Patria
should have been the two to go away. But then, Papá
thought it over and said Dedé could go along, too.¹⁹⁸

Their father relented, allowing all three older girls to attend boarding school, as long as
Dedé stayed behind until December to help with the accounting records and books during
the busy harvest season.

Once at school, Minerva comes of age both literally and figuratively. She makes a
new friend, Sinita Perozo, who confides in her about atrocities that Trujillo and his
regime have perpetrated.

‘But Sinita, one thing. How is this Trujillo’s secret?’
‘You still don’t get it? Minerva, don’t you see? Trujillo
is having everyone killed!’ I lay awake most of that night,
thinking about Sinita’s brother and her uncles and her father
and this secret of Trujillo that nobody but Sinita seemed
to know about.¹⁹⁹

Having learned this truth about Trujillo and having that evidence run counter to her
lessons learned as a young girl to respect, honor and adulate Trujillo, life got more
complicated for her now that her eyes were fully open to the awful situation. Creating a
parallel with this political coming of age, Minerva also began her menstrual cycle for the
first time as this revelation came. “I lifted the covers, and for a moment, I couldn’t make

¹⁹⁸ Álvarez, In the Time of the Butterflies, p. 13
¹⁹⁹ Álvarez, In the Time of the Butterflies, p. 19
sense of the dark stains on the bottom sheet. Then I brought up my hand from checking myself. Sure enough, my complications had started.” In both cases, Minerva has come to the end of her childhood both through her loss of innocence vis-à-vis Sinita’s story and as represented by having her period and “becoming a woman”.

Besides being intellectually driven, rebellious towards her parents and politically aware, Minerva was also socially liberal. She figured out that her father, Enrique Mirabal had two families, one legitimate and another illegitimate. Her father had four daughters with a campesina woman nearby. Minerva recalled,

> Every time I drove the Ford, these raggedy girls came running after me, holding out their hands, calling for mints. I studied them. There were three that ran to the road whenever they heard the car, a fourth one sometimes in the arms of the oldest. Four girls, I checked, three in panties, and the baby naked. One time, I stopped at the side of the road and stared at their Mirabal eyes. ‘Who is your father?’ I asked point blank.

When the girls heard the car, they were expecting Enrique not Minerva, as it was his car and he was the one that most often drove it. Unlike her sisters or the typical traditional Catholic Dominican woman, Minerva was not angry, nor did she feel hurt and betrayed like Maté did. She accepted her half-sisters and when her father died, she charitably put money aside from her inheritance for their education.

Minerva also matured further upon meeting Virgilio Morales, a young man on the medical school faculty at the university. He had earned his medical degree in Venezuela and was a revolutionary who opened Minerva’s eyes to new political doctrines, communist ideas and information about the escalating Cuban Revolution. When her

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200 Álvarez, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, p. 20
201 Álvarez, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, p. 85
family became aware of Lío’s political leanings, they were worried and outraged. As an “enemy of the state,” Lío could endanger their daughters, their family. Minerva “argued eloquently that Mamá herself had heard Lío’s ideas, and she had even agreed with them. “But I didn’t know they were communist ideas!” Mamá protested.”\textsuperscript{202}

Unlike Maté, Minerva was able to separate her romantic feelings and her political feelings. She learned from him and felt that she had experienced a political awakening, she cared for him deeply but she did not love him. “All I knew was I was not falling in love, no matter how deserving I thought Lío was. So what? What’s more important, romance or revolution? But a little voice kept saying, \textit{Both, both, I want both.}”\textsuperscript{203} Minerva was determined to participate in the revolution and find love. As usual, she would try to get what she wanted and avoid what she did not want.

A further example of Minerva’s rebellious and untraditional nature comes out in the Discovery Day Dance that was held in the capital in Trujillo’s honor. The Mirabals had been invited to attend and for fear of drawing attention to themselves by sending regrets, they had to attend. During the evening, Minerva finds herself dancing against her will with El Jefe. She does not show Trujillo the respect and reverence that he is accustomed to.

‘Your medals,’ I complain, pointing to the sash across his chest. ‘They are hurting me.’ Too late, I recall his attachment to those \textit{chapitas}. He glares at me, and then slips the sash over his head and holds it out. An attendant quickly and reverently collects it. El Jefe smiles cynically. ‘Anything else bother you about my dress I could take off?’ He yanks me by the wrist, thrusting his pelvis at me in a vulgar way, and I can see my hand in an endless slow motion rise – a mind all its own – and come down on the astonished,

\textsuperscript{202} Álvarez, \textit{In the Time of the Butterflies}, p. 74
\textsuperscript{203} Álvarez, \textit{In the Time of the Butterflies}, p. 86
made-up face.\textsuperscript{204}

This slap catapulted Minerva into the most definable characteristic of her identity, her hatred for the dictator. "It marked the beginning of a highly personal antagonism – an antagonism that proves fatal for both of them."\textsuperscript{205} She defies him; he does not like being defied. She is a threat to him because she is willing to question him and act on what she questions. Fernando Valerio-Holguín points out that besides being the beginning of a more highly charged antagonism between the two, the scene at the dance is also repeating an allegoric gesture present in the founding events of the Dominican nation – that of Enriquillo’s wife Mencía, who rejects the Spanish conquistador Valenzuela, or that of the legendary white woman who slaps the black Haitian soldier during the 1821-1824 occupation.\textsuperscript{206}

Minerva was already entering the realm of deification and myth when she repeated this allegorical gesture, whether it was done with symbolic intent or not. Certainly, this scene serves to foreshadow the personal antagonism between Minerva and El Jefe, as well as to hint at the legendary role Minerva would represent for this resistance movement.

This scene is also endowed with a different symbolic meaning, which is also significant in understanding the character of Minerva. Her rebellious ways make her in many ways similar to the Garfía girls upon their immigration to the United States. Once there, they questioned patriarchal traditions and found independence and freedom. In the US, they inverted the patriarchal structure symbolically. Here, in Minerva Mirabal’s case, the patriarchy literally crumbles. After Minerva slaps Trujillo, her father is imprisoned for no crime other than being Minerva’s father. While in prison, he is starved and suffers a heart attack. Lack of timely medical care combined with the lack of nourishment and proper

\textsuperscript{204} Álvarez, \textit{In the Time of the Butterflies}, p. 100
\textsuperscript{205} Sirias, p. 60
\textsuperscript{206} Valerio-Holguín, p. 797
shelter rendered him mentally unstable. Soon later, Enrique passed away. “Thus, Don Enrique becomes the first casualty in the struggle between Trujillo and Minerva Mirabal, between the tyrannical old order of Dominican men and the new Dominican woman.”

Minerva did not back down and continued to showcase her trademark rebelliousness even when called in by General Federico Fiallo and Don Anselmo Paulino to be interrogated for her possible involvement with subversives.

> Once the toad and I are seated, the general turns back to his desk. ‘You must look on me as your protector. Young ladies are the flowers of our country.’... ‘I am here to ask you some questions about a young man I believe you are acquainted with.’ He looks squarely at me. ‘Virgilio Morales.’ I feel ready – as I wasn’t before – to risk the truth. ‘Yes, I know Virgilio Morales.’ Magic Eye is at the edge of his chair, the veins on this neck showing. ‘You lied to El Jefe. You claimed you didn’t know him, didn’t you?’... ‘Yes, I denied knowing him. I was afraid’ – again I choose my words carefully – ‘Of displeasing El Jefe.’ It is just short of an apology, all I will give.

Even in her answers to questions that could endanger her and her family, she chooses a defiant path where she uses the words that are expected with a tone or meaning that is quite rebellious. Her penchant for carefully choosing her words in this scene, as well as in others shows that she too, like Yolanda García and her sister Maté understands the power of language. The interrogators cannot be unhappy with her answer; through her words she implies devotion to El Jefe through the admission of being afraid to displease him. These carefully chosen words also resonate for Minerva, as they are not a lie. She did not disclose the information because she was afraid that Trujillo and his associates would use her acquaintanceship with Virgilio Morales to hurt her, Lío or her family.

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Gómez Vega, “Radicalizing Good Catholic Girls”, p. 104
Alvarez, In the Time of the Butterflies, p. 109
After her father’s release from prison, Minerva continued to be brazenly rebellious, even after what Trujillo did to her father. She decided to speak up to demand something that she wanted.

‘My dream of going to law school.’ He strokes his short, brush mustache with his fingers, musing. His gaze falls on the dice. Slowly, his lips twist in a wily smile. ‘I’ll tell you what. I’ll let you toss for the privilege. You win, you get your wish. I win, I get mine.’ I can guess what he wants. But, I’m so sure I can beat him now that I know his secret. ‘I’ll toss,’ I say, my voice shaking. 209

Knowing that the heavier set of dice was loaded, Minerva felt certain that she could win, so she was willing to put herself at risk. Trujillo uses the same loaded dice that she did, so their battle of wills ends in a tie. Later, Trujillo agrees to allow her to attend law school, only to finish his plan to cruelly deny her license to practice when she graduates.

In every way, Minerva is the rebellious sister, daughter, and revolutionary. She questions the patriarchal rule and challenges authority outright, she demands education, she fends off unwanted advances even when they come from the nation’s leader, she acknowledges her illegitimate half-sisters with sympathy, not hatred, and she participates as a central figure in the underground resistance. She is “the driving force behind her family’s reluctant but inevitable activism.”210 Her defiance and belief in eliminating the oppressive forces from power are unwavering. Even in prison she redoubles her commitment to the cause. As Ibis Gómez Vega asserts, “through her involvement with the revolution, Minerva succeeds in redefining the role of the woman as wife and mother in the world that she helps to create.”211 Minerva’s vision of a new woman is one that need not rely on a man to support her, one that is seen as equal to her spouse instead of

209 Álvarez, In the Time of the Butterflies, p. 115
210 Zakrzewski Brown, p. 105
211 Gómez Vega, “Radicalizing Good Catholic Girls”, p. 102
subservient to him, one that demands an education and learns what she can, one that is free to question and defy authority, one that is independent, feminist and modern. Minerva Mirabal’s character as well as that of the prototypical woman she would like to see in society is very different from the traditional, submissive, religious Dominican woman of the past. Minerva’s role in history, as well as in the novel, helps to redefine and reinvent the role of women. Minerva has opened the door and given permission to independence.
Worldview Trumps Context for Weaker Characterizations

That these versions of the historically deified Mirabal sisters are entirely of Álvarez’s own creation is where the door opens for questioning the character representations in the novel. María Inés Lagos suggests that the identities of the characters in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* were formed as a direct consequence of the immigration and transplant process. When speaking of the narrative structure and characterizations in Julia Álvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, Cristina García’s *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) and Esmeralda Santiago’s *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1993) Lagos argues that

> las narraciones subrayan la situación particular de cada familia, en la que se puede distinguir, de un lado, la historia individual de los transplantados, sus orígenes nacionales y de clase, y de otro, la percepción que despiertan en el grupo dominante o en otros grupos minoritarios ya asimilados a la cultura anglo-norteamericana.²¹²

This critical analysis of Álvarez’s text is questionable because if the García family’s particular situation, their transplant status as immigrants to the United States, their national status, their social and economic positions really influenced their characterizations and roles then why do their characterizations match so closely with those of the Mirabal family in the novel *In the Time of the Butterflies*? If the individual history of the García de la Torre family, an upper-class, urban, Catholic, politically exiled family living in the United States was crucial in the formation of the characters, one would expect the Mirabal family, a middle-class, rural, Catholic, family from a slightly earlier time period that never immigrated at all to be quite different. Lacking the immigration and transplant process, one would expect the Mirabals to have very different

²¹² Lagos, “Deconstrucción del estereotipo hispánico” p. 197
character identities. They do not. In fact, there are many similarities between the two families.

Both the García de la Torres and the Mirabals are from the Dominican Republic. Each family has four daughters and no sons; Carla, Sandra, Yolanda and Sofía in the García de la Torre family and Patria, Dedé, Minerva and María Teresa in the Mirabal family. Similarly, the families were both Catholic. As such, the sisters in each family spent at least part of their educational years in Catholic schools; Inmaculada Concepción for the Mirabals y Sacred Heart for the García's. For the Mirabal girls, the religious education fits into a larger framework of their “dedication to their religion, their families, and the traditional, albeit patriarchal, Dominican way of life. In their world, men rule, both in the private and public spheres, and their rule is seldom questioned or challenged.”213 Along those lines, Dr. & Mrs. García had their daughters attend Catholic school in the United States in order to keep their values strong, to ensure that strict rules were enforced and to guarantee that their daughters would meet and befriend the “right kind” of Americans.

Another similarity is the appearance of and reaction to maids that happen to share beliefs in voodoo. Both families employ maids, Chucha (How the García Girls Lost Their Accents) and Fela (In the Time of the Butterflies) whose characteristics are nearly identical. Both are Afro Caribbean women who experience discrimination due to their Haitian roots. Much as Chucha conjured up feelings of fear among the other maids for sleeping in a coffin and practicing voodoo in the home, Fela evoked the same emotions.

Fela had set up an altar with pictures of the girls cut out from the popular posters that appeared each November. Before them, a table was laid out, candles and the mandatory

213 Gómez Vega, “Radicalizing Good Catholic Girls”, p. 94
cigar and bottle of rum. But most frightening was the picture of Trujillo that had once hung on Dedé and Jaimito’s wall. Dedé was sure she had thrown it in the trash. What the devil was he doing here if, as Fela argued later, she was working only with good spirits?  

It is as though the scenes with these two could be interchangeable. The families reacted to them much in the same way too, being surprised and somewhat uncomfortable with hearing about voodoo, zombies, or Santería. Maté, the youngest Mirabal sister, defended herself from trouble by explaining, “And it was Fela who told me the zombie story. I just repeated it.” Myra Medina also notes this coincidental resemblance, “Chucha y Fela muestran muchas similitudes en sus peculiaridades santeras y sus personalidades singulares.”

Each family has situations where at least one of the daughters rebels and puts her father’s life at risk unintentionally. For example, when Yolanda tells the story about her father’s gun to General Molino and when Minerva slaps Trujillo for making an unwanted advance at the Discovery Day Dance.

However, the biggest and most problematic similarity is that the main women characters take on un-traditionally strong roles in similar ways in both novels. For example Laura García is the “boss” of her family in the United States because she has no accent. Mamá Mirabal is similarly strong for her daughters, sons-in-law and grandchildren, especially when they are in prison. Her strength is maintained even after her husband dies. She learns to read and write late in life from her daughters, even though women of her class stature and age normally did not need to learn and therefore did not bother. Most importantly, Minerva is controversial, rebellious and independent from the

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214 Álvarez, In the Time of the Butterflies, p. 64
215 Álvarez, In the Time of the Butterflies, p. 34
216 Medina, p. 163
start. Despite her traditional family and religious upbringing, Minerva flouts the prescribed gender roles of the Dominican female and chooses her own path. This is analogous with Sofía’s romantic rebelliousness and Yolanda’s desire or need to redefine her roles through the use and manipulation of language. In the United States, there were no stereotypical, patriarchal men, except Dr. García, to prevent the García girls from experimenting with the defiance of authority and the attempts at claiming independence and Dr. García’s role as boss was undermined by his inability to communicate fluently in English as well as his required subservience towards his American colleagues who helped him secure a job in order to flee the island. When the García sisters returned on visits to the Dominican Republic, their newfound independence and rebelliousness was thwarted by the influences of their more traditional relatives such as Tía Flor, Tía Carmen, their cousin Mundín, and Fifi’s boyfriend/cousin Manuel Gustavo. Manuel, for example, reminds the girls that “Yes, women have rights… but men wear the pants.”217 With these influences, the girls are less able to be independent on the island, and when they are, it is only accepted because they are seen as having become too Americanized. They can be more independent because they are not really Dominican any longer.

Lagos argues that in How the García Girls Lost Their Accents there is a “transformación de roles familiares como consecuencia del transplante a una cultura que promueve otros valores, en la que los recién llegados no tienen la estabilidad económica y social que tenían en el país de origen.”218 However, if Lagos is correct, and the transformation of family roles occurred due to immigration and being transplanted into a new culture, then how can similar transformations in the Mirabal family be explained?

217 Álvarez, How the García Girls Lost Their Accents, p. 223
218 Lagos, “Deconstrucción del estereotipo hispánico” p. 199
The Mirabals did not leave the Dominican Republic. They were not transplanted into a new culture. Nevertheless, women did have strong roles; men in many cases were, as Medina suggests "personajes marginados con un papel secundario."\footnote{Medina, p. 164}

Given this evidence, how could the characterizations of the Mirabals be suitable in their Dominican island world that was full of stereotypical, patriarchal men including Trujillo, their father Enrique, Jaimito, Dedé's husband, and to a lesser extent, Pedrito, Patria's husband as well as women who accepted and protected this traditional world view? It does not seem likely that Patria would have opposed traditional and religious value to become a revolutionary simply because of witnessing the death of a young rebel and considering it to be a life-changing experience. Similarly, Maté's quick conversion through falling in love with Leandro and the resistance at once, seems unlikely even given her predisposition to admire things that Minerva was involved with. The least convincing of all is Minerva's characterization. A woman born to rebel and stray from prescribed gender roles does not sound like a traditional Dominican woman whose political awakening required her to become fully invested in the underground resistance. You would expect the sisters to continue in their roles as

traditional upper/middle class Dominicans who
are also good Catholics, devout, the kind of women
who do not question the status quo and ask their father
permission to attend the university.\footnote{Gómez Vega, "Radicalizing Good Catholic Girls", p 94}

We can expect this also because of the portrait of the García and de la Torre cousins that Álvarez offers in How the García Girls Lost Their Accents and ¡Yo!. These cousins stayed on the island during the Era of Trujillo. They did not find themselves in political
exile having immigrated to the United States. The cousins, such as Lucinda Marfa
Victoria de la Torre, provide a counterpoint to the Garcfa girls. Lucinda always
questioned the Garcfa girls and their questions every time they came back to visit.

That was their way. They'd talk and talk about the
unfairness of poverty, about the bad schools, the terrible
treatment of maids. Then, they'd leave... and all their
questions would stay spinning in my head: How could
I let maids make my bed? How could I let my novio push
me around?... How could I live in a country where
everyone wasn't guaranteed life, liberty, and the pursuit
of happiness?221

Lucinda was not the one asking the questions. She and her siblings and friends were not
challenging authority and trying to change the status quo. It was the Garcfa girls that were
rebelling and asking the questions. Based on this evidence, and the similarity of their
experiences, I would expect the Mirabals should be more like the hair and nails cousins
on the island than like the Garcia sisters who emigrated to the United States, especially
given that their slightly earlier time period was more traditional and had not been affected
by the US's culture of the 1960's yet.

These inconsistencies can be explained in the following way: the characterizations
that Julia Albarez creates in How the Garcfa Girls Lost Their Accents and Yo! are not
only due to the transplant and immigration issues of the characters themselves, but also
are heavily influenced by the autobiographical nature of the characterizations. Julia
Albarez herself was raised in the Dominican Republic and moved to New York as a
young girl because her father was part of the same underground resistance movement as
the Mirabals. For that reason, her biography is centered on the issue of migration and this
issue is a major theme appearing in her writing. This experience colored the families,

221 Albarez, Yo!, p. 36-37
friends and events in her own life and as such, affects the creation of her characters. Therefore, many of the coincidences between *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, ¡Yo!, and *In the Time of the Butterflies* can be accounted for because their inspiration is the same. The coincidences are not an accident. They are a nearly inevitable by-product of having the same roots; Álvarez’s childhood experiences and her personal and familial journey through Americanization into adulthood. As the characters come of age and struggle with different situations in all three novels, they appear to be mirroring episodes from the lives of Julia Álvarez, her family and her close associates. Without analyzing the three novels as a group, the reactions and episodes especially in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and ¡Yo! would likely be viewed as convincing identity formation of the characters. However, when viewed together, it appears that each of the novels is an Álvarezian translation of a part of her experience, or an imagined experience seen through the lens of her worldview. The way in which the Mirabals become radical is, at least in part, a byproduct of their characterizations being imagined and fictionalized by Julia Álvarez. Knowing the radical historic outcome of their lives and sharing a similar beginning, the process of piecing together the literary adolescences, awakenings and radicalizations of the Mirabals is a familiar one. Álvarez translates them onto paper using the process of cultural displacement and hybridity. This translation is a faulty one as the girls are firmly a part of the traditional Dominican world. Their educations and friends such as Virgilio Morales have shown them new possibilities, however despite their ideological leanings, they are still restricted to an extent by the world in which they live.²²² This is not to say that Dominican women like the Mirabals are not capable of

²²² Theoretically, the Mirabal girls could “immigrate” psychologically, crossing ideological borders instead of national ones thereby making themselves psychological exiles. However, there does not appear to be
rebellion. They do have a rebel spirit and the capacity to be independent, but the narrative mechanism used to create their characterizations does not offer enough societal opposition to their rapid and one-sided revolutionary conversions. The sisters were not fictionally complex enough and their conversions along their revolutionary paths did not show sufficient intellectual justification.

Not participating in a sudden revolutionary conversion, Dedé’s characterization is the most convincing, especially in the scenes where she speaks in the present day with the “Álvarez author character.” Given the idea that Álvarez is drawing on personal experience to create the characters, this makes sense primarily because Álvarez met with Dedé on a research trip to the Dominican Republic and because both Dedé and Álvarez are playing the same role as a survivor and memorialist. Álvarez survived because her family left. Dedé survived in part due to her pragmatic nature, her patriarchal husband and luck. In these scenes with Dedé “is where we best understand the depths of Ms. Álvarez’s despair and the authenticity of her effort to represent the inner drama of her conversion to an American self.” In trying to translate the Mirabal girls using her Dominican-American lens, Álvarez does not see “the realization that the gringa dominicana would never really be able to understand the other woman, much less translate her.”

Roberto González Echevarría, in a review of In the Time of the Butterflies, agrees with the impression of the characterizations as a type of translation. He suggests that the novel reads “like the project the Americanized Dominican woman at the beginning of the novel (“a gringa dominicana in a rented car with a road map asking for street names”)
would have come up with." He contends that it was "as if she needed to have her American self learn what it was really like in her native land, the Dominican Republic." These assertions about the Dominican-American interviewer can also be applied to Julia Álvarez. In her fascination with the history of the Mirabal sisters, especially as it represents an alternate path to the one her family chose, it was as if she too needed to translate the story to understand her island roots. The unfortunate part of this translation process is that Álvarez’s Dominican-American worldview coupled with her desire to avoid lionization of the Mirabals resulted in characterizations that were one-sided, stereotypical, and too American.

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225 González Echevarría, p. 11
226 González Echevarría, p. 11
Conclusion

In Álvarez’s first novel, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, she simply retells a story—a thinly veiled fictionalization of her own experience. *¡Yo!* continues to tell the story of the García family. However, instead of allowing Yolanda García, Álvarez’s literary alter ego, to be the primary storyteller, perspectives shift and Álvarez offers more insight into other views of related events. The need to translate and understand was not as pressing in these novels because the circumstances are much closer to those that the author herself experienced. Álvarez already understands these contexts and has no need to interpret or decode the experiences. However, in trying to translate the story of the Mirabal sisters and the Dominican Republic under the Trujillo regime into something comprehensible to an American or Dominican-American audience, the result is largely stereotypical characterizations, with unconvincing moments of radicalization.

Thus, the representation of characters whose lives match more closely with that of Álvarez, for example the main characters in *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* and *¡Yo!*, possess more convincing identities because their stories are accurately drawn from the well of Álvarez’s own experiences. The Mirabal sisters live in a purely Dominican context and do not correspond completely with Álvarez’s biography, still they exhibit many coincidental similarities to the characters in the other works without participating in the migration process that helped forge their characteristics. In creating the characterizations of the Mirabals, Álvarez is unable to avoid the influence of her
Dominican-American experience. In the process of writing to legitimize the hybrid space of Dominican-American literature, the inherent duality of Álvarez’s own experience has affected her characterizations and narrative mechanism by appearing in her works, whether or not it is warranted by the context.
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