

AND WHY DID THE GARCÍA GIRLS LOSE
THEIR ACCENTS? LANGUAGE, IDENTITY
AND THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE IN JULIA
ALVAREZ'S *HOW THE GARCÍA GIRLS LOST
THEIR ACCENTS*

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Skin color and foreign accents provide the most obvious clues to identity since they are easy to recognize and hard or impossible to erase. Further, they constitute undeniable marks of a person's belonging to and simultaneously being estranged from a given cultural and value system. In the case of immigrants, when speaking the language at all, their accent often contributes to delimit their place in the realm of America's cultural displacement. They are constrained to move in an in-between space that will determine their destiny.¹ While moving across geographical spaces, they also go across varied cultural and linguistic worlds, losing touch with a monolingual cultural reality and a unified, stable self. Carol Boyce Davis remarks that «the re-negotiation of identities is fundamental to migration» (3); and so, in a foreign country, the question of one's identity becomes a complex issue characterized by that «double consciousness» W. E. B. DuBois placed at the core of the African-American experience, but that could well apply to the Hispanic experience in America: «It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.» (45)²

1. I borrow here Amy Ling's concept of fragmentation she applies to Asian-American fiction.

2. Amy Ling refers to how the «double consciousness» with which Du Bois characterized the Black American equally characterizes Chinese-Americans. I made Du Bois's discussion extensive to the Hispanic community in America, although it might as well apply to most of the groups outside the mainstream.

Maybe because of my personal concern with linguistic assimilation, I was immediately attracted to Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost their Accents*, interested in the why as much as in the how. The novel is constructed from fragmented memories, loosely intertwined, that mirror the fragmentation and confusion of the female protagonists. It unfolds as a story of compound stories that are diverse reactions to the immigrant experience, different perspectives voicing fears, anxiety and frustrations while trying to cope with strangeness and alienation. Chronological order is disrupted in the sense that we move back in time throughout three periods representing adulthood, adolescence and childhood, three sections covering a span of time from 1989 to 1956. Memories are told in the third person, except for the final section in which some of the characters are allowed to establish a more intimate dialog with the reader by recounting directly a specific memory linked to the childhood period. Yolanda's voice is central as she is the only García girl who speaks in the first person, the writer in the novel and the implied writer of the story, the one who uses her past and the memories from her homeland to redefine herself through her writing. For this reason, I will also focus on her more than on her sisters.

In what follows, I would like to analyze how the García girls –Carla, Sandi, Yolanda and Fifi– both resist and comply to the mainstream, a tug of war I consider inherent to the immigrant experience, while searching for an identity that may take into account their new bilingual, bicultural, immigrant status; which blends their past and present and renders them meaningful parts of their existence. As opposed to the image of both the migrant and exile, they emerge as «nomadic subjects» insofar as they do not «stand for homelessness, or compulsive displacement ... [but express] the desire for an identity made of transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes, without and against an essential unit.» (Braidotti 22) In parallel, I will reflect on the role of language both as a determinant factor of exclusion from a given culture and as an empowering instrument for the non-native speaker and how this fact affects immigrants' perception of themselves and their country of origin. I would also like to suggest a possible answer to the question that gives title to this paper –why the García girls lost their accent– one that links language and identity and both to the immigrant experience, what will now take me back to the beginning of the novel which is, actually, the end of the process.

As immigrants, the García girls go through an initial moment of confrontation between two different cultural systems and a subsequent alienation from both the new world America represents and the old world they left behind. Then, a movement away from their roots and a rejection of their country of origin. In this period of confusion, they are unable to accept their non-native identity, whose conception, as David Palumbo-Liu suggests, is «anchored by the gaze of the dominant Other,» (78) and a resulting fragmentation of the self occurs. Finally, a time of «authenticity,» a cultural and physical approach to their homeland that helps «organize *two* cultural systems, a culture of the present and the future and a culture of memory, into a single model» (Boelhower in Wong 144), which, in the case of Yolanda, makes possible both self-discovery and writing.

Unlike most immigrants, the García family does not approach America looking for a new beginning but for a temporary shelter against political uncertainty. As

members of the ruling class in the Dominican Republic the world from which they part is perceived as stable and calm, a world of privileges and isolation from external poverty. On the Island, their identity is saved in the very fact they bear a particular last name, whose only mention brings about respect and preferential treatment; «... acknowledgment.» their mother would say, «had come to her automatically in the old country from being a de la Torre.» (139) In contrast, America has nothing to offer at the end of their journey, «...only second-hand stuff, rental houses in one red-neck Catholic neighborhood after another, clothes at Round Robin, a black and white TV afflicted with wavy lines.» (107) And so their initial experience of the host country inevitably involves a desire for turning back to their homeland, «whinning to go home» (107) or, like Carla, praying God to take them back home on the day they celebrate their first year in America. (150)

In this first stage of relocation, the García girls' sense of displacement arises from their inability to speak the language properly. As Gloria Anzaldúa remarks, «ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity.» (59) and so ethnic and linguistic differences are also intimately related. As the only immigrant in her class, Yolanda is literally isolated in the classroom, «put in a special seat in the first row by the window, apart from the other children so that Sister Zoe could tutor her without disturbing them.» (166) When confronted with a monolingual reality, an accented utterance will affect the perception the girls have of themselves making them insecure when speaking in public, like Yolanda, mortified by the idea of giving a speech in front of the whole school, «subjecting herself to her classmates ridicule.» (141) Also, language is revealed as an instrument of petty dominations for Carla, whose struggle with English provokes daily humiliations at school. Mimicking her accent, the bullies in her class would make fun of her when she mispronounced a word (153) and, as children of former immigrants of Irish descent, they assert their «Americanism» by defining her difference as something negative, calling her «spic,» the derogatory term for Spanish, and claiming their right to America by stressing her not belonging: «Go back to where you came from, you dirty spic.» (153) Carla's culture-crossing is viewed as an invasion, and so the title of the chapter, «Trespass.»

However, together with an idealized, nostalgic vision, which their initial feeling of alienation encourages, the old world also means a conventional value system that clashes with the American reality the four girls soon begin to explore. Life on the Island is linked to Catholicism, patriarchal domination and women's silence. There is complete separation between men and women symbolized in the divided sections of the «patio» –«the men sit to one side, smoking their cigars and tinkling their rum drinks. The women lounge on wicker armchairs by the wall lamps, exclaiming over whatever there is to be exclaimed about» (127)– or the special consideration that was reserved to the men in the family. In a society ruled by men who, like Fifi's boyfriend during her temporal confinement on the Island, forbade women to leave the house without permission, drive cars or wear pants in public (120), a tyrant will be defined by the other girls as «a mini Papi and Mami rolled into one.» (120) Facing America becomes then confronting and questioning home as well, and the change in the girls' perception of the mainstream culture is mirrored in the new relationship they establish with their parents, who are now identified with their culture of origin, progressively

perceived as shameful and unattractive. They secretly wish for «more American» parents who would help them fit, instead of meaning further embarrassment (98), and experience a removal from their parents' culture which runs parallel to their removal from their parents themselves: «We began to develop a taste for the American teenage good life, and soon, Island was old hat, man. Island was the hair-and-nails crowd, chaperones, and icky boys with all their macho strutting and unbuttoned shirts and hairy chests with gold chains and teensy gold crucifixes.» (109) In this second stage, the girls create a barrier between their life at school and the one at home and draw a line between their summers on the Island and their winters in America, journeying between identities, as they physically move across different geographical points. They smoke dope, date American boys, read books that celebrate women and their bodies, and devise complicated ways of fooling their parents. They oppose their father and reject his authority asserting, like Fifi, her need for physical independence by fleeing home with her German lover after her father discovered their relationship reading her secret letters; or, Yolanda, who affirms her right to intellectual freedom by refusing to articulate her school speech following her father's directions. Whitman's poems celebrating individual freedom inspire her writing, an approach her father, anchored in conventional «humbleness and praise,» (142) reads as an insult to her teachers. (146) Further, the girls' increasing identification with American culture is expressed in their progressive command of English and detachment from their native Spanish, now difficult to follow when spoken by their father. For Yolanda, language becomes the only stable, unchanging center outside herself: «...in New York, she needed to settle somewhere, and since the natives were unfriendly, and the country inhospitable, she took root in language. By high school, the nuns were reading her stories and compositions out loud in English class.» (141)

Corresponding with this process of approximation to the new world, a growing need for a redefinition of identity arises. In America, negative representations of Hispanic people are forced onto the girls: «Their food smelled. They spoke too loudly and not in English. The kids sounded like a herd of wild burros,» (170) a denigrating vision that affects the manner in which the sisters see themselves and how they wish to be perceived. Parallel to their desire for belonging is the attempt to reconstruct a self in terms of rebellion against the old world by ironing their hair, using hair removal and going on diets that would help them resemble fashion models. The rejection of their body is the girls' response to the disdainful look of the Other. Carla perceives hers as the immediate cause of her alienation –«The girl she had been back home in Spanish was being shed. In her place ... was a hairy, breast-budding grownup no one would ever love.» (153) In contrast, Sandra's pride on being able to pass for American, «with soft blue eyes and fair skin,» (181) feeling pretty because she was able to fulfill dominant standards of beauty, and basing her sense of belonging on her non-ethnic appearance: «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.» (182) Both approaches reveal a shameful perception of their Spanish origin and grant the dominant culture the valid parameters against which one's sense of worth is confronted.

Yet, while moving away from their ethnic self, the García sisters feel caught in a cultural heritage, internalized by birth and upbringing, that cannot be as easily rejected as if they had never been in touch with their motherland. Then, as they look for acceptance in the American mainstream, the girls' own sense of self is shaped by their Island cultural background. Catholicism, for example, conditions Yolanda's vision of sex and love relationships. While considering herself a lapsed Catholic, willing to have sex like her American classmates, she cannot escape her childhood preaching that figured the body as a cherished gift, a hidden treasure a *señorita* should guard and not let anybody take advantage of (235), an idea that emasculates her impulses and desires. Brought up in a tradition «where the guy did all the courting and seeking out.» (100) Yolanda cannot accept Rudy's lack of tact and care, «frightened of sex with a man who called it *getting laid*.» (100) Later, in a more adult relationship, her monolingual lover, John, will fail to make her happy because of his inability to move towards her culture, «making her feel crazy for being her own person.» (73) As Amy Ling points out, «coexisting and unresolvable opposites are daily experiences for bicultural people ...» (112), and a sense of fragmentation is then the inevitable cost of that between-world condition.

Images of fragmentation permeate the entire text, from the novel's style –fragmented memories scattered throughout disconnected chapters– to the destiny of the American toys they received in their childhood –a drum with no drumsticks (278), a cracked-open human body whose missing pieces would make it impossible to be reassembled. (278) Fragmentation in the sister's actions that show confusion, a lack of a clear direction, in their tendency to sudden changes when dealing with people «several divorces among them, including Yolanda's. The oldest, a child psychologist, had married the analyst she had been seeing when her first marriage broke up, something of the sort. The second one was doing a lot of drugs to keep her weight down. The youngest had just gone off with a German man when they discovered she was pregnant.» (47) Fragmentation in Yolanda's name, «...nicknamed *Yo* in Spanish, misunderstood *Joe* in English, doubled and pronounced like the toy, *Yoyo* –or when forced to select from a rack of personalized key chains, *Joey*...» (68) Particularly significant is the personality fragmentation of Yolanda and Sandra, symbolized in their temporary nervous breakdowns, that their mother defines as «madness», which take a similar form in both of them. Madness, according to Foucault, is, in its essence, a «manifestation of not being» (15) and so, in Alvarez's text, it becomes a trope for the girls' inability to articulate a bicultural, divided self. «No, no, no» would say Yolanda, «she didn't want to divide herself anymore, three persons in one *Yo*.» (78) Fear and insecurity find expression in her frantic change of languages, quoting from Don Quijote in the original and translating the passage on prisoners into instantaneous English, (80) her endless talking quoting and misquoting poets, (79) her growing allergy to words like «love» or «alive.» (82) Sandi would undertake continual reading before what she thought would be turning into a monkey, so that, «she'd remember something important from having been human ... But she was afraid she'd go before she got to some of the big thinkers.» (54) They both try to fill with words a void inside, one that opened when they had to leave their native Island and that nothing would quite fill. (215) Words that recount other people's experiences as if, by

assimilating them, they could make sense of their reality. Still searching for a unified identity, the road to self-healing will start with their acceptance of a divided self, full of inconsistencies and paradoxes, feeling completely at home nowhere and elsewhere, «a peculiar mix of Catholicism and agnosticism, Hispanic and American styles.» (99)

The opening episode of the novel in which an Americanized Yolanda goes back to her native Dominican island is emblematic of the bicultural subject whose emergence we have been following throughout the book. Yolanda's assimilation into American mainstream culture is signaled in her difficulties to speak Spanish, in the clothes she is wearing, «a black cotton skirt and jersey top, sandals on her feet, her wild black hair held back with a hairband.» (3) that make her look so different from her cousin Lucinda who, having remained on the Island, «looks like a Dominican model.» (5) Also her absurd suggestion of traveling by bus across the country, a country that is going through one of the many political changes that forced the García family to emigrate. «Yolanda, *mi amor*, you have been gone long.» teases Lucinda, and, laughing, pictures «Yoyo climbing into an old *camioneta* with the *campesinos* and their fighting cocks and their goats and their pigs!» (9). Yet, Yolanda's secret intention to stay and her quick immersion into the old world point to a desire for a reconciliation with her past. As she puts it, «this is what she had been missing all these years without really knowing that she has been missing it. Standing here in the quiet, she believes, she has never been at home in the States.» (12) Then, not everything is negative in this migration between countries, languages and identities. Dislocation, in Janet Wolff's words, «can also facilitate personal transformation,» (10) and help self-discovery and reflection. By turning back to the Island on her own will, once she has experienced displacement and alienation, Yolanda can now redefine herself through her writing: «The adult she has become is the woman who begins to write, whose successful career as a writer can only be seen as the product of her trials with language and translation.» (Wolff 13)³ Language, storytelling, becomes essential as a means of exploring one's past and coming to terms with one's present for being an insider and outsider in two cultures allows now the necessary distance for a new perception of both.

How the García Girls Lost their Accents emerges as an attempt to articulate a self moving across contending realities, in the process of re-negotiation I mentioned at the beginning of this paper. Throughout the novel we follow that process of Americanization, of acculturation, an the journey back into her original culture that helps Yolanda make sense of her past and accept her self as a whole of fragmented parts. By making language an essential part of identity and linking both to the García girls' experience in America, Julia Alvarez explores how difference is signaled in speaking and the language of the host country, English in this case, turns out to be an empowering strategy for the non-native speaker. It is on the road to becoming

3. Janet Wolff's comments refer to Eva Hoffman, writer of Polish origin who eventually settled down in New York where she became editor at the New York Times. Wolff sees Hoffman's memoirs as a narrative of struggle in another language and culture (13); I see Yolanda's in the same way.

«Americans» that the four sisters lose their accent for it would always mark them as alienated subjects. And, because of their parallel identification with their country of origin, they only lose their accent, not their mother-tongue. Transcending common assumptions of a stable, singular identity, the García girls, represented by Yolanda, struggle to construct for themselves a distinctive language that may help them articulate a bicultural self as they navigate between different cultural and linguistic realities.

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