

When Immigrants Speak:

Diasporic Voices in Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost their Accents*

Tito Matias-Ferreira, Jr.

“I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent’s tongue – my woman’s voice, my sexual voice, my poet’s voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence.”

Gloria Anzaldúa, 81.

As an immigrant and diasporic intellectual writer, Julia Alvarez makes use of the language of the geographic place she inhabits, English, to speak about her condition as “other” in the hegemonic cultural context of the United States. Thus, Alvarez gives voice to her ethnic group when choosing the English language to write about the experience of the García sisters in her novel *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* (1991). Her writing grasps as well as assumes all the responsibilities of her silenced past, which constantly seems to haunt her present, and, for that matter, Julia Alvarez provides a dialogue with her present as she establishes new concepts and, more importantly, talks about her difference.

One of the changes in the life of immigrants in the U.S. is supposedly having to acquire the English language to be incorporated into American society. The García girls are still able to keep and use their native language – Spanish – which contributes to the preservation of the customs they brought from the Dominican Republic. Nevertheless, they make a great effort to maintain their first language and, at the same time, acquire English. Spanish gets hard to understand and their father makes such a process tougher because they are not able to understand his Spanish either: “Yoyo and her sisters were forgetting a lot of their Spanish, and their father’s formal, florid diction was hard to understand” (Alvarez 142).

Moreover, the girls are no longer on the island, and they need to learn the local language – English – to be accepted by their peers. As the English language becomes more familiar to them, the girls are also able to acquire some American customs and, for that matter, their vision of the world is split: they have to deal with the maintenance of their Caribbean traditions as well as the acquisition of American customs:

Here they were trying to fit in America among Americans; they needed help figuring out who they were, why these Irish kids whose grandparents had been micks were calling them spics. Why had they come to this country in the first place? Important, crucial, final things, and here was their own mother, who didn't have a second to help them puzzle any of this out ... (Alvarez 138)

Julia Alvarez's characters' split vision demonstrates that the path an immigrant apparently takes in order to fit into American mainstream society is a matter of choosing either to become bilingual or not. Language allows people to define their places in the world, since it can serve as a sign of belonging to a certain community or the reason for exclusion from such a community (King 2005). Likewise, Richard Rodriguez (1996) describes his early childhood and the issue of growing up as an immigrant in the U.S. as well as having two languages: his public one (English), regularly used at school, and his private one (Spanish), spoken by his parents at home. Rodriguez feels these two spheres start to clash at the moment the nuns from his school (the public side) go to his house (his private space) and "invade" his private space when they ask Rodriguez's parents to speak English only to their children to help them fit in the American school as well as America. Rodriguez's mother and father start to speak to their children in English and avoid conversation in Spanish. As Richard Rodriguez grows older and becomes an adult, Spanish is no longer a language he is able to understand but is only whispers he can listen to from within when he remembers his childhood. Thus, this was the option given to Richard Rodriguez: to abandon his native language and speak the mainstream language to be part of American society.

On the other hand, the critic Chérrie Moraga (1994) claims for an America that can deal with cultural differences and does not impose language and customs on immigrants; an America where one has the free choice to decide what to speak, what to wear and what to look like. She understands that this is something tough for Latinos, Native-Americans, African-Americans and Asian-Americans to attain since they do not present Anglo-American physical features and they "wear" their ethnicity on their faces (Moraga 303). Thus, Moraga wants an America where standards can be minimized and one can be whatever one wants to be, speaking the language they know and making their own choices. In this sense, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) contends that:

Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot can take pride in myself. Until I can accept as legitimate Chicano Texas, Spanish, Tex-Mex and all the other languages I speak, I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself. Until I'm free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speaker rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate. (Anzaldúa 81)

Indeed, language is one of the main components of ethnicity, often the main and most tangible one, since “ethnicity is a matter of identity: you are what you say you are and what other people think you are” (King 299). According to Richard Rodriguez, bilingualism enhances segregation among the different groups throughout the American territory (Rodriguez 51). On the other hand, as Juan Flores and George Yúdice have stated, speaking not only Spanish but English properly would enable immigrants to fight against prejudice as well as create pressure for official legitimization (Flores & Yúdice 72). Furthermore, Chérrie Moraga believes that both English and Spanish can be used to express her points of view about immigrants' status through her writing. As she has affirmed, if immigrants are able to use their other language and know it well – not only language itself but their immigrant culture – they can stick together and “envision” a new culture: a culture in which there is no right or wrong, nor mainstream or margin (Moraga 306). Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) believes that her identity will only be legitimate once she has the freedom to decide what language she can speak in the United States. In addition, King (2005) states that

We should never make the mistake of confusing a language with a dictionary and grammar. Both the effect and the affect of language go well beyond words and rules of grammar. Language touches us in the deep places of our being-- in our identity, in our sense of where we belong. One of the most sensitive of these places is our ethnicity. In ethnicity begins the true study of language as a badge of identity. (King 301)

Thus, language does not exist separately from ethnicity, since it is in fact one of the most remarkable parts of an ethnic group (King 2005). Language then becomes the most obvious point of mediation of immigrant's consciousness towards their belonging to a geographical space or not.

Julia Alvarez deals with such issues in “Antojos”, the first chapter of her novel *How the García Girls Lost their Accents*, where she introduces the character Yolanda García. Although the novel presents the view of the García girls about their exile in the U.S., the focus of Alvarez’s book is Yolanda García, who narrates most of the chapters. Furthermore, Alvarez has published another novel entitled *¡Yo!*, which can either work as a nickname for Yolanda or the translation of the English pronoun ‘I’ into Spanish. This aspect reinforces again the autobiographical elements in both novels, since *¡Yo!* is taken as an extension of the family story introduced in the earlier *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. Julia Alvarez attempts to keep on developing the character of Yolanda García because she seems to have deeply undergone the effects of immigration.

In the aforementioned opening chapter of Alvarez’s novel, Yolanda finds herself at the age of thirty-nine and back in the Dominican Republic. She is seeking an answer to the question “Who am I?”; “[t]his is what she has been missing all these years without really knowing that she has been missing it. Standing here . . ., she believes she has never felt at home in the United States, never” (Alvarez 12). When updating her family on the island about her sisters back in the U.S., Yolanda starts to mix English and Spanish as well as to get confused between both languages:

In halting Spanish, Yolanda reports on her sisters. When she reverts to English, she is scolded, “*¡En Español!*” The more she practices, the sooner she’ll be back into her native tongue, the aunts insist. Yes, and when she returns to the States, she’ll find herself suddenly going blank over some word in English or, like her mother, mixing up some common phrases. (Alvarez 07)

Yolanda's hesitation in speaking Spanish with her family in the Dominican Republic seems to depict the character's own hesitation about her identity. Yolanda García is hesitant about the languages she speaks and the places she belongs. Immigration years before has created a new space, an in-betweenness where language and home were not English / United States or Spanish / Caribbean, but a place permeated by both. Therefore, Yolanda was uncertain about her true native language, just as she was not sure which place she could really name as home.

Also, Yolanda wishes to eat guavas in the northern part of the island:

“What’s an *antojo*? Yolanda asks. See! Her aunts are right. After so many years away, she is losing her Spanish. “Actually is not an easy word to explain.” ... “An *antojo* is like a craving for something you have to eat.” ... An *antojo*, one of the old aunts continues, is a very old Spanish word “from before your United States was even thought of,” she adds tartly. “In fact, in the countryside, you’ll still find some *campesinos* using in the old sense. Altagracia! she calls one of her maids sitting at the other end of the patio. ... She is asked to tell Yolanda what an *antojo* is. ... “In my *campo* we say a person has an *antojo* when they are taken over by *un santo* who wants something.” ... “I’ll tell you what my *santo* wants after five years,” Yolanda says. “I can’t wait to eat some guavas.” (Alvarez 8-9)

Interestingly, guavas were not common to Yolanda in the U.S. and her craving for them shows her distance from her Dominican side.

In New York, Americans have never been able to pronounce her name correctly and called her Joe; her parents would also address her as either Yo or Yoyo: “Yolanda, 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*.” (Alvarez 68). These characteristics echo Yolanda’s ambiguity about her identity: when she is in the U.S., she searches for the Dominican Republic, and when she is on the island, she searches for the U.S.:

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 late 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 (Alvarez 11).

Yolanda faces what most immigrants probably do: the negotiation of places as well as identities in order to find themselves, for “this is the plight of being a hyphenated person: she [Yolanda] is both, none, and sometimes one in the United States and another in the Dominican Republic. It seems that her identity is double and relative” (Suárez 126).

In the end of “Antojos”, Yolanda is lost in the northern part of the Dominican island because her car broke in the middle of a guava field. It is going to be dark soon and she gets frightened as she sees some *campesinos* coming back from working in the fields. Two men come

to her and offer her some help to fix her car. They talk to her in Spanish and she is not able to reply to them in the same language, even though she clearly understands what they say. Yolanda tries to speak to them in Spanish but due to her fright, she mutters only English words. She then recalls what a friend of hers once said: “That poet she met at Lucinda’s party the night before argued no matter how much of it one lost, in the midst of some profound emotion, one would revert to one’s mother’s tongue” (Alvarez 13).

In his essay entitled “Imaginary Homelands”, Salman Rushdie states that the linguistic struggle immigrants undergo reflects other struggles in real life: the struggle between two cultures within themselves (Rushdie 16). This is what happens to Yolanda when she is in the guava field: she has to cope with two worlds she belongs to and when she sees herself in a dangerous situation she prefers to speak English due to the association this language has in the Dominican Republic. Rushdie further claims “to conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free” (Rushdie 16).

In the chapter entitled “Antojos”, which ambiguously functions as a beginning and an end to Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, Yolanda’s attempt to find out whether she’s American fails. Julia Alvarez leaves the question open: “what are we?” Immigrants like Yolanda leave it unanswered. Again, according to Salman Rushdie, a translated individual is the one born across two worlds. Immigrants, too, go through a translation, a movement that makes them lose some things that remained in their native country, but also makes them acquire some new things from their new location (Rushdie 17). And, this is what makes the García girls be considered “hyphenated women”, for their new existence in the U.S. enhances their feeling of living in-betweenness.

In addition, Ana Celia Zentella (2003) claims that Latinos’ use of English is monitored and corrected by Americans who live near them, and their use of Spanish is censored and considered “acceptable” only in “ethnic” places. Mixing the two languages is, in general, reprimanded and not desirable. Such monitoring over Latinos, as well as other immigrants, does not improve communication or enhance national unity; it creates a tension among immigrants and the mainstream society (Zentella 51). The García girls also experience the same tension throughout the novel, as they try to keep their Caribbean and American halves steady. In this sense, in a linguistically diverse country like the United States:

Social identification is accomplished through language choice . . . a speaker reveals and defines his or her social relationships with other people by choosing one or other of the two languages or more languages in his/her repertoire . . . Language, together with culture, religion and history, becomes a major component of identity (Wei 12).

Finally, Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* assumes that the García sisters' "accent", or rather, the languages that they speak are the fundamental aspect "[of] the negotiation between assimilation and contestation, memory and self-invention, exposing the need to embrace the two languages [English and Spanish] as part of a constructive whole for Latino/a communities" (Suárez 128). Besides, as Wei (2000) proposes,

Every time we say something in one language when we might just easily have said it in another, we are reconnecting with people, situation and power configurations from our history of past interactions and imprinting on that history our attitudes towards the people and the languages concerned. Through language choice, we maintain and change ethnic boundaries and personal relationships, and construct and define 'self' and 'other' within a broader political economy and historical context (WEI 15).

In conclusion, the García sisters have to deal with two cultures, which affect their hyphenated identity "with dual codes of behavior and two languages that define and defy them" (Suárez 127). In the final analysis, through the characters of Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, one is able to notice what immigrants may face in order to get by in the U.S. Although bilingualism is one of the most prominent reasons for immigrants to feel "hyphenated", other issues need to be taken into consideration, such as the place immigrants live in the U.S. and the other minority groups they live with, their social status, and so on. Since these aspects that may also confer immigrants their hyphenated identities were not investigated in this work, they are points that deserve further investigation.

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