

JULIA ALVAREZ & JUNOT DÍAZ: THE FORMATION OF BOUNDARIES IN
CREATING A NEW DOMINICAN-AMERICAN IDENTITY

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A capstone submitted to the

Graduate School- Camden

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts

Graduate Program in Liberal Studies

Written under the direction of

Dr. Richard Drucker

And approved by

Richard Drucker

Camden, New Jersey

October 2016

CAPSTONE ABSTRACT

Julia Alvarez & Junot Díaz: The Formation of Boundaries in
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This essay will explore the concept of ethnicity in the stories and through the characters in the writings of Junot Díaz and Julia Alvarez. In particular, I will examine their critically acclaimed novels, Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) and Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), and how the authors' personal lives are reflected in these novels. Through the novels, I will examine the acculturation of Dominicans immigrating to the United States and consider how their narratives relate to the idea of a new Dominican-American identity. I will analyze how displacement, economics, and national expectations affect the characters' behaviors as they search for a new identity. Finally, I will evaluate, and corroborate with scholarship, the aspects of immigrants' former lives, and how their past and present ethnic identities have transformed with their attempt to balance both cultures, and establish an understanding of the immigrant and ethnic experience.

Introduction

Julia Alvarez and Junot Díaz are acclaimed authors who have built their narratives around their personal experiences as Dominican-Americans. Both authors use the craft of storytelling to illustrate the ways in which Dominican-American immigrants discover a new ethnic identity through language, gender roles, cultural values, and personal expectations. The literary techniques the authors employ, such as sarcasm, metaphor, imagery, and bilingualism, are inspired by their own bi-cultural backgrounds. Díaz was born in the Dominican Republic before relocating to the United States; Alvarez, by contrast, was born in New York before being brought up in the Dominican Republic. The characters in their novels represent how Dominican immigrants navigate a new culture and society, all the while trying to maintain a cultural heritage derived from their homeland. The novels address issues related to the immigrant experience, including ethnic and personal identity, cultural resistance, and assimilation. While both novels are focused on Dominican immigrants, the characters' experiences are similar to those of other ethnic groups that have immigrated to the United States. Dr. Marisol Moreno claims that the work of both authors "marks a change in direction of Dominican literature written in the United States that reflects the socio-cultural transformations undergone by that community in recent years" (104). Thus, both Díaz's and Alvarez's novels are relatable to the reader through their exploration of gender, racial, and cultural issues that reflect the struggles of Dominican-Americans to remember the past, and to accept a changed present. These aspects create identity confusion for these immigrant characters, sometimes blocking successful attempts to adapt and conform to two very different cultures.

The Immigrant Experience

In the novels of Junot Díaz and Julia Alvarez, it is evident that the principal challenge faced by their characters is to find the right balance between being Dominican and American. As they travel back and forth between the US and the Dominican Republic, they struggle to create a new ‘ethnic identity’ that is reflective of both cultures. Research shows that, historically, Dominicans have traveled to the United States in search of better opportunities and to escape political oppression. This results in a problematic disconnect between “who they were” and “what they will become”. According to the Migration Policy Institute, large-scale migration from the Dominican Republic to the United States began in the 1960s after the death of dictator, Rafael Trujillo. Before 1960, the Dominican immigrant population in the United States was 12,000. After Trujillo’s death in 1961, there was an influx of Dominican immigrants, with the total population rising to 350,000 in 1990 and 879,000 in 2010 (Nwosu and Batalov). Political and cultural sociologist Dr. Joanne Nagel describes ethnic identity as “the result of a dialectical process involving internal and external opinions and processes, as well as the individual's self-identification and outsiders' ethnic designations-i.e., what you think your ethnicity is, versus what they think your ethnicity is” (154). Given that immigrants, no matter their origin, face difficulties adjusting to a new life in the United States, this typically causes feelings of being perceived as outsiders. This sense of not belonging is evident in the novels of these two Dominican-American authors.

In addition to those negative feelings of not belonging, use of language, displacement, economics, and history are factored into the immigrant experience. These elements, when fused together, play a significant role in constructing the ethnic identities

of Dominican-American immigrants. Like previous generations of U.S. immigrants, Dominican-Americans must reconstruct their lives in a new environment unfamiliar to them and begin again. As Nagel describes the ethnic construction model, “individuals and groups create and recreate their personal and collective histories, the membership boundaries of their group, and the content and meaning of their ethnicity” (154). Thus, it is important for Díaz and Alvarez, when creating their fictional characters and stories, to preserve a sense of “who they were,” as well as “what they will become.”

The terms “transnationalism” and “diaspora” are keywords scholars use to describe the process of displacement by shifting between cultures. Research scholars, Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Szanton-Blanc, define transnationalism as “the processes by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement” (1). As a result, immigrants can maintain multiple identities linking them to multiple nations (Duany 149). The theme of transnationalism is ongoing in *García Girls*; the girls’ parents are determined to keep Dominican values and traditions alive in the household even as they work to assimilate outside the household. Diaspora is a term first used to describe the expulsion of Jews from their homeland to Babylonia (Encyclopædia Britannica). Since its origination, the concept of diaspora has evolved and taken on new meanings for scholars. In its simplest form, diaspora describes those who have been displaced from their homeland. Díaz explained Dominican diaspora in an interview with *The Progressive* magazine in 2007, “There’s nothing more true in being a child of a diaspora, a child of immigrants. We’re completely new to our parents. We’re not something they can ever understand” (Díaz and Lantigua). Being part of a diaspora can also be difficult to accept for those who experience it, leaving them in a

limbo of sorts between cultures. Both Díaz and Alvarez allow readers to experience what immigrants go through and feel. According to Nagel's cultural construction model:

Groups construct their cultures in many ways which involve mainly the reconstruction of historical culture, and the construction of new culture....techniques include revivals and restorations of historical cultural practices and institutions; new cultural constructions include revisions of current culture and innovations--the creation of new cultural form (Nagel 162).

This aptly describes the creation of Dominican-American culture, and also speaks to the "diasporic experience." By preserving cultural traditions, in other words maintaining, "where they came from", and blending these with American influence, they in turn create a new identity: "what they become". It is the characters' process of discovering or creating these new identities that is examined in the two novels.

From Past to Present

Junot Díaz's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), is more than a coming-of-age immigrant story. The novel's characters encounter conflicts in Dominican and Dominican-American culture as the reader is led back and forth through a non-linear storytelling structure. Characters in the novel struggle to connect to their country of origin, the Dominican Republic, while living in the United States. This causes them to feel unable to fuse their identities as they attempt to conform to two very different cultures. This confusion affects the book's protagonist, Oscar de Leon, most of all, although Oscar himself is born in the United States, but ensnared by Dominican history.

Similarly, Julia Alvarez's novel, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), revolves around the story of a Dominican family of four sisters before and after their family's political exile to the United States. The novel takes place from 1956-1989, for part of which the Dominican Republic was ruled by the ruthless dictator, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina. The novel is written in reverse chronological order following the story of each of the four García sisters: Carla, Sandra, Yolanda and Sofía from adulthood to childhood. The sisters are forced to leave their home country, undergo assimilation, and eventually embrace American culture. This reversal of time in the narrative reflects both personal memory and the voyage back in time, a voyage that also becomes inflected by Dominican history.

For Díaz and Alvarez, it is important to revisit their home country in order to remain connected to their heritage. However, to fully understand what these Dominican characters are leaving behind or longing to return to, we must first have an understanding

of the Dominican Republic in the period that these novels are taking place. From 1930 until his assassination in 1961, Rafael Trujillo, nicknamed “El Jefe” (the boss), was the leader of the Dominican Republic. Having gained the presidency by force, he continued with his terror tactics until the end of his reign (Haggerty 28, Dictionary of Hispanic Biography). TIME Magazine published an article in 1945, *DOMINICAN REPUBLIC: Gaudiest Dictator* that described Trujillo as follows:

Today he puts on a show combining the outstanding features of a waterfront goon squad and Hollywood. Generalissimo Trujillo's car sports a five-starred, solid-gold license plate. Newspapers and radio hysterically shout his praise. Statues of him litter the land. An electric sign once glittered: "God and Trujillo" (TIME Magazine).

Trujillo ruled by intimidation and by eliminating his opponents (Haggerty 29). Those in the Dominican Republic were thoroughly familiar with the greed that corrupted the country, however, others chose to believe in the Trujillo myth.

Under the Trujillo regime, the citizens of the Dominican Republic faced unimaginable oppression. This prompted the formation of secret groups, some of which rebelled, though typically without much success (history.com). The two novels provide an insight into the tragic history of the Dominican Republic from the point of view of Dominican-American characters. As such, they enable the reader to understand how Dominicans felt during the reign of Trujillo and how he influenced their lives in the years that followed, and offer readers to evaluate the process of "who they were" and "what they become".

In the prologue to *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Díaz sets up Oscar's family story by first describing the arrival of Europeans on the island of Hispaniola. This took place before the island was divided and became known as the Dominican Republic

and Haiti. Díaz introduces a folktale curse, known as the *fukú*. The novel moves from past and present, introducing Oscar's grandparents in 1944, and his mother, Beli, uncovering family secrets. The narrator, Yuniór, concludes that Oscar and his family are plagued by this *fukú*; his re-telling of the story is meant to serve as a counter-spell to Dominican social history. In the opening paragraph, he refers to *fukú americanos* as the "Curse and the Doom of the New World" (1). It is through this type of narrative that Díaz invokes magic realism centered around Dominican displacement by Europeans. Magic realism is a literary genre with characteristics of mythical elements that appears realistic in fiction (Encyclopædia Britannica). This genre is rooted in Latin-American postcolonial literature and was first applied by Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier in the 1940s. According to literary critic Angel Flores "The practitioners of magical realism cling to reality as if to prevent "literature" from getting in their way, as if to prevent their myth from flying off, as in fairy tales, to supernatural realms" (191). The *fukú* curse becomes the magical element in the novel, part real and part myth. By introducing this element at an early stage of the book, Díaz leads the reader to believe that the misfortune that follows this family is the result of an inescapable curse by the colonial conquerors, and by Trujillo, unless it can be confronted directly. Dr. Daniel Bautista writes, "Despite numerous clues and suggestions, the reality of the *fukú* remains rather vague; it is never absolutely clear where the *fukú* comes from, how it operates, who exactly is cursed, or who has done the cursing and why" (48). Dr. Christopher Gonzalez asserts that the *fukú* curse is a "type of original sin of the New World that derives its power from the outrage of slavery, and *fukú* drives [Díaz's] novel to its bittersweet end" (51). Although the narrator refers to it, the nature of the curse is never made clear throughout the novel,

perhaps the *fukú* curse represents the historical and cultural boundaries that Díaz places on Oscar's family. In any event, it is a curse that haunts the Cabral- De Leon family throughout the novel.

Trujillo's dictatorship played a significant role in constructing national identity in the Dominican Republic (Sellers 42). Both Díaz and Alvarez go back in time to unfold the story of their characters against this background. For Díaz, this is done through Oscar's mother Belicia and her parents, Dr. Abelard Luis and Socorro Cabral, whereas for Alvarez, it is through the García girls' childhoods. Díaz's non-linear narrative allows the reader access to Oscar's past and suggests how much Trujillo influenced Oscar's future life. We learn the history of Oscar's mother, Hypatia Belicia (Beli) Cabral-De Leon, and the reason Oscar grows up in New Jersey. Beli was intimate with a man, referred to by Yuniór as the Gangster, who was married to Trujillo's sister. When she became pregnant and Trujillo's sister discovered the affair, Beli was beaten almost to death—a foreshadowing of her son's subsequent beating, and death. Beli was sent to live in the United States (for her own protection) and chose to stay. Ironically, Oscar falls in love with the wife of a police officer in the Dominican Republic who almost beats him to death when he discovers the affair. Oscar, too, is sent back to the United States. Oscar decides, however, to return to the Dominican Republic and is ultimately murdered. This fatal event seems determined by the *fukú*, the curse that haunts both Dominican and Dominican-American characters. According to Professor Fremio Sepulveda, “The *fukú* acts as a unifying force within the novel, connecting the family through the multiple generations of bad luck and tragedy. To Dominicans living under a state-sponsored apparatus of terror and violence even pronouncing Trujillo's name carries a *fukú*” (22).

Díaz takes us back even further, to Beli's parents Dr. Abelard Luis and Socorro Abelard. We discover that Beli's father was a well-known doctor in the Dominican Republic. He made a good living and had two beautiful daughters and an infant, Beli. Abelard learned, however, that Trujillo wanted to sleep with one of his daughters. In order to protect her innocence, Abelard decides not to bring her to a Trujillo function, making an excuse for her absence. A few weeks' later, Beli's father is arrested without explanation and sentenced to eighteen years in prison. Socorro, unable to handle the stress, commits suicide, and Beli's sisters mysteriously die, leaving Beli orphaned. Thus, the novel attempts to show how three generations of the family had problematic, ultimately tragic, encounters with Trujillo and state officials. These encounters left them physically scarred, dead, or forced them to emigrate, enforcing the notion of a possible curse that is projected into the future, the "who we will become".

In the footnotes to *Oscar Wao*, Díaz provides the reader with a brief, ironic summary of Trujillo and his dictatorship. In what he refers to as "your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history," he portrays Trujillo as:

a portly, sadistic pig-eyed mulatto who bleached his skin, wore platform shoes, and had a fondness for Napoleon-era haberdashery...came to control nearly every aspect of the DR's political, cultural, social, and economic life through a potent (and familiar) mixture of violence, intimidation, massacre, rape, co-optation, and terror; treated the country like it was a plantation and he was the master (2).

Thus, Díaz injects a measure of terrible humor into his description of the social, political, economic, and racial realities endured by Dominicans under Trujillo. Aside from being oppressive, murderous, and downright cruel, Díaz's point is that Trujillo strongly influenced the construction of racial and social identity in the Dominican Republic, something immigrants would continue to experience in the United States.

Alvarez, on the other hand, portrays a different way to view the Trujillo-controlled Dominican Republic. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* begins in 1989 with Yolanda García's nostalgic return to the Dominican Republic and travels back to 1956, when the girls were young and living in the Dominican Republic, and possibly less aware of Trujillo's murderous rule. The tone Alvarez adopts is not one of ironic humor or harsh criticism, nor does she provide footnotes. According to Dr. Ellen McCracken, those U.S. readers who are unaware of Dominican history must rely on external sources for historical details (80), as Alvarez mentions Trujillo only obliquely. Alvarez adds references to Dominican history through her characters, allowing readers to view it through the characters' eyes, especially children's eyes as narrated by Yolanda. For instance, Sofia, the youngest García, tells the story of the night when her grandfather first met Chucha, the family maid:

Chucha had just appeared [...] begging to be taken in. Turns out it was the night of the massacre when Trujillo had decreed that all black Haitians on our side of the island would be executed by dawn. There's a river the bodies were finally thrown into that supposedly still runs red to this day, fifty years later (218).

Here, Alvarez refers to the 1937 Haitian genocide, ordered by Trujillo, in which approximately 20,000 Haitians were killed and their bodies dumped in the Massacre River. The 1945 TIME Magazine article, *DOMINICAN REPUBLIC: Gaudiest Dictator*, also makes reference to the infamous Haitian massacre stating, "The Trujillo soldiery was ordered out. They smashed babies' heads against rocks, ripped pregnant women with bayonets, slaughtered thousands of Haitians. Hogs gorged on the rotting corpses." This brutal event came to be known as the "Parsley Massacre" because Trujillo's soldiers would ask suspected "Haitian" Dominicans to pronounce the Spanish word for parsley "perejil," knowing that Haitians had difficulty pronouncing it correctly (Memmott). Only

in Sofia's narrative does Alvarez mention that Chucha, a "real Haitian...couldn't say certain words like the word for parsley or anyone's name that had a *j* in it" (218). Even though Sofia was not born at the time of this horrific event, she relies on the stories told by her family through her narrative. Sofia admits, "I'm the one who doesn't remember anything from that last day on the Island because I'm the youngest and so the other three are always telling me what happened that last day" (217). Alvarez relies on family memory to reconstruct Sofia's narrative. Suarez states:

[Alvarez] directs us, not to the historical accuracy of her accounts but rather, to the power of a certain sensation, a far-off, enigmatic memory. This memory, based on the unknown and reconstructed from the possible past, affects the way Dominicans and Dominican Americans remember and imagine themselves, in the present and for the future (121).

In the final chapter of *García Girls*, titled *The Drum*, Alvarez takes the reader back to Yolanda's childhood. The chapter is narrated in first person by Yolanda as she recalls the moment when she received a toy drum set from her grandmother, whom she calls Mamita. The gift is from F.A.O. Schwarz, a popular U.S. high-end toy store, bought during Mamita's visit to New York City. Annoyed by Yolanda's constant loud beating of her toy drum in the house, Yolanda's mother scolds her, telling her to play in the yard like a responsible adult. However, Yolanda loses a drumstick and her aunt accidentally breaks the second one. While in the yard, a curious Yolanda discovers a litter of kittens in her family's coal shed and immediately singles out a kitten, whom she names Schwarz, after her favorite toy store. The name, Schwarz, German for black, blends her innocence with an authorial irony. She asks a stranger walking his dog about the possibility of keeping Schwarz as a pet and he responds, "Well, just as your drumsticks belong inside of your drum, [...] so a kitten belongs with its mother, and no one else will

do” (284). The stranger continues, “To take it away would be a violation of its natural right to live” (285). Nevertheless, Yolanda takes Schwarz from the litter and hides her in the drum. Yolanda observes the mother cat as she searches for Schwarz; she even beats her drum to drown out the noise that is coming from Schwarz. Unable to control the kitten’s constant meowing from inside the drum, Yolanda tosses her out of the window. The injured kitten soon disappears. From that moment, Yolanda is haunted by the mother cat. According to Professor William Luis from the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at Vanderbilt University, the mother cat serves as a reminder of Yolanda’s actions and becomes a symbol of the psychological fear Yolanda experiences when recalling her own displacement (848). As such, Yolanda must return to her homeland “not to understand the status of the present time of a privileged family or a culture struggling for democracy, but as a way of confronting her childhood and the past (Luis 848).

Coming from a privileged background, the García family had a ‘good’ life in the Dominican Republic, living in a family compound together with cousins, aunts, uncles, and maids. Their natural right to live as citizens of one country was taken away by their displacement, leaving scars as the García girls struggle to adapt to a new culture. Chronologically, the final chapter would come at the beginning of the novel, but Alvarez leaves this to the end, as it symbolizes a turning point in Yolanda’s life and what she would become. Once the kitten scene is complete, time begins to move forward. As Yolanda writes in the final paragraph:

Then 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. My grandmother grew so old she could not remember who she was. I went away to school. I read books. You understand I am collapsing all time now so

that it fits in what's left in the hollow of my story? I began write, the story of Pila [the laundry maid], and the story of my grandmother. I never saw Schwarz again. The man with the goatee and Kashtanka [the stranger and his dog] vanished from the face of creation. I grew up, a curious woman, a woman of story ghosts and story devils, a woman prone to bad dreams and bad insomnia. There are still times I was up at three o'clock in the morning and peer into the darkness. At that hour and in that loneliness, I hear her, her magenta mouth opening, wailing over some violation that lies at the center of my art (290).

Alvarez recreates the past, through memory, traveling backwards in time, gradually unfolding the incidents that resulted in her family's exile to the United States (Luis 840). Alvarez allows each sister to narrate her own experience, as they attempt to make sense of their migration and the reasons behind their family's decision to quickly leave the Dominican Republic. Their stories continue in reverse chronological order, beginning and ending with Yolanda. Both novels allow readers to hear different accounts of the Trujillo dictatorship by Dominicans living in the United States, especially those of Yolanda and Yunió. Readers can enter this process, where memory creates the sense of "where they came from," in Yolanda's own experience.

Authors' Alter Egos

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Díaz approaches history, both life in the Dominican Republic and the Dominican immigrant experience, through sarcasm and irony, Spanglish slang, and myth. The main narrator is Yunior de Las Casas, a character who had first appeared eleven years earlier in Díaz's book, *Drown* (1996). In *Oscar Wao*, Yunior tells the story of Oscar de Leon, an atypical Dominican boy who grew up in New Jersey, and who has left an indelible imprint on his own character. Junot Díaz and Julia Alvarez have a similar habit of recycling characters as seen in Alvarez's first novel, *How the García Girls Lost their Accents*. The protagonist and main narrator in *García Girls* is Yolanda García, a character who later becomes the subject of Alvarez's novel, *Yo!*, published six years later. Considering the biographies of Díaz and Alvarez it would seem that, in a sense, they have created fictional alter egos through which to re-cast their own experiences. For Alvarez, the principal alter ego is Yolanda García (Luis 840). In the case of Díaz, his alter ego is Yunior de las Casas. Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz of the University of Duesto writes "Bicultural self-writers are more than likely to rescue-and reinvent imaginatively- those experiences that they believe are going to help their readers understand their condition in the best possible light...[Alvarez and Díaz] rely on both memory and imagination" (225). To better understand the basis of the narratives and the alter ego psychology, we must first look at the authors' inspirations, and their own personal histories.

While Alvarez and Díaz both write about the immigrant experience, they come from different socio-economic backgrounds. Alvarez is from an upper-class family in the Dominican Republic. She was born in New York City, but moved to the Dominican

Republic when she was three months old. She states, “My parents, both native Dominicans, decided to return to their homeland, preferring the dictatorship of Trujillo to the U.S.A.” (JuliaAlvarez.com). Díaz, on the other hand, was born in Santo Domingo and grew up in poverty. He was primarily raised by his mother. When he was six years old, however, his family relocated to a poor neighborhood in New Jersey when sent for by his father, who was already living in the United States. Unlike the Alvarez family, who chose to live under the dictatorship of Trujillo, Díaz’s family chose to leave the Dominican Republic and move to the United States in hopes of achieving the “American Dream.” These economic and class differences are reflected in the two novels. Díaz and his characters’ stories come from poverty and broken families, while Alvarez and the García family come from wealth and a close-knit family. Despite their different socio-economic backgrounds, both authors found success as Dominican-American writers, thereby, achieving their own version of the “American Dream”. Their novels have drawn interest from researchers and scholars who study literature and the formation of ethnic identity. These authors, despite their focus on the Dominican-American experience, offer insight into identity issues faced by many immigrants living in the United States. And, despite the different economic backgrounds of both the authors and their fictional characters, the experiences described by Alvarez and Díaz are remarkably similar.

Julia Alvarez was born in 1950 and grew up under the Trujillo regime, when oppression in the Dominican Republic was a daily reality. She came from a wealthy family, was the second-oldest of four sisters, and attended an American school on the island. Similarly to the García family, her family was comprised not only of her nuclear family, but an extended family unit of cousins, aunts, uncles, and maids, many of whom

were distinctly Dominican. Like Dr. Carlos García in *García Girls*, her father was a doctor who joined an underground group that unsuccessfully attempted to overthrow Trujillo. Soon after, it became dangerous for her family to remain in the Dominican Republic. Alvarez's family fled back to New York in 1960 for their safety, a year before Trujillo's assassination. She was ten years old when she returned to the United States permanently. Alvarez recounts what it was like as a young schoolgirl returning to the US:

It's not like I didn't know some English at ten when we landed in New York City. But classroom English, heavily laced with Spanish, did not prepare me for the "barbaric yawp" of American English -- as Whitman calls it. I couldn't tell where one word ended and another began. I did pick up enough English to understand that some classmates were not very welcoming. *Spic!* a group of bullies yelled at me in the playground. Mami insisted that the kids were saying, *Speak!* And then she wonders where my storytelling genes come from (JuliaAlvarez.com).

Significantly, the move happened only four months before the Mirabal sisters, founders of the underground group to which Alvarez's father had belonged, were brutally murdered. Their story inspired Alvarez to write her second novel, *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994). The resemblances between Alvarez and Yolanda are striking.

Junot Díaz was born almost two decades after Alvarez in 1968, and though Trujillo's reign had ended, he and his family are still haunted by his rule as witnessed by Yunior, of the *fukú* curse in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. In contrast to Alvarez, who is an American citizen, Díaz was born in Santo Domingo. His first book, *Drown*, published eleven years prior to *Oscar Wao*, chronicles the life of Yunior de la Casas in the Dominican Republic and his family's economic struggle as immigrants trying to adapt and make a better life in New Jersey. Yunior's story closely resembles Díaz's own story. In *Drown*, an adult Yunior, a name similar to Junot, provides readers with a vivid account of Yunior's experience, as the novel bounces back and forth from

Yunior's childhood in the Dominican Republic to his life selling drugs in New Jersey to adulthood. Coming to America, Yunior finds himself in an environment that is new and different. Through Yunior, Díaz allows the reader to experience his underlying themes of poverty, survival, cultural confusion, violence, infidelity, machismo, and homosexuality. Díaz says that he always felt like an outsider in the U.S. from a very young age, causing him to become a fanatic of his native country. In a 2008 radio interview with NPR, he stated, "I don't think that I ever would have thought so fondly of Santo Domingo had I stayed there my whole life" (Junot Díaz, "On 'Becoming American'"). Unlike Alvarez, who had some knowledge of English from school, Díaz struggled to learn the English language from scratch while simultaneously dealing with the solitude of immigrant life. This isolation was what turned him to literature, movies, and television, and to the possibilities in first person narration, which can suggest an alter-ego stance.

Thus, both of the authors' novels can be described as semi-autobiographical. They use techniques of self-reflection, memory, and historical referencing to communicate the social and cultural issues of Dominicans and Dominican-Americans in the Dominican Republic and the United States. Ibarrola-Armendariz asserts, "Autobiography becomes both a way of testifying to oppression and empowering the subject through their cultural inscription and recognition" (104). Their own personal histories inspire their stories, as the all-too-real history of oppression in the Dominican Republic and United States fuels the novels' plots.

As previously stated, the authors make use of alter-egos. The narrative of *García Girls* strongly reflects Alvarez's life, as well as Yolanda's search for identity. Similarly, Alvarez and her sisters abruptly left the Dominican Republic and were forced into a new

culture. In fact, the fictional story of the García sisters echoes the experience not only of Alvarez's family, but that of many other Dominican immigrants fleeing one world, and caught between two worlds. Alvarez is known to use pseudo memory, deliberately blurring the lines between 'fact and fiction,' and narrative space and time. According to Karen Christian, Alvarez's process requires a significant amount of invention as she pieces together fragments of her past (116). In the view of Jessica Wells Cantiello, "It represents the emotional truth better than the factual memory" (83). For example, Alvarez used memories from her family's experience in re-telling the story of the Mirabal sisters in her second novel, *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994). This is a true story about four sisters living in the Dominican Republic who were secretly involved in a resistance movement against Trujillo and his regime. They were brutally assassinated by Trujillo's henchmen and their death resulted in outrage among many Dominicans living under Trujillo's dictatorship. In an interview, Alvarez recalls that writing the book helped her understand her country's story and her parents' stories. In reconstructing the story of the Mirabal sisters, she used a combination of fact, fiction, and memory. For instance, in the *Butterflies* postscript, Alvarez informs the reader, "...though I had researched the facts of the regime, and events pertaining to Trujillo's thirty-one-year despotism, I sometimes took liberties - by changing dates, by reconstructing events, and by collapsing characters or incidents" (324).

Childhood memories play an integral part for both Díaz and Alvarez as they craft their alter-egos, their characters, and their stories. As Díaz explains,

It's true I play with autobiography. I love to play with it. It's like a medium...no matter how hard I try to be autobiographical; the demands of fiction transform the material. There was no possible way to be autobiographical. The same way a memoir is also a kind of fiction. And so, the same way I said my friends as

audience have certain demands, the craft of fiction, as I know it, has rigorous demands which transform what I think is autobiography into something entirely different” (Cespedes and Torres-Saillant).

In similar vein, Alvarez expressed in a 2000 interview with Juanita Heredia that *García Girls* is not semi-autobiographical. Rather it combines her story with the stories of her people: “Latinos who were also Americans, a hybrid.” Even though there are episodes in *García Girls* that resemble Alvarez’s life story, her ultimate goal is to tell a story that unveils a personal immigrant experience to the world. As Heredia argues, “By combining history and fiction, Alvarez demonstrates that some stories are better told through a poetic sensibility than factual documentation” (20). Alvarez further admits, “I was especially interested in Latinas who were also dealing with gender issues, issues about being ‘nice’ girls from Latino families who had to deal with the rough and tough new world to which they had come” (Heredia 26). By emphasizing ‘nice girls,’ Alvarez writes from the perspective of a female immigrant confined to traditional gender roles in a Dominican patriarchal culture, in contrast to the freedom she has experienced as a writer.

Gender Roles

The women in Alvarez's novels aren't the only ones dealing with gender issues. A prominent theme in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is the expectation of stable masculine identities. The novel's protagonist, Oscar de Leon, struggles to establish his ethnic masculine identity in a world where he fails to meet both Dominican and American expectations of maleness. The narrator, Yunior (as yet anonymous to the reader), introduces a young Oscar as a "Casanova" type who is good with the girls when "he was (still) a 'normal' Dominican boy raised in a 'typical' Dominican family" (11). The narrator validates masculinity and Latino identity while implying that it is the American influence that has undermined Oscar as a "Casanova." Oscar develops into the complete opposite of the narrator, an unattractive, overweight "ghetto nerd" who is into science fiction and fantasy books. Of Oscar's masculinity, Yunior writes:

Anywhere else, his triple zero batting average with the ladies might have passed without comment, but this is a Dominican kid we're talking about, in a Dominican family: dude was supposed to have Atomic Level G, was supposed to be pulling in the bitches with both hands [...] because they were Dominican everybody talked about it (14).

The narrator, Yunior, uses the term un-Dominican to indicate that Oscar has failed to reach "suave" expectations, those traits that Dominican males are expected to exhibit.

Yunior's frustration at Oscar's lack of masculinity raises questions for the reader about Oscar's identity issues. Would it really be more acceptable to have a "triple zero batting average with the ladies" if Oscar weren't Dominican? Does the pressure of being a Dominican male contribute to Oscar's low self-esteem and unsuccessful relationships with women? Would it be the same if Oscar came from an American family? Many of these questions are left unanswered but the tone in which Oscar is described through

Yunior makes it clear that the pressure is possibly worse for him as a Dominican-American male.

When Yunior introduces himself as the narrator, readers discover that Yunior is Oscar's college roommate. Yunior reveals that he is Dominican and a "ladies man" who also likes and desires Oscar's sister Lola. In order to get close to Lola and to secure a dorm on campus, Yunior offers to be Oscar's roommate during the latter's sophomore year. Oscar is desperate to find a girlfriend, and Yunior attempts to transform Oscar into what he believes to be a 'real' Dominican man. He calls this attempt the "Oscar Redemption Program;" its objective, in Yunior's eyes, is for Oscar to lose his virginity. However, under pressure to assert his masculinity, lose weight, and develop intimacy, Oscar buries himself in video games and science fiction books. As Yunior describes this process:

Dude was not into it *at all*. As soon as we were through he'd be back at his desk in no time flat [...] Twenty-four/seven at a computer, writing sci-fi monsterpieces, darting out to the Student Center every now and then to play video games, talking about girls but never actually touching one--what kind of life was that? For fuck's sake, we were at Rutgers--Rutgers was just girls everywhere, and there was Oscar, keeping me up at night talking about the Green Lantern (178-179).

Oscar befriends a woman in his dorm who shares his interests, and he quickly falls for her. This becomes a recurring theme throughout the novel; Oscar falls deeply for any girl who shows the slightest interest in him. Yunior describes Oscar's new friend as a Puerto Rican Goth named Jenni, who had previously rejected Yunior's advances. Shocked that Oscar is spending time with a 'hot' girl, Yunior begins to question himself. "I should have been happy for the Wao. I mean, honestly, who was I to begrudge Oscar a little action? Me, who was fucking with not one, not two, but three fine-ass bitches at the same

time” (185). Through this narrative, Díaz exemplifies the Dominican machismo persona that Yuniór has attempted to convey to Oscar. Unfortunately for Oscar, he finds out the hard way that Jenni only considers him a friend; he walks in on her being intimate with another man. The shock of this discovery provokes an anxiety attack in Oscar. He is convinced that he cannot live up to the masculine expectations of a Dominican culture that his roommate has placed on him. To express Oscar’s frustrations with Yuniór, Díaz writes:

To my virginity!’ Oscar shouted.
 Oscar cool it, bro. People don’t want to hear about all that.
 You’re right, they just want to stare at me
 Come on, tranquilízate.
 He slumped. I’m copacetic.
 You ain’t pathetic.
 I said copacetic. Everybody, he shook his head, misapprehends me (189).

Depressed that he cannot live up to Yuniór's sexual expectations for him, Oscar attempts to commit suicide by jumping off a bridge. As long as he shares a space with Yuniór, there is no escaping the constant reminders of his failed masculinity and ‘Dominican-ness’. He becomes desperate, believing that he's found love every time a woman shows him kindness. Eventually, when he does fall in love (again) and experiences physical intimacy for the first time during a visit to the Dominican Republic after Trujillo’s assassination, it is with an older woman, a prostitute named Ybon. Unfortunately for Oscar, Ybon has a boyfriend whom Yuniór refers to as the ‘capitan’ because he is a military police officer. Oscar’s love for Ybon and his desire to see her proves to be fatal. Having been brutally attacked by the 'capitan' in the Dominican Republic, he is sent back to the United States. However, instead of staying there and continuing with his

life, he chooses to go back to the Dominican Republic and risk his life to see Ybon. As a result, he loses not just his virginity but his life.

It is ironic that Oscar comes from a family that lived in the Dominican Republic during the dictatorship, yet he is repeatedly described as “un-Dominican” by Yunior. His struggles with intimacy keep him from emulating the masculinity that is significant in his culture and identity. The failure to meet either Dominican or American cultural expectations haunts Oscar throughout the novel and prompts his often-questionable behavior. Oscar believes that finding love will be his key to ‘fitting in’ with American culture, when in reality it only results in his death. The characters of Oscar and Yunior reflect a certain demographic of young Dominican-American males battling to conform to the expectations of two distinct cultures. Elena Machado-Saez writes:

[Oscar Wao] challenges the academic formulation of diaspora through Yunior’s conflict over Dominican cultural authenticity, as he is torn between identifying either himself or Oscar as model diasporic subjects. Díaz’s channeling of Oscar’s life through Yunior’s narrative lens reveals that even within the diaspora a silencing can occur, because the diaspora is also conditioned by the logic of the nation (525).

Yunior represents himself as the complete opposite of Oscar. He is described as hyper-masculine and embodies all that he believes is Dominican. Though opposites in character, Yunior portrays both as outsiders. On the one hand, they are sons of Dominican immigrants; on the other hand, they are American males faced with certain social expectations. Díaz states:

We’re accepted as long as we conform to what we are expected to be, and I’m sure that’s not any different for anyone else. For us, there’s this cultural component: You’re Dominican only if you do this, this, and that. And if you do this and that, you’ll be accepted to a certain degree and if you don’t, people will scorn you for it (Díaz and Lantigua).

In *García Girls*, Yolanda and her sisters find it difficult adapting to their new environment its own gendered expectations when they arrive in the United States. Here, Alvarez writes from the experience of a female immigrant, and someone who is unsure about American gender roles. Dominican cultural values at home are important for Yolanda's parents who go to great lengths to ensure that their Dominican culture and tradition survive in the United States; however, outside of the home the girls are exposed to the American way of life. Alvarez demonstrates gender identity confusion. Living in a new environment, learning a new language, and attending a new school are factors that contribute to an immigrant's ethnic identity. Yolanda and her sisters feel a sense of isolation. At home, the family believes the girls want to be American and are constantly enforcing Dominican culture out of fear the girls will lose their identity, but in school they feel out of place as they try to assimilate. For instance, Carla is ridiculed by other students who tell her to "Go back to where you came from, you dirty old spic!" (153). When the girls begin to adapt to American culture, the parents, out of fear, try to instill Dominican culture. For example Yolanda states:

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. By the end of a couple of 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[...] The next decision was obvious: we four girls would be sent summers to the Island so we wouldn't lose touch with *la familia* (108-109).

The patriarchal culture the girls are living in is common in Dominican culture. The García sisters are expected to conform to certain gender roles. For instance, when the girls engage in conversation with their cousin Manuel during a summer visit on the island, Carla declares "Women do have rights here" (122). Manuel responds "Yes,

women have rights [...] But men wear the pants” (122). For Carla and her sisters, these beliefs become problematic, especially in their household in the United States; instead of listening to their parents and conforming to Dominican traditional values, the girls became more rebellious. As Dr. William Luis suggests, “The unstable lives of the sisters are related in part to the control the mother and father exert over their children” (842). This stress on "where they came from" is a part of, and sometimes the cause of, the ethnic tensions the sisters live and re-live.

Language

It is clear that language is a key component of assimilation into another culture, as well as, part of one's original language culture. It is essential not only for communication, but also to express oneself. The challenges the García girls are faced with exemplify those faced by immigrants growing up in the United States. In the first chapter of *How the García Girls Lost their Accents*, an adult Yolanda returns to the Dominican Republic after being away for five years. Alvarez hints at Yolanda's desire to return home permanently, suggesting that she wants to leave the United States. Alvarez titles the first chapter *Antojos*, a word translated by Yolanda's aunt as "a craving." Yolanda desires to eat guavas, which call to mind her upbringing in the Dominican Republic. As Luis suggest, "Yolanda does not return to Dominican reality, but to the past of her childhood, by means of her memory, writings, and the text" (846). However, Yolanda, in her first encounter with her aunts and cousins, finds it difficult speaking in Spanish. "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" (7). Yolanda fully understands Spanish and what they are saying, but is more comfortable speaking in English. And when she begins to speak English, her aunts reprimand her. At this point, both the reader and Yolanda realize that Yolanda has grown up as an American and she will need to assimilate as a Dominican. Yolanda's struggle with language, when she returns to the Dominican Republic is illustrated when she gets a flat tire while driving in the countryside looking for the guavas. Two men offer to help her and begin to speak to her in Spanish, but instead of communicating with them in

Spanish, she identifies herself as an American. The cultural and language barriers she is faced with prevents her from fully expressing herself.

As the novel continues to unfold, Alvarez continually reveals the struggles to assimilate and learn a new language. In the chapter titled, *Daughter of Invention*, a young Yolanda is selected to give a school speech. Her inability to speak and write English properly causes anxiety as she struggles to find her voice. Inspired by a passage in a poem by Walt Whitman, Yolanda includes it in her speech, “I celebrate myself and sing myself [...] He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher” (142). When Yolanda recites her speech in front of her father, he becomes angry and is offended by her “plagiarized words.” In another chapter, titled *Trespass*, narrated by Carla, the oldest sister is ridiculed and bullied in school because of her thick accent.

The use of Spanish is also important for both Díaz and Alvarez. In the case of Díaz, his narration includes many Spanish words and street slang and he makes no effort to translate these for the non-Spanish-speaking reader. For instance, in *Oscar Wao*, Díaz writes, “What’s wrong with you? His mother asked [...] When Oscar whimpered, Girls, Moms de Leon nearly exploded. Tu ta llorando por una muchacha? She hauled Oscar to his feet by his ear” (14). The question when translated in English means “You’re crying over a girl?” When asked why he chooses to leave certain phrases untranslated, Díaz responded in an interview in 2000 with Diogenes Cespedes and Silvio Torres-Saillant:

By keeping the Spanish as normative in a predominantly English text, I wanted to remind readers of the fluidity of languages, the mutability of languages. And to mark how steadily English is transforming Spanish and Spanish is transforming English. But you’re right, Diogenes. About the violence. When I learned English in the States, this was a violent enterprise. And by forcing Spanish back onto English, forcing it to deal with the language it tried to exterminate in me, I’ve tried to represent a mirror-image of that violence on the page. Call it my revenge on English (904).

It may be difficult for the reader to understand the Spanish language Díaz employs at times, but it is this unique style of his writing that exemplifies Dominican culture and draws the reader into Oscar's story as told by Yunió.

Similarly to Díaz, Alvarez uses Spanish words throughout her novel. Unlike Díaz, however, Alvarez emphasizes Spanish words in *García Girls* by using italics or quotations throughout the text. For example, when two guards visit the García house, Alvarez illustrates the conversation:

Next to her in the passenger seat it has taken her months to convince the young country girl to ride in, Imaculada says "*Doña, hay visita.*"
 Laura plays along, controlling the tremor of her voice. "Yes, company." She stops and motions for Chino to come to the car. "*¿Que hay, Chino?*"
 "They are looking for Don Carlos," Chino says tensely (200).

Laura's "Yes, company" response to Imaculada reinforces what Imaculada just said in Spanish. Here, Alvarez provides the translation through Laura's narrative. As the conversation continues the next phrase, "*¿Que hay, Chino?*" translates in English to "What's up Chino?" Although the reader may not fully understand all of the Spanish words in the novel, Alvarez sets up the conversation in a way that allows the non-Spanish-speaking reader to interpret the Spanish words and phrases through the story's context. As a result, readers are able to follow the storyline without too much confusion. These episodes also raise issues of cultural boundaries and cultural crossings, the idea of transnationalism achieved by bilingualism, and the perils of diaspora and displacement.

Conclusion

The two novels cover a lot regarding Dominican history and the formation of boundaries as immigrants' transition into American life. Both Alvarez and Díaz develop anti-colonial themes in subtle literary ways through plotting, character development, and narrative techniques and point of view. These novels are memorable for their narration of the movement from childhood to maturity as the authors give voice to Dominican experience. They serve as the authors' opportunities to get their personal stories heard by using their characters as the vehicles. It is clear that it not easy for Dominicans to form their new American lives, with all the history and societal pressure to present themselves as Dominican-Americans. As for Alvarez, *García Girls* was the first novel written by a Dominican-American woman to receive critical acclaim in the United States. Ellen McCracken states, "By engaging in both narrational and thematic 'trouble,' Alvarez disrupts the celebratory aspects of multiculturalism, moving beyond the notion of 'ethnic spice' and revealing immigrant identity to be the unstable site of ethnic, class, and, especially, gender battles" (31-32). In Alvarez's writing style, the narrative moves in reverse chronological order from a fragmented adulthood to a more homogenous vision of childhood. Yolanda's story especially reflects her struggles in the present and the events and impressions she chooses to communicate that have helped form her identity.

Díaz's writing style is impressive as he uses such slang and language that incorporates so much Spanish to give the readers a full account of the diverse Dominican-American life. Hanna et al consider Díaz's work as "a forerunner in creating, articulating, and shaping the decolonial imagination in contemporary American literature" (8). His work truly qualifies as contemporary ethnic American literature as it

reveals the complexities of Dominican and Dominican-American ethnic experience. His novel can be interpreted as semi-autobiographical and historical. It is tied together by Yuniors personality, and his often sarcastic and bitter narrative voice. These two modes of narration, internal and external, are successful, if painful, attempts by these renowned authors to give voice to the Dominican-American experience. In one case, the voice that is conveyed is the voice of assimilation, yet backward looking; the other is Diaz's voice of resistance to past oppression. The relatability of these stories to the masses, whether immigrant or not, is remarkable. Feelings of being the outsider can be felt at whatever age, by whatever race. Therefore, it is not surprising that these novels have been critically acclaimed and are the recipients of esteemed awards.

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