Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro
Centro de Educação e Humanidades
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Priscila Reis Catalão

Julia Alvarez's writing practices: the elaborate process of self-invention through literature

Rio de Janeiro
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Dissertação apresentada como requisito parcial para obtenção do título de Mestre, ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras da Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. Área de concentração: Estudos de Literatura.

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Banca examinadora:

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Prof.ª Dra. Leila Assumpção Harris (Orientadora)

Instituto de Letras – UERJ

_____

Prof.ª Dra. Maria Aparecida Andrade Salgueiro

Instituto de Letras – UERJ

_____

Prof. Dr. Luiz Manoel da Silva Oliveira

Universidade Federal de São João del-Rei

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DEDICATÓRIA

Dedico este trabalho à minha família, meu grande amor.

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RESUMO

CATALAO, Priscila Reis. *A escrita de Julia Alvarez*: o elaborado processo de invenção de si através da literatura. 2019. 97 f. Dissertação (Mestrado em Letras) - Instituto de Letras, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, 2019.

O objetivo desta dissertação é discutir os conceitos de lar e deslocamento, elementos de performance de gênero e indícios da presença da escrita de si no fazer literário da escritora dominicana-americana Julia Alvarez. A autora, apesar de nascida em Nova Iorque, foi criada na República Dominicana, tendo imigrado para os Estados Unidos aos dez anos de idade. Suas experiências como sujeito diaspórico delineiam sua vida e influenciam sua escrita. Alvarez escreve ficção e não ficção que apresentam como protagonistas mulheres caribenhas que vivem entre culturas e cujas vidas estão profundamente conectadas à terra natal. O foco principal desta análise literária é estabelecer um paralelo entre a jornada de Alvarez e de sua personagem Yolanda, ressaltando aspectos políticos e estéticos. Seu romance *¡Yo!* (1997) e a coleção de ensaios autobiográficos, *Something to Declare* (1998) constituem o principal *corpus* literário de meu trabalho, mas também incluo passagens extraídas do primeiro romance da autora *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* (1991) e de entrevistas. Os conceitos de escrita de si e de autoficção figuram como elementos-chave para a apreciação da obra de Alvarez. Por meio de suas experiências como uma escritora dominicana-americana, a autora cria personagens e narrativas que entrelaçam história e ficção de modo a expor as dificuldades de quem está situado entre culturas. Além disso, com base nos seus ensaios, pretendo analisar os efeitos do deslocamento forçado tanto na vida da escritora quanto em sua representação literária presente nos romances selecionados. Dito isto, de forma a discutir estes resultados, vou abordar questões como formação de identidade, expectativas e performance de gênero, hibridismo cultural e mais. Os autores que compõem o *corpus* teórico desta pesquisa escrevem, em sua maior parte, de um ponto de vista crítico pós-colonial/decolonial e feminista; não obstante, para investigar as práticas de escrita de si pretendo usar alguns teóricos que são especialistas em autobiografia e/ou autoficção. A base desta pesquisa inclui os trabalhos de Phillipe Lejeune, Homi K. Bhabha, Susan S. Friedman, Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, entre outros.

Palavras-chave: Julia Alvarez. Escrita de si. Deslocamento. Hibridismo. Gênero.

ABSTRACT

CATALÃO, Priscila Reis. *Julia Alvarez's writing practices*: the elaborate process of self-invention through literature. 2019. 97 f. Dissertação (Mestrado em Letras) - Instituto de Letras, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, 2019.

The purpose of this thesis is to discuss the concepts of home and displacement, elements of gender performance and strategies of life-writing in the works of the Dominican-American writer Julia Alvarez. The author, although born in New York, was raised in the Dominican Republic, immigrating to the United States at the age of ten. Her experiences as a diasporic subject not only shape her life path but also influence her writing in general. Alvarez writes fiction and non-fiction that feature as protagonists Caribbean women who live in-between cultures and are often deeply connected to their homeland. The primary focus of this literary analysis is to establish a parallel between Alvarez's journey and that of her character Yolanda, highlighting both political and aesthetic concerns. Her novel *¡Yo!* (1997) and a collection of autobiographical essays, *Something to Declare* (1998) constitute the main literary corpus of my work, but I also include excerpts from the writer's first novel *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* (1991) and from interviews. The notions of life-writing and autofiction are going to be brought up as key elements to the appraisal of Alvarez's works. Making use of her own experiences as a Dominican-American writer to build her characters and storylines, Alvarez weaves history and fiction in order to expose the struggles of people who are caught between cultures. Furthermore, through her essays, I intend to analyze the effects of forced displacement both on the author herself and her mirrored literary representation presented in the selected novels. That being said, in order to discuss such outcomes, I am going to touch upon topics such as identity formation, gender expectations and performance, cultural hybridism and more. The authors who compose the theoretical foundation of this research write mostly from a viewpoint of postcolonial/decolonial and feminist criticism; nevertheless, in order to investigate life-writing practices I intend to use some scholars who are specialists in autobiography and/or autofiction. The basis of this thesis includes the works of Phillipe Lejeune, Homi K. Bhabha, Susan S. Friedman, Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, among others.

Keywords: Julia Alvarez. Life writing. Displacement. Hybridism. Gender.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

I have always been a book worm; growing up with little money in the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro, I considered myself to be an introvert; hence, I found in literature a shelter and a way to experience things I would not be able to due to a number of constraints, including the impossibility to travel. At first, books offered me entertainment, but soon they became my door to understanding the world through literary representations. From classics to dystopias, novels helped me discover realities that were totally different from mine

Nevertheless, it was only when I began studying Literature at Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (UERJ) as an undergraduate that I got to know narratives that actually changed me as a woman; some contemporary works written by women made me rethink my place and privileges. When I first read Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents* (1991), I was captivated. I felt that, even though I have never been a diasporic subject, I understood those girls at least partially. I too am a woman who was born in a so called Third World country to a family that also thinks I should fit into a mold that does not encompass all the complexities of my identity. I finally understood that literature might be an instrument of resistance.

Julia Alvarez is a writer of novels, poetry, essays and books for readers of all ages[1]. At the beginning of her career, she dedicated much of her time to poetry which was her starting point, as the writer explains in an interview for *The Writer*: "My default genre is poetry. That's where I began." (ALVAREZ, 2016); nonetheless, it was with the publication of her

[1] **Novels**: *Return to Sender* (2009), *Saving the World* (2006), *In the Name of Salomé* (2000), *¡YO!* (1997), *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994) and *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* (1991).
Poetry: *The Woman I Kept to Myself* (2004), *Homecoming: New and Collected Poems* (1996), *The Other Side / El Otro Lado* (1995)
Nonfiction: *A Wedding in Haiti:* The Story of a Friendship (April 2012), *Once Upon A Quinceañera*: Coming of Age in the USA (2007), *Something to Declare* (1998)
For young readers of all ages: *Where Do They Go?* (picture book, 2016), *How Tía Lola Saved the Summer* (middle readers, 2011), *How Tía Lola Learned to Teach* (middle readers, 2010), *The Best Gift of All:* The Legend of La Vieja Belén / *El mejor regalo del mundo*: la leyenda de La Vieja Belén (picture book, 2008), *A Gift of Gracias*: the legend of Altagracia (picture book, 2005), *finding miracles* (young adult, 2004), *Before We Were Free* (middle readers and up, 2002), *How Tía Lola Came to Visit Stay* (middle readers, 2001), *A Cafecito Story* (a green fable for young readers of all ages, 2001). *The Secret Footprints* (picture book, 2000)

first novel that she rose to prominence. Alvarez underscores the importance of her debut novel in a text written for the "About Me" area of her website: "With the success of **García Girls**, I suddenly had the chance to be what I always wanted to be: a writer who earned her living at writing"[2]. The writer is both critically and commercially acclaimed; she is considered one of the most influential Dominican-American authors of our times. In 2013, she was presented with the National Medal of Arts by former President of the United States, Barack Obama.

Alvarez's awards and honors include the Lamont Prize from the Academy of American Poets in 1974, the first prize in narrative from the Third Woman Press Award in 1986, the Latina Leader Award in Literature in 2007 from The Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute, the Montgomery College 2009 F. Scott Fitzgerald Award for Outstanding Achievement in American Literature, the Woman of the Year of *Latina Magazine* and more. Furthermore, her work has received a great deal of honor. For instance, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* was picked by NY Librarians as one of the 21 classics for 21st century and was selected a Notable Book by PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles Literary Award for books which present a cultural view point. *In the Time of the Butterflies* was selected as a Notable Book by the American Library Association in 1994. She was also awarded the Hispanic Heritage Award in Literature in 2002.[3]

The writer is a diasporic subject who, although born in New York, lived most of her childhood in the Dominican Republic, her parents' homeland. The Dominican Republic, once known as the colony of Santo Domingo, was ruled by Spain during colonial times. France also ruled the island for a brief period during the nineteenth century. In 1809, the British banned the French from the Dominican territory and returned it to the Spaniards. The country is a fairly recent democracy since it gained its independence from the Spanish Crown in 1821; nonetheless complete independence from foreign intervention came only in 1844 after a secret Dominican society called *La Trinitaria* achieved success with their underground movement and unbound the country from Haitian control. The Dominican Republic's first constitution was adopted on November 6, 1844.

The country experienced a new period of subjugation to another country's policies when an American intervention was installed in the Dominican territory. This occupation lasted from 1916 to 1924. Following the American interference, there was a six-year period of

[2] Available at https://www.juliaalvarez.com/about/. Last access on February 17th, 2019.
[3] All the data was taken from Alvarez's website. Available at: https://www.juliaalvarez.com/about/. Last access: February 17th, 2019.

stable governance with the election of President Horacio Vásquez. Vásquez was re-elected in 1930, but could not commence his mandate, let alone finish it, due to the military coup led by Rafael Leónidas Trujillo which set up a violent dictatorship in the country from 1930 to 1961.

Trujillo's reign of terror lasted for 31 years and all the progress in healthcare, transportation, education and other different areas of governmental responsibility was followed by intense repression. Trujillo used torture, terrorist methods, and murder in order to deal with his opponents or anyone he considered to be suspicious. There was a secret police called the SIM which was responsible for eliminating any political opposition and preventing any coup attempts. It allegedly assassinated over 500.000 people during *El Trujillato*.

Caribbean women writers are like quilters. They weave different pieces of histories that help to create cultural memory based on accounts that were suppressed by those in power. During centuries of colonial rule, the period of foreign intervention and the decades of dictatorial regime, people's minds and lives were controlled, in greater or lesser extent, through the deliberate repression of memory and the disempowering act of making them believe they did not have a history. Julia Alvarez seems to be aware of the importance of unraveling histories/*herstories* that were erased especially during the *trujillato* and giving voice to subjects who were marginalized and silenced. The author is also committed to investigating how displacement affects women's identity and the process of assimilation of diasporic subjectivities.

What first caught my attention when reading Julia Alvarez's works was the way the author builds her protagonists, who are mostly women, and how their stories share many similarities with Alvarez's life journey. For that reason, the first chapter of this thesis, "Language is the only homeland": an analysis of Julia Alvarez's life writing practices is going to focus on investigating these practices in Julia Alvarez's selected works.

The main objective of this thesis is to discuss Alvarez's contemporary representation of her own experiences as a woman who has lived through exile and assimilation, going through a process of subjectification that includes not only her experiences as a diasporic subject but also her work as a writer. Since I intend to deal with the idea that all literary praxis is heterogeneous, my goal is to analyze the projection of the author inside the narrative, scrutinizing her books as unique pieces that require an analysis which will not circumscribe them to pre-established definitions, but make use of these definitions to reach a better understanding of their intricacies.

In order to reach this objective, the theoretical references chosen to ground this chapter are Phillipe LeJeune's research on autobiography and intimate writing, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's *Reading Autobiography*: a guide for interpreting life narratives (2010). Notwithstanding, it is impossible to write about life narratives and self-narration without mentioning Serge Doubrovski and the concept of autofiction coined by him, so I also work with the collection of essays on autofiction organized by the Brazilian scholar Jovita Maria Gerheim Noronha which features an essay by critic Vincent Colonna that is paramount to the proposed discussion. Firstly, I am going to propose a discussion that encompasses all of these topics and then I intend to analyze and point out the "coincidences" between Yolanda's life through excerpts taken from *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents,* but relying mostly on examples from *¡Yo!*. I also make use of Julia Alvarez's autobiographical accounts featured in her essays from *Something to Declare* and interviews.

In the second chapter, Hybrid identities and the pursuit of home in diaspora, I intend to explore the concepts of home and displacement and how dislocation fosters the process of hybridization of identities. Since modern displacements have forced great masses of people to leave their homeland – owing to factors such as indentured labor, wars, even genocide, among others – and changed the way we think about cartography nowadays, questioning the notion of home is a relevant matter. Thus, I plan to discuss the effects of displacement – geographical and/or emotional – on identity formation which leads us to think about elements of hybridism and the establishment of one's cultural identity. Identity formation implies never ending negotiations between similarities and differences within discourse. As Stuart Hall points out, one of the ways to comprehend the idea of cultural identity is the following:

> Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (HALL, 2010, p. 225)

Becoming oneself, then, is connected to the historical moment, to the notion of territory and to cultural mobility. The diasporic aesthetic present in many contemporary narratives is a product inside a globalized world that emerges accordingly to that reality. One of the main aspects of this new phase is the decentering of spaces, as Sandra Regina Goulart

Almeida states in her book *Cartografias Contemporâneas:* espaço, corpo, escrita (2015): "(...) at the same time that the center of cultural contemporaneity is everywhere, it is also nowhere (...)" (p.49, my translation) . Fictionalizing diaspora is a way to elaborate this deterritorializing experience.

For immigrants, going abroad cannot be compared to traveling. Diaspora includes positive and negative aspects. On the one hand, immigrants often feel alienated in the host country, as if they did not belong anywhere while dealing with a number of prejudices and facing language barriers that might prevent them from communicating. On the other hand, leaving a country that may have made them experience true horrors might create a world of new possibilities such as more independence, agency and better quality of life. As Avtar Brah clarifies, "these geographical accounts demonstrate how the same geographical and psychic space comes to articulate different 'histories' and how 'home' can simultaneously be a place of safety and of terror" (BRAH, 1996, p. 180).

According to *New Key Words: A [Revised] Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (2005), the concept of home "(…) implies both rest and settlement, and movement. Home is the place from which things originate (hometown, home country) and to which they return, or – where movement is blocked – a place of imagined return." (BENNET, GROSSBERG & MORRIS, 2005, p. 162). Therefore, home is an unfixed concept and may even represent only a myth, a place where one is never able to return to. Regarding diasporic journeys, no concept should be analyzed as a fixed construct; there are many possibilities for changeability within diasporic communities. To conduct this investigation, I use the works of authors such as Stuart Hall , Homi Bhabha and Susan Stanford Friedman to address the issues of cultural identity and hybridism. The words of Ella Shohat and Timothy Brennan are brought to the table in order to discuss conceptualizations on postcolonialism and globalization. Scholars Paul Gilroy, Ann Hua and Avtar Brah are also included in this chapter to clarify matters concerning the term *diaspora*.

My relationship with literature has changed over the years. If it began as a simple means to escape the difficulties I faced in my own life, it is now a way to contribute, through my research, to a better understanding of society and how much it is still a source of oppression for women, especially if they are poor and non-white. Although we live in a rather globalized world, countries in the American continent which were under colonial rules still suffer from coloniality. Decolonial practices are emerging in places, yet we observe that the

old system continues to operate through colonial relations of power within social classes, race and, of course, gender. The works chosen to be analyzed in this thesis denounce many of these practices through their literary representations.

We live in a world that is allegedly postcolonial; nonetheless, in the present time many authors choose to work with designations such as the pair coloniality/decoloniality in order to make it explicit that although nearly all Europe's former colonies have gained political independence, colonial structures are present and operating in the same spaces that were once colonies. Thus, colonialism and decolonization are not interchangeable terms in relation to coloniality and decoloniality. Since the analysis I propose in this thesis deals with migrant literature from a writer whose roots are also in the Caribbean, I chose to analyze Alvarez works from a postcolonial/decolonial viewpoint. Thus, it bears relevance to comprehend the meaning of coloniality of power. The term was coined by the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano in the article Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality (2007) and has also been addressed by Professor Walter Mignolo. The theory is paramount to many decolonial discussions suggested by relevant Latin American authors in the present days such as María Lugones and Nelson Maldonado-Torres. According to Quijano, coloniality of power can be defined as,

> Coloniality, then, is still the most general form of domination in the world today, once colonialism as an explicit political order was destroyed. It doesn't exhaust, obviously, the conditions nor the modes of exploitation and domination between peoples. But it hasn't ceased to be, for 500 years, their main framework. The colonial relations of previous periods probably did not produce the same consequences, and, above all, they were not the corner stone of any global power. (QUIJANO, 2007, p.170)

In the third chapter, What it feels like for a girl in this world: gender representations in Julia Alvarez's narratives, I plan on discussing gender as a construct touching upon the notion of gender expression and gender performance and focusing on the lived experience of gender for diasporic women. I will extend the comparison between the *¡Yo!* and Alvarez's collection of essays and use some excerpts from *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents* to substantiate my study. Moreover, I intend to deal with the notion of coloniality of gender to conduct a deeper discussion concerning women from developing countries.

Scholar María Lugones emphasizes in her article Toward a Decolonial Feminism that "unlike colonization, the coloniality of gender is still with us; it is what lies at the interaction of gender/class/race as central constructs of the capitalist world system of power." (LUGONES, 2010, p. 743). This means that western gender categorizations and definitions were actually imposed by colonialism; therefore, there is no universal classification of what it

means to be “Female”. The imperialist system divides us into binaries in order to profit, so it benefits from these social constructs of gender. Deconstructing these fixed concepts when performing gender might be not only a way to resist the oppression of the system but also a form to survive when living in between cultures.

This analysis aims at investigating the subversion of gender as a fixed unit though the character of Yolanda alongside with similarities to Julia Alvarez’s real life experiences. In both cases, I will resort to the viewpoint of performativity as a tool for coping with the distress of being caught between two patriarchal systems. Furthermore, I intend to take into consideration the fact that both Yolanda and her creator spent their childhood in a developing country, even though they are privileged in some levels, which means that I will make use of a relational approach that understands that the level of oppression one suffers depends on positionality. The authors that fundament the analysis of the literary corpus at this stage are Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Breny Mendoza and María Lugones.

Since before the election of the current United States of America President, Donald Trump, the world has been witnessing a debate over immigration versus segregation resurface. It is not that illegal immigration had stopped or that refugees no longer faced menace during their journeys in search for a better life. It takes a reading of the world’s most prestigious papers for readers to find stories such as the ones related to Syrian Civil War or about Latin America where the Venezuelan exodus is already seen as the biggest displacement in the region so far.

The biggest issue here concerning the U.S.’s current policies is that when the leader of one of the most powerful countries in the world threatens to build a border wall to solve a so-called “crisis”, the consequences are not only virtual. Migrants, who already might face a great deal of discrimination in their host lands, are perceived as criminals. Episodes such the ones in which undocumented families were separated at the U.S. southern border and their children were put into cages become trivialized by a zero tolerance policy. Instead of marching towards a better way of co-existing with difference, it seems that what is happening is the other way around: a demonization of difference and diversity and the emphasis of an ideology of white supremacy.

In this context, I find it especially important to emphasize the relevance of works such as Julia Alvarez’s since they cover a plethora of topics that are crucial to the comprehension

of diasporic people's predicaments and aspirations. Although in *How the García Girls Lost their Accents*, *¡Yo!* and *Something to Declare* Julia Alvarez draws inspiration from her own experiences and her journey includes a life with some privilege, the writer is also able to provide literary representations that heap criticism on societal stratification and at the same time depict the lives of women who still need to search for empowerment. Hence, more than ever, there is the need to adopt a relational point of view to approach the representation of difference among the people that are connected by elements such as gender identity, but are separate by class and/or race.

1 "LANGUAGE IS THE ONLY HOMELAND": AN ANALYSIS OF JULIA ALVAREZ'S LIFE WRITING PRACTICES

A novel is the truth according to character.

Julia Alvarez

Writing about oneself is not a recent human habit, the choice to describe one's own life may be considered part of a Western ethos and there are many examples of life narratives that are preliterate. Since medieval times human beings reflect on society, history, politics and other topics of interest by writing about their own personal experiences. Human beings also tend to enjoy talking about themselves; therefore, writing seems to be a more systematic way to generate and preserve memories, comprehend feelings and even overcome traumas. This chapter will focus on an analysis of the writing praxis of Julia Alvarez through a comparison between her novel *¡Yo!* (1997) and her collection of essays *Something to Declare* (1998). I also write with the aim of justifying this analysis by using theories and discussions promoted by authors whose research touch upon topics such as life writing and autobiographical practices.

Literary critics all over the globe have abandoned the binary fiction versus nonfiction when studying and analyzing novels, biographies, and autobiographies. Since the mid-seventies when author Serge Doubrovsky coined the term autofiction after a period of researching biography and autobiography in order to deal with his own novel *Fils* (1977), supposedly written to represent what autofiction is, much has been discussed when it comes to defining autofiction as a genre and whether such definition would be desirable.

Instead of defining autofiction *per se*, it might be more productive to start by discussing what it is not. Autofiction is not a synonym for autobiography, nor can it be compared to fictional texts; therefore, autofiction is situated in between biography and novel. The umbrella term *autofiction* allows the author to invent and reinvent not only stories but also themselves. Notwithstanding, given the fact scholars disagree on many levels regarding what should be considered autofiction and what should not, there is no consensus on the fundamental aspects that may characterize a text as autofiction. For that reason and also for assuming that fixed definitions are restricting, I find much more appealing to use the expressions autobiographical practices, self-referential writing, life-writing and life narratives

in my work because they encompass more than biographies or autobiographies, including works of fiction that defy the fictional pact. I align my thinking to the definitions provided by authors Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in their *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2010) when they state that:

> We understand life writing as a general term for writing of diverse kinds that takes a life as its subject. Such writing can be biographical, novelistic, historical, or an explicit self-reference to the writer. We understand life narrative as a somewhat narrower term that includes many kinds of self-referential writing, including autobiography. (2010, p.4)

It is important to assert that for many authors labeling their work as autofiction was a way to narrate their life experience without having to face the disadvantages of being called autobiographers, such as being accused of utter narcissism; thus, the term autofiction provided more freedom to authors who were not willing to abide by the autobiographical pact. By definition autobiography involves self-narration; nevertheless, it is safe to stress that all texts, including fictional stories, are participants in the autobiographical space due to the interaction between real and fictional. Some scholars and readers tend to understand novels as a more valid art form than autobiographies, since they think that an analysis of a fictional text may tell us much more of the story than a simple reading of facts as they happened.

Life narratives date back to earlier than the eighteenth century. Rousseau's *Confessions* and its parallel to Augustine's homonymous work are still some of the works that bear great importance to the discussions we carry on nowadays. The earliest existing autobiographical work in English, *The Book of Margery Kempe* (1501), can be traced back to medieval time and depicts Kempe's own reality as a pilgrim who claimed to have experienced the divine; thus, one might assume that she attempted to create an accurate representation of her life through writing. It is said that the book was dictated by her to two scribes, since Kempe was illiterate. Kempe's work is still an object of research to this day and its relevance is not lost. Here it is how author Carolyn Dinshaw describes it:

> *The Book of Margery Kempe* not only depicts in brilliant detail the historical moment of a bold late medieval woman, but also tells us about the status of history iself and, further, about our place in it. If Margery is not considered a potential saint, her *Book* nonetheless 'illuminat[es] a life possibility for the present', and its visionary nature is crucial to its new place in the twenty-first-century literary canon. (DINSHAW, 2003, p. 223)

French critic Philippe LeJeune has researched and written about autobiography and intimate writing for over thirty years. Before Lejeune, self-referential writing was not really considered to be a genre and not many critics had devoted their work to studying it. In his work, LeJeune proposes that there are two kinds of pacts which are established between participants (author and reader) at the beginning of a reading process: the autobiographical pact and its counterpart, the fictional pact. These agreements are responsible for guiding readers' perception of the nature of the work they are in touch with; simply put, they should help them understand if it is fiction or nonfiction.

In *Le Pacte autobiographique* (1975), LeJeune discusses and defines autobiography and what he called the autobiographical pact. Moreover, the author establishes a difference between the aforementioned pacts. According to LeJeune, the name of the protagonist is intrinsically connected to the distinction between these contracts of sorts. On the one hand, in order to define the agreement between reader and author as fictional, readers have to take into consideration that the name of the leading character should be different from that of the author; hence the author is not the narrator of the story. On the other hand, the autobiographical pact implies an equivalence of names between protagonist and author; therefore, the narrative is autodiegetic and the author is both the narrator and the protagonist of the story. In the case of leading characters with no names, the pact is considered to be absent. LeJeune states that if the name of the protagonist is equal to the name of the author "this fact alone excludes the possibility of fiction. Even if the story is, historically, completely false, it will be on the order of the *lie* (which is an "autobiographical" category) and not of fiction" (LEJEUNE, 1989, p.17).

Thirty years later the writer revisits his work in *Signes de vie (Le pacte autobiographique, 2)* (2005) and provides the reader with a broader definition of what is considered to be the autobiographical pact. This definition catches our attention since it tells us that the pact is a certain type of discourse addressed to readers (LeJeune, 2009); it is a contract between them and the author. Therefore, the autobiographical text is taken as true narration of facts and establishes a clear difference between autobiography and novel. I will not go any further to discuss what the truth is as a concept exactly, but I surely find interesting to work with such a definition.

Lejeune's definition of the pact generated controversy at the time he published his book, for in the sixties critic Roland Barthes had discussed the death of the author and

autonomy of the text (Barthes, 1967), not to mention that in the same period Michel Foucault gave a lecture, “What is an author?” (Foucault, 1969) that featured similar thinking. The barthesian theory implies that the life experience of the individual writing a book should not be taken into consideration during the reading process and the text should be analyzed by itself; consequently, one may affirm that the autobiographical pact transgresses this idea when it conjectures that the writer is not only very much present in that specific context but also dialogues with the reader by establishing a contract which declares that everything narrated in that particular text is fact and not fiction.

Still according to LeJeune (2009), the autobiographical pact is a proposition that involves only the author, so readers are free to choose between reading a text accordingly or not and even reading, as they wish. Nonetheless, if readers choose to commence this process, they have to consider the contract proposed by the author, whether in order to contest or neglect it. The critic actually states that the pact is going to put the reader’s defenses on alert.

It is important to understand the relevance of literary pacts to the present discussion. Supposedly, a text is written to be read and the pact between the author and the reader is established right at the beginning of this journey. Regardless, there are plenty of contemporary works which brings to mind the idea of a third pact. This diverse contract would imply ambiguity, instead of a fixed border between fiction and nonfiction. The ambiguous pact indicates the possibility of binaries such as identity versus non-identity and fact versus invention, all present in the same text.

From Sartre’s perspective (1948 apud COMPAGNON, 2010, p. 93), the reading process is fundamental to the text as an object. The text needs a reader and vice-versa; therefore, a book is only fully appreciated in its value when it is read, making this process a dialectical one. In the past, one might have thought that analyzing any novel and/or works of nonfiction required of the reader an understanding of the kinds of pacts involved in the reading of these texts. Yet, as I point out, much has taken place in the literary field and the way human beings think, teach and write literature has changed greatly, ergo the need to consider that some texts not only transgress these pacts but also are part of narratives that create new pacts, new paths and new forms to tell a story of a life journey.

When it comes to contemporary literature, one may resort to more flexible terms to deal with works which are difficult to be defined by a fixed category. Researching and analyzing literature requires more than formulas and definitions; that is the practice of using

restrictive concepts to limit texts to a number of categories is rather hermetic and outdated. Serge Doubrovsky believed that writing about one's own experiences is a healing practice (FAEDRICH, 2014, p. 34-35) nonetheless, as I tend to understand, this practice has more than a psychoanalytical meaning embedded in it. Besides helping individuals to cope with issues, life writing, life narratives and autobiographies might be a way to play with doubles, understand one's own journey, forge memories that are not only collective and political but also extremely intimate.

Contemporary writers have shown that the above-mentioned concepts cannot contain all the complexities of their work. The object of this study, two works by Julia Alvarez, are a poignant representation of this reality. As a diasporic subject herself, Alvarez has produced works that not only portray subjectivities that represent unfixed identities but also reveal writing practices that cannot be categorized or completely defined, given their fluid nature. The choice of labeling Julia Alvarez as a diasporic subject, although she was actually born in the United States, is justified by the fact that a subject's cultural identity may be perceived not only as a fixed combination of cultural and historical experiences the individual shares with his/her people but also as a variable concept that changes according to the positionality of the subject.

Thus, the lived experience of an individual will influence his/her process of subjectification and for that reason Julia Alvarez may be perceived as a diasporic subject whose identity is constantly changing according to politics of location/dislocation and the experiences she undergoes. When discussing diaspora space, border and transnational identities, Avtar Brah touches upon the issue of transcultural identities which I also find relevant to the defense of the term "diasporic subject" as a form to address Julia Alvarez's identity throughout this study. Here is how Brah explains the matter of identities that emerged within the diaspora space during the twentieth century:

> What is at stake is the infinite experientiality, the myriad processes of cultural fissure and fusion that underwrite contemporary forms of transcultural identities. These emergent identities may only be surreptitiously avowed. Indeed, they may even be disclaimed or suppressed in the face of constructed imperatives of 'purity'. But they are inscribed in the late twentieth-century forms of syncretism at the core of culture and subjectivity (HALL 1990; COOMBES 1992). (BRAH, p. 205, 2005)

Alvarez's novels play with the notions of fact versus fiction as well as with the concepts of autobiographical writing and life writing. She has written books that are based on real-life characters, using historical data while simultaneously intertwining these narratives with fiction. Moreover, Alvarez has explicitly written about herself in *Something to Declare*, a collection of essays that continuously provokes the reader into thinking about the limits between fiction and nonfiction. Crucial incidents in her life help clarify many elements in her writings. Concerning her novel ¡*Yo!* (1997), the speculation starts with its title. On the one hand, the word is short for Yolanda, the name of the protagonist, also one of the characters in Alvarez's first novel *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents* (1991). On the other hand, it is the Spanish equivalent for the personal pronoun "I".

Julia Alvarez was born in New York during the fifties, but only a few months after her birth, she and her family moved to the Dominican Republic. She spent the first ten years of her childhood in that country, her family's homeland. At the time Alvarez was born, the Dominican Republic was under the dictatorial regime instituted and conducted by Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina. *El Trujillato* lasted from 1930 to 1961 when Trujillo was assassinated. Due to the fact that her father was involved in clandestine activities against Trujillo's government as were the Mirábal sisters, also known as *Las Mariposas*, murdered on 25 November 1960 by Trujillo's henchmen, the Alvarez family had to flee their homeland in order to survive like the Alvarez many Dominican families left the Dominican Republic during Trujillo's dictatorship to escape political persecution. The Mirábal sisters became a symbol of resistance not only in the Dominican Republic but also worldwide and Alvarez wrote a novel about them which ingeniously combines history, fiction, and memory. These details about Alvarez's life are paramount to understand her work as a writer, it includes poems, novels, children's books, and essays.

Alvarez often makes use of fictional elements and historical data in her novels when narrating the lives of exiles. She addresses issues such as memory, assimilation, belonging and identity; she has also written about political and cultural experiences of women in the Dominican Republic and the United States and narrated the lives of those who left and those who stayed. Some of her recent works address issues relevant to Caribbean women, signaling her commitment to represent them through literature and preserve memories that are often erased from official History. Among her many works, I am fundamentally interested in her

third novel *¡Yo!* and her collection of short essays called *Something to Declare* in which she narrates through autobiographical pieces the hybridization process she has undergone.

When Alvarez's first novel, *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents*, was published in 1991, it received critical acclaim and Alvarez herself was given the status of one of the most promising Latina writers of her time. The book is made of fifteen short stories/chapters which encompass thirty years in the lives of the Garcia de La Torre family. Furthermore, readers get to know the four daughters of the clan more deeply than their parents. The narrative is built upon a reverse chronology, starting in the present and retreating to the past. The stories are about Carla, Sandra, Yolanda and Sofia's lives through their adulthood and teenage years as immigrants in the United States back to their childhood in the Dominican Republic.

The forced displacement from the home country in order to avoid the assassination of their father whose activities in an underground movement against Trujillo's government were under suspicion and the struggles to adapt to a reality very different from the one they were used to are also chronicled. *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents* features many characteristics of a *bildungsroman*, as it focuses on the growing up process of the four girls. In a 2016 interview to the magazine *The Writer*, Alvarez confirms that her novel is a coming-of-age story and justifies her choice of narrating the novel from present to past:

> The typical Bildungsroman, the novel of growing up, first of all traditionally involves a single character reaching a kind of epiphany or self-realization, and it has a forward trajectory, which is the classic structure of the novel. But I wanted to structure the novel so that the reader can experience, not by being told but *shown*, what it feels like to be an immigrant – you're always going back, going back to where you came from to measure who you are today. So plot in a novel is not just how you're going to fit all the pieces together or how you're going to do the chronology. Plot is more sophisticated than that. It's a way of structuring the way the reader thinks and feels. (ALVAREZ, 2016)

The excerpt above proves that Alvarez's writing, although fictional at times, is committed to represent real-life experiences of immigrants that might not have the opportunity to speak for themselves: thus, Alvarez gives them voice through fictionalized subjectivities. The story of Yolanda, the García de La Torre's third daughter, is often on the foreground of *How the García Girls Lost their Accents*. The literary representation of her experiences as a diasporic subject often mirror those of Julia Alvarez, according to the author's own accounts included in her essays.

In the first chapter, Antojos, readers find out that Yolanda is traveling by herself to the Dominican Republic to spend some time with her family after five years apart. Since the beginning of the chapter, readers are aware that being raised away from her homeland created a gap — between Yo and her Dominican kin — which is not only geographical, but also cultural. In this chapter, the travel trope is used as a narrative element to represent the internal movement the character is going through in order to understand her own struggles with her fragmented identity as a person who grew up in between cultures. Throughout her stay in her family's estate, Yolanda, who is considering returning to the home country, keeps comparing her life to her cousins'.

As the narrative progresses, it becomes clear Yolanda has been struggling with her life's outcomes up until the point she takes the aforementioned trip. As a teenager she wanted to be a poet, however, she did not achieve success in this field. Hence, she takes a position as a teacher. Moreover, she suffers from a breakdown after the failure of her first marriage and has to be checked in into a rehabilitation clinic where she ends up falling in love with the doctor responsible for her case. Thus, returning to the homeland seems to be a restart, a possibility of rethinking life. Comparing her life to her cousins' seems to be a way to assess what aspects of their lives are the ones Yo would like to incorporate to her own and if it is not too late for her.

¡Yo! may be understood as a follow-up to Alvarez's first novel *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents*, especially because Yolanda, the Garcia de La Torres' third daughter, is the focus of Alvarez's third novel. Furthermore, readers get to know more about the family itself, since all the chapters are narrated by a different character and all of the Garcia sisters as well as the parents are given voice. Although the book did not receive as much praise as Alvarez's award-winning debut, its critical reception may be considered satisfying, as it is confirmed through the words of author Claire Messud in a book review for the newspaper *The Washington Post:*

> *¡Yo!* is subtle, engaging and charming; but it triumphs in spite of, rather than because of, its formal daring. Alvarez's strengths lie not in a Faulknerian ventriloquism, but in the vital resonance of her supreme creation: the extended Garcia family and its retinue, sprawling across cultures, classes and generations. In this novel, Yolanda stands at center stage, and it is she who beckons us to read; but all the Garcias attract and enchant us, and in their stories rather than in the novel's structure lies *¡Yo!*'s enduring appeal. (MESSUD, 1997)

In *¡Yo!* all the short stories are about Yolanda. The novel is divided into sections which are named after literary genres, elements of fiction and narrative strategies, for instance the Prologue is named The sisters – fiction and the opening chapters in Parts I, II and III are successively called The mother – nonfiction, The caretakers – revelation and The wedding guests – point of view. This peculiar choice may have to do with the fact that Yolanda is a writer, so her life stories are deeply connected to literature.

Since Yolanda is a character that is featured in two of Alvarez's works, it bears relevance to state that from this point on whenever I mention her, I am going to be referring to the literary representation portrayed in *¡Yo!*. If not, it will be clarified before any further discussion. Instead of an analysis of all the chapters, the discussion will focus on the ones connected to the topics more relevant to the life writing practices in Alvarez's writing, such as the importance of storytelling in the lives of both Yolanda and Julia Alvarez, and gender performance as way to cope with hybridism and the concept of home.

The book is composed of chapters which are also organized in a non-chronological way and narrated through first and third person accounts, although it once features a second person narration. This narrative strategy is not uncommon in contemporary fiction; furthermore, the novel also features many instances of focalization, which means that even though the narration is being given in the third person, it is filtered through the perspective of a specific character. For example, in The Third Husband, Yo is married to an American man called Doug; the following passage discloses Doug's feelings regarding his wife's diasporic condition and the cultural differences between them:

> To tell the truth he does want that soil out of here—even though he knows damn well José's soil is plowed throughout the garden. But this dark plastic bag has come to represent all his troubles here these last two weeks, all the fury pent up in his child, all the loneliness of missing Yo for two months, all his anger at the country that keeps claiming her and taking her away from him, which is why, he knows it now and without the help of a therapist, thank you, why he was so angry at the intrusions of José's calls. (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 273-274)

Alvarez's choices leave the readers with the impression that they have to put the story together like a puzzle. In the end, there is no sense of closure, possibly another strategy used by Alvarez to enhance the impression that this work of fiction contains autobiographical occurrences. Thus, I understand that a closure to Yolanda's story is not appropriate as her

journey mirrors her creator's; therefore, there is actually no end planned or written to a story that might be complete on paper but is structured by fragments, as life itself.

As I have mentioned, *¡Yo!* is a thought-provoking work from the title on. A reader who has never known anything about Alvarez and her life might start the book thinking that Yo is solely a short version for Yolanda; nevertheless, as the narrative develops and reveals a little bit more about the character, it becomes clear that the title of this book might also refer to the subjectivity of the artist herself.

Some coincidences between Alvarez's and Yolanda's journeys are part of what helps me in this analysis. For instance, both of them are diasporic subjects who have immigrated to the United States. This identity play proposed by the title is only one of the pieces of evidence I find to corroborate my hypothesis that *¡Yo!* contains passages which bear resemblance to its writer's real-life experience. Throughout this investigation, I am going to foreground other coincidences, using examples taken from the novel, excerpts from interviews with the author and from *Something to Declare* in order to illustrate what I understand as Julia Alvarez's life writing practices.

It is paramount to this discussion to highlight the perception of life writing practices as heterogeneous. When analyzing works such as the ones discussed here, I do not aim to classify them as autobiographies, autofictions or anything of the kind, especially due to the fact that contemporary writers such as Alvarez herself, Sandra Cisneros and others seem to be interested in writing authentically and not simply privileging a certain genre or using the same narrative strategies. Their practices do not dictate their work methods; on the contrary, they seem to follow the paths their narratives bestow throughout the creative process.

The life writing practices Alvarez utilizes in *Yo!* brings to mind the work of the French-Algerian writer Vincent Colonna who has come up with a series of definitions while discussing autofiction. Although I am not interested in putting any of Alvarez's works in classification boxes in order to categorize them, I find Colonna's arguments very appealing to the present consideration. It is possible to recognize plenty of the aspects which were discussed previously by scholars such as LeJeune, Doubrovsky and now Colonna in a specific text without having to classify it even if one is tempted to do so. Likewise, it is possible to observe a literary piece that gathers many of these aspects at the same time, as I tend to believe it is the case of Alvarez's work in *¡Yo!*.

Colonna discusses autofiction in depth as he categorizes and classifies types of autofiction in his work *Autofiction et autres mythomanies littèrraires* (2004). Here I would like to call attention to his concept of specular autofiction. According to the critic, this kind of autofiction work is related to the metaphor of the mirror; it refers to the reflection of the author of the book inside the book itself. In this case, verisimilitude and realism are not the main concerns, neither is the author necessarily the focus of the narrative; nonetheless, her/his presence is there even if only as a spectrum in the corner of the story.

Furthermore, equivalence between the name of the author and the name of the character is not necessary as it supposedly is for an autobiographical text to be recognized as such, especially when considering the autobiographical pact as explained by LeJeune. There is not a necessity for any disclaimers that indicate the real-life inspiration; notwithstanding, in agreement to this perspective there are pieces of evidence which prove that the relation between narrative and real life is present in the text. As I conjecture, the idea of mirroring real life in fiction and also the presence of the author's spectrum are present in *¡Yo!* and I intend to analyze these matters more deeply from now on.

In a first reading of *¡Yo!* what is likely to stand out the most is the way Alvarez pieces the story together and how readers are able to grasp Yolanda's struggles and desires, even though she is never the narrator of her own story. Moreover, the reader sees Yolanda as the other characters see her. The experiences which Yolanda undergoes that are portrayed in the novel are very akin to the ones Alvarez narrates in her essays from *Something to Declare.* Thus, it is relevant to analyze themes and motifs that are present in the book such as the hybridization process, identity formation, and gender performativity, which may function as symbols for real-life dilemmas while taking into consideration the definition of diaspora and its various implications.

Both Julia Alvarez and Yolanda may be considered diasporic subjects, a detail that makes all the difference in the way Alvarez builds Yolanda's character and the way she writes about herself and her personal experiences. Firstly, it is necessary to assert that diaspora is not traveling; it is actually living in between and may be defined as the term used to address communities that were forced to leave their places of origin. There are many reasons why displacements happen including the one that made Alvarez family and also the García de La Torres, the fictional family portrayed in *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents* and in *¡Yo!*, leave their homeland: forced expatriation to escape a brutal dictatorship.

I am led to concur with author James Clifford who quotes William Safran when defining diaspora:

> Safran discusses a variety of collective experiences in terms of their similarity and difference from a defining model. He defines diasporas as follows: "expatriate minority communities" (1) that are dispersed from an original "center' to at least two "peripheral" places; (2) that maintain a "memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland"; (3) that "believe they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host country"; (4) that see the ancestral home as a place of eventual return, when the time is right; (5) that are committed to the maintenance or restoration of this homeland; and (6) of which the group's consciousness and solidarity are "importantly defined" by this continuing relationship with the homeland (Safran 1991:83—84). (CLIFFORD, 1994, p. 304-305)

Members of diasporic communities have to deal with a number of difficulties. Diaspora includes not only socioeconomic complications but also psychological quandaries at times. Being displaced evokes feelings of alienation and exclusion in the host country due to issues like racism, sexism, homophobia and class prejudice. Besides these issues, even inside diasporic communities, one might find levels of oppression similar to the ones the host land system imposes on immigrants. It is true that both systems are never equal and oppression will manifest itself in distinct tones. What I mean is that power relations are uneven, heterogeneous and constantly changing even if subjects are part of the same community and live under the belief that they constitute a collective "we". Ann Hua elaborates on the matter in her article Diaspora and Cultural Memory:

> It is crucial to remember that diasporic identities and communities are not fixed, rigid, or homogeneous, but are instead fluid, always changing, and heteregeneous. There are always power struggles within diasporic communities, disjunctures produced by the diverse intersectional experiences of gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, age, generation, disability, geography, history, religion, beliefs, and language/dialect differences. In other words, diasporic communities and networks are not exempted from sexism, racism, classism, homophobia, ageism, and other discrepancies and prejudices. (HUA, 2008, p. 193)

Diasporic subjectivities such as those of Yolanda and Julia Alvarez herself endure the tension of being loyal to two places at the same time. Sometimes, they are fully aware that the cultural and socioeconomic conditions of the homeland are not ideal, yet they also know that their relationship with the host country concerning the same politics is not perfect either. Notwithstanding, being part of a diaspora might mean that one is conscious of these aspects, but still feels connected to the homeland, experiences nostalgia and yearns to return.

Returning to an imagined homeland, however, may be impossible and most of the times staying put is the only choice available.

These are some of the circumstances Yolanda — as the character is portrayed in *¡Yo!* — finds herself in. Although readers may have a glimpse of Yo's struggles in *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents*, it is in its sequel that Alvarez is able to develop the abovementioned topics more in depth. Yo is a member of a diasporic community composed of her family and their servants as much as she is part of the family that stayed in the Dominican Republic. While she faces these ambiguities, Yolanda matures as a person and undergoes a process of searching for her own meanings to life while being constantly aware that she lives in between two cultures. While she deals with the dichotomy belonging versus unbelonging, she also starts a process of subjectification when realizing that although her identity is multicultural, hybrid and has a lot to do with her family's traditions and customs, she must find a way to understand what is essential to her and what she can get rid of in that whole package of identity traits.

That is why Yo is often regarded as someone who is always seeking answers not only for the simple idiosyncrasies of life but also for more profound questions about her existence. The chapter The wedding guests – point of view is narrated from multiple characters' perspectives and one of them is Yo's best friend. Through her account, readers come to know more about Yo's self-questioning personality, a kind of behavior that brings to mind people who are never fully satisfied with the responses they have already got from life.

> I should know, as her best friend, I heard it all: how she wanted to know what she was meant to do with her life, how she felt torn between giving herself to art or to political action, how she didn't know if she was meant to love men or women. *Yo* was never one to take the big questions in bite-size, chewable portions. It was always *What is my place in the universe instead* of *where can I park the car and not get a ticke*t or *what apartment can I rent that includes the utilities*. (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 234)

The question Yo's best friend remembers, *"What is my place in the universe?"* seems quite suggestive. As discussed previously, diasporic subjects often face the feeling of uneasiness due to the perception that they do not belong anywhere, not to the homeland they have left and cannot go back to and not to the host country since the discrepancies among them and the locals are unmistakable. It appears to be very difficult to pass as a local when one's own body contains the marks of difference.

Linda Martín Alcoff states in the introduction of her book *Visible Identities:* Race, Gender, and the Self (2006) that "the reality of identities often comes from the fact that they are visibly marked on the body itself, guiding if not determining the way we perceive and judge others and are perceived and judged by them" (p. 5). For that reason, being different from what is considered to be standard is not something that can be easily hidden when these marks are visible. Although I understand that difference in many cases functions as a form of oppression and segregation, I also view it as important and a way to resist and manifest unity.

Cultural differences are as important as physical variances. *Something to Declare* contains a whole essay dedicated to Alvarez's eating habits and to the naive reader it might appear that the text is solely about food. In fact, it is more about recollecting the details of her family eating habits, how these stories might help her understanding the ways immigration affected them, than actually about discussing food. Moreover, Alvarez goes on to describe her husband Bill Eichner, "a doctor who was very involved with food and food preparation" (ALVAREZ, 1998, p. 83), and his family's cooking and eating habits and how they differ from hers.

The distinction between the eating habits of the two families is not casual; it is marked by the fact that Alvarez and her family were foreigners. There are some specifics to that equation that make Alvarez's experience with food different from Eichner's, such as the fact that her father had to work very hard to support his family and woke up so early that all of them had to have dinner the moment he came home and also that she and her sisters went to boarding schools and developed eating habits that differed from the average American family (ALVAREZ, 1998, P. 79-80).

In the end, Alvarez posits a question about belonging, but in her late thirties, she is already able to formulate a response to her own inquiry. As I conjecture, Alvarez knows the answer to her question because she already understands that identity formation is a process that implies recognizing that differences are as important as similarities; therefore, she knows she can have a place at the table of her American family, as it is clear in the following excerpt:

> But I admit that years of picky eating don't vanish overnight. I still worry when we go out if there will be anything in the category of things-I-eat. There are still times when I walk back from the kitchen and spy my husband and his family gathered at the table, talking away about the difference between this week's crust and last week's crust or how you can get the peak in those whipped potatoes or individual

> grains in the rice, and I wonder if I belong here. Will I ever stop feeling as if I've wandered into one of those Norman Rockwell scenes of a family sitting around a table laden with platters and pies? But each time I've put down what I had in my hands—my contribution to the feast—and looked around, I've found a place set for me at the table. (ALVAREZ, 1998, p. 86)

Another important issue that is present in both works is the politics of space. It is contradictory and relational by itself because "home" is the place with which an individual shares an intimate bond, even if he/she is alienated from this land. There are plenty of instances in which readers can observe the effects of this dilemma in Yolanda. She misses the Dominican Republic when she is in the United States and feels the same about the latter when she is in her homeland.

The feeling of alienation in the host country, the uncertainty of the future and longing for the family she has left behind are translated in a conversation between Yo's mother and a social worker from school who visits them after hearing from the girls that they want to go back to the Dominican Republic. In the chapter The mother – nonfiction, Laura García narrates the struggles she and her husband had to face when they immigrated to the United States, including the difficulties their daughters had to adapt and the trauma brought on them by the horrors of living under a dictatorship.

> I can't trust my voice to say so. I give her a little nod.
> "But what I don't get is how the girls keep saying they want to go back. That things were better there."
> "They are sick of home —" I explain, but that doesn't sound right.
> "Homesick, yes," she says.
> I nod. "They are children. They do not see the forest or the trees."
> "I understand." She says it so nicely that I am convinced that even with those untried blue eyes, she does understand.
> "They can't know the horror you and your husband have lived through."
> I try to keep the tears back, but of course they come. What this lady can't know is that I'm not just crying about leaving home or about everything we've lost, but about what's to come. (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 32-33)

In her essay Our papers, Julia Alvarez discusses the fact that for her family leaving the Dominican Republic was a way to escape the horror of Trujillo's dictatorship. Alvarez comes from a privileged background. Although she mentions that her relatives' trips were exceptions, they could travel only because they had social status and power to an extent that allowed them to enjoy those exceptions. Since the family lived "communal lives" (ALVAREZ, 1998, p. 14) which included trips together to their beach houses, suddenly having to leave her country and

therefore her extended family behind was a terrifying experience to her as a child. Since her father was involved in the underground movement, when they were finally granted the papers that enabled them to immigrate, they left immediately. At the end of this account, Alvarez makes a statement which illustrates how painful it must have been to have to let go of everything one knows: "(...) I would wonder if those papers had set us free from everything we loved." (ALVAREZ, 1998, p. 19)

Curious and a born storyteller, as Yolanda the character in *How the García Girls Lost their Accents*, grows up, she is able to transform reality through her words and narrates her family's journey in a novel that receives great praise and is very successful. This process, however, turns her into a traitor in the eyes of her inspiration, her family members. Nonetheless, as Yo grows uncertain of her writing skills, especially after provoking angry reactions from her mother and sisters' with her representations of them, she questions her father about her *destino* as a writer. He reassures her giving her his blessing and telling her that she should go on narrating the story of their family. The following passage from *¡Yo!* makes explicit the father's understanding of his daughter's predicament is contained in The father - conclusion:

> I have promised her a blessing to take the doubt away. A story whose true facts cannot be changed. But I can add my own invention—that much I have learned from Yo. A new ending can be made out of what I now know.
> (...)
> And I say, "My daughter, the future has come and we were in such a rush to get here! We left everything behind and forgot so much. Ours is now an orphan family. My grandchildren and great grandchildren will not know the way back unless they have a story. Tell them of our journey. Tell them the secret heart of your father and undo the old wrong. My Yo, embrace your destino. You have my blessing, pass it on." (ALVAREZ, 1997, p.309)

Throughout the last decade of the twentieth century with the advent of new technologies, such as the internet, it became possible for inexperienced authors to write about themselves in experimental ways, hence blogs and online diaries became quite popular. People in general have been able to share their real lives in real time with a few clicks. Its reflection on contemporary literature seems to be more evident with the rise of first person narrative in which readers come across fictional characters that through the narration of their own stories become writers as well. Commenting on such circumstances, Ana Claúdia Viegas

observes that at times a clear distinction between character and author becomes almost impossible to be drawn (VIEGAS, 2014). [4]

Although *¡Yo!* was published in the late twentieth century, Yolanda is not the narrator of her own story, since the novel consists of multiple narrations by different characters who participate in Yo's life — intimately as her relatives and close friends or incidentally as acquaintances — and attempt to portray Yo as they see her. Therefore, Yolanda is not a "character-writer" as first person narrators seem to be at times; nevertheless, she is a character who writes, a product of Alvarez's imagination. The strategy of writing a novel whose characters are explicitly inspired by the people in her life, creating some bad blood between Yo and her kin, is ostensibly "reversed" when these characters become the narrators and Yo the object of their narration.

As I conjecture, the connection established by the actual novel narrative and the protagonist's work is a metalinguistic one, due to the fact that both Julia Alvarez and Yolanda make use of life writing practices to write their novels. Moreover, *¡Yo!* is an act of reciprocity: the protagonist is depicted through the perceptions and opinions of people who know her, a process analogous to the writing of her own novel in which she was the one who had written a book inspired by those same people, making visible and public what was once private. As the characters in *¡Yo!* begin to tell their stories about Yolanda, they also start coming to terms with their own traumas, resentments and bitterness related not only to Yo but also to the García de La Torre family at times; most importantly they start coming to terms with their own selves. By the same token, the process of writing about what she knows also helps Yolanda.

Yo identifies herself as a writer and writes because it helps her balancing the issues she has in relation to her own fragmented identity as a diasporic subject that longs to belong to her family's "home", the Dominican Republic, but is never able to abandon the United States for good. These problems are only understandable if one ponders on the hybridization process of diasporic subjects. Moreover, Yolanda comes from a culture which preserves the

[4] In Portuguese: "Apesar da diversidade, é possível apontarmos algumas tendências na produção literária contemporânea. Por exemplo, um "novo realismo", que busca chamar a atenção para uma realidade brutal, mas sem o caráter apenas de "representação da realidade". (...) Outra tendência é um uso bastante frequente da narração em 1ª pessoa, sendo que esse narrador, muitas vezes, se confunde com a figura do próprio autor. Daí um grande número de "personagens-escritores".
Available at https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrissima/2014/02/1415947-respostas-de-ana-claudia-viegas.shtml. Last access on November 29th, 2018.

tradition of telling stories; hence it becomes clear that a woman with such a talent for weaving words into narratives was bound to become a writer. At one point, readers even come to know that she looked at her writing as "stories (that) had kept her going through some pretty dark days" (ALVAREZ, 1997, p.180).

Here is another piece of evidence that demonstrates how much Yolanda's experiences function as a mirror to Alvarez's life journey. The writer addresses her career in many passages of *Something to Declare*; nevertheless, a specific part of the chapter First Muse is quite relevant to the discussion on her life writing practices as it shows us that Yolanda's passion for writing seems to be a reflection of Alvarez's. In this excerpt, the author describes her relation to Scheherazade's story, how it helped her understanding that she was not a victim of circumstances and recognize she could lead her life the way she found more adequate; furthermore, it encouraged her in her journey towards herself. In the passage below, Alvarez describes her passion for the arts, especially storytelling, and how having Scheherazade as muse helped her to tell her own story. When analyzing Yolanda's process of becoming a writer, I find it similar to Alvarez's accounts of her journey. The power of words as a tool for building one's identity is also illustrated in the excerpt below:

> Maybe I would have found her anyway, because, as I mentioned earlier, I was raised in a storytelling culture. Certainly, in coming to this country and this new language, I discovered new resources and the need for self-invention. What was already a natural love of words and their music, of narrative and its enchantments might have flowered, and I would have become a writer anyhow.
> But I am glad that she came so early into my life and into my imagination, so that her voice was not completely drowned out by the other voices that were telling me something else. She was my first muse long before I knew what a muse was. Early on, I began to tell stories to anyone who would listen and even to those who would not. It was just a matter of time before I, too, listened to the story I was telling myself about who I really was. (ALVAREZ, 1998, p. 145)

Scheherazade's influence on Alvarez's passion for words is a powerful symbol of the cultural role of women as storytellers. In some cultures, it is granted to women the responsibility of being bearers of culture and transmitters of oral traditions, especially when it comes to diasporic communities. The importance of perpetuating traditions by means of orality in diaspora is of great relevance to the present discussion, since it is through this practice and the sharing of collective histories that "diasporic people attempt to revive, recreate, and invent their artistic, linguistic, economic, religious, cultural, and political

practices and productions" (HUA, p. 193, 2008), thus being able to face cultural assimilation without losing sight of their roots.

In the first chapter of *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents*, readers come across an excerpt that illustrates how elderly non-educated women are often responsible for passing on accounts that are considered to be important to maintain Latino cultures strong. Yolanda is visiting her family in the Dominican Republic when her *Tía* Carmen asks her to tell them about anything she would like to do while she is there; however, she uses a word in Spanish that Yo does not recognize: the word *antojo* which, as the aunt explains, might mean "a craving for something you have to eat" (ALVAREZ, 2010, p. 8). Nonetheless, an *antojo* can also mean something different and in order to explain this other meaning, one of the older aunts calls the maid, a much older woman, to explain it.

> "An *antojo"*, one of the older 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 the word in the old sense. Altagracia!" she calls to one of the maids sitting at the other end of the patio. A tiny, old woman, her hair pulled back tightly in a white bun, approaches the group of women. She is asked to tell Yolanda what an *antojo* is. She puts her brown hands away in her uniform pockets.
>
> *"U'té, que sabe,"* Altagracia says in a small voice. You're the one to know.
>
> "Come now, Altagracia," her mistress scolds.
>
> The maid obeys. "In my *campo* we say a person has an *antojo* when they are taken over by *un santo* who wants something." Altagracia backs away, and when not recalled, turns and heads back to her stool. (ALVAREZ, 2010, p. 8-9)

An act of cultural translation takes place as Altagracia resorts to tradition to explain/translate this folk belief to those present, including Yolanda. Intercultural translation, in a broad sense, is a theme that might be explored in Julia Alvarez's literary practices. Through her writing, the author is able to disclose acts of intercultural communication between different cultures. Moreover, when the writer tries to capture the specificities of her own experiences and also traumas resulting from migration, Alvarez and Yolanda, her character who is also a writer, establish a connection between their cultural identities, as Latino women who have migrated and become diasporic subjects.

In the article, Dislocating the sign: toward a translocal feminist politics of translations which deals with travel and translation theories from a feminist standpoint, Claudia de Lima Costa and Sonia E. Alvarez observe that "translation is a process of opening the self to the

other" and, therefore, it implies "a process of displacement of the self" (2014, p. 557). Moreover, the writers argue that "(…) in translation there is a moral obligation to uproot ourselves, to be, even temporarily, homeless so that the other can dwell, albeit provisionally, in our home." (2014, p. 557). Through acts of intercultural translation, Altagracia and the García de La Torre women engage in a back and forth movement of dislocation that leads them to an interstitial location, even if only for the moment.

. Orality was instrumental to Yo's development as a writer. In *¡Yo!*, her mother describes her as a child who likes to tell stories. At one point she states that "Yo has always been full of stories" (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 34), an ability that helped her as a teenager in the United States. In *How the García Girls Lost their Accents*, the narrator says of Yolanda: "she needed to settle somewhere, and since the natives were unfriendly, and the country inhospitable, she took root in the language" (ALVAREZ, 2010, p. 141). Similarly, Scheherazade's storytelling abilities not only spared her life, as she was doomed to be beheaded by the King, but also changed her status from a vizier's daughter to the queen. Once again, it is possible to draw a parallel between the author Julia Álvarez and her character Yolanda. Alvarez herself has acknowledged Scheherazade as her muse and Yolanda's journey as a writer mirrors Alvarez's own trajectory, thus Scheherazade's stories empowered the author as much as being able to make a living out of her own stories empowered Yolanda. Scheherazade and Yolanda were saved — the former in a literal manner and the latter metaphorically — by their story-telling abilities.

Alvarez, in her turn, is able to acknowledge the ways books and writing changed her journey as an immigrant facing many difficulties and especially coming from a country where freedom of speech was not a given, as it is explained in a passage below from an interview to the Chicago Public Library website from 2004.[5] This excerpt also provides more evidence to ground the foundation of the discussion concerning Julia Alvarez's life writing practices since her process of becoming a writer is very similar to Yolanda's as described above.

> The Dominican society and times I was raised in did not encourage young girls to have "careers." Remember this was the '50s in a repressive dictatorship, where telling stories was a dangerous activity. Mine was an oral culture, full of storytellers, but reading and writing were not encouraged. (No public libraries, no free press!) Coming to the United States suddenly thrust me into a world where I was an alien,

[5] Available at https://www.chipublib.org/interview-with-julia-alvarez/ Last access on November, 29th, 2018

> where I spoke the language with an accent. This abrupt and painful "translation" led me to the company of books, the homeland of the imagination where all were welcomed. In trying to master my new language of English, I had to pay attention to words, their little reputations and atmospheres, their exact weights and balances, their smells and sounds and textures. This, of course, proved to be excellent training for a beginning writer! And so it was that what I had once considered a tragedy, losing all I knew and loved, provided the opportunities for me to find my calling as a writer. (ALVAREZ, 2004)

Alvarez, the author, and Yolanda, the character, found themselves struggling with the uncertainties of making a living out of writing. Writer and character are well-educated women whose careers in the academic field and as teachers, professions they did not want to pursue forever, were thriving and somewhat stable while it was difficult to make it as a writer. Moreover, they also had to face their families' disapproval, given the fact that to *la familia* a woman is the guardian of their secrets, their traditions, their reputation, and honor. A woman is expected to remain in the domestic sphere and should never attempt to have a public voice. Besides that, Alvarez seems to translate into Yolanda's story her persistence in following what one may describe as her true calling and although we only get to see a small part of Yolanda's success as a writer, we are gladly witnessing Alvarez's accomplishments as a prominent author of our times.

As part of a diasporic community, Yolanda faces the dilemma of being caught in between cultures. The fact that Yolanda and Alvarez are even able to choose their own career paths is a testimony to the process of hybridization both of them go through. This is not the type of agency and autonomy women experience in a place such as the Dominican Republic, especially if when it is considered that Alvarez's career took off in the early nineties and according to the timeline provided in *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents* along with the events detailed in ¡*Yo!*, Yolanda's success as a writer came in the same period.

There are multiple literary representations of diasporic women's experiences and Yo is one of them; it is important to stress that she is not the only one. Through the comparison between Yo's and Alvarez's experiences, it becomes clear that some of them are expected to act according to different cultural standards. As a single woman, Yo forbids her boyfriend to visit her at her homeland, so she would not have to explain to the *familia* the reasons why she is not married with children yet. Even though at that point in her life she has already had a failed marriage, she prefers that her father thinks her virginity was restored after the divorce to avoid admitting that she has sex with her American lover. At times, her father represents the metonymized image of patriarchy.

This idea of having to deal with two patriarchal systems at the same time — and choosing the ways to behave in order to be less oppressed by them — is not lost in the autobiographical accounts Alvarez provides us in *Something to Declare*. She often addresses the fact that her gender is always fundamental to the way she behaves and is perceived by others. In the following paragraph taken from Have Typewriter, Will Travel, she describes the need to invent and reinvent herself given the fact that her feminine models were representations of lives she did not want to live; especially being a subjectivity whose identity is hybrid and fluid. For many women immigrants who no longer live in a "so-called Third world" more agency and autonomy are in order:

> In this sense I was like other women of my generation: women who had grown up with mothers we could no longer use as models for the lives we were living. And so we stumbled ahead and invented ourselves. In the case of my sisters and myself, the confusion was compounded by the fact that, having come from a so-called Third World country and from a very traditional Latino culture, our female predecessors were not just one but two or three generations behind the women we were now becoming: old-fashioned tías who believed too much education could ruin a girl for marriage. (ALVAREZ, 1998, p.183-184)

James Clifford underscores that "rooted in desires and aspirations that cannot be fulfilled, identity movements are open-ended, productive and fraught with ambivalence" (CLIFFORD, 2000, p. 95). It is possible to assume that identity formation is also a negotiation process where subjects have to balance what they are in relation to what they are not. Stuart Hall (2003) questioned whether one's cultural identity is solely established at the moment of birth and perpetuated through their genetic code and family heritage. Although this is not the only way one may understand the concept of cultural identity, it is possible to perceive it as a bond that connects people from the same background and location through narratives of past, present, and future. Yet, for diasporic subjects, their identity is never permanently attached to the past; it is distinguished by fragmentation and the effects of hybridization as a result of the interaction with diverse cultures.

In this context, language is a very important constituting trait of identity; it may function as a barrier when one is not able to communicate and therefore is isolated from human contact in the host country, but it also represents belonging to a specific culture, community, motherland. When a person undergoes a natural assimilation process, many times language is one of the aspects that is most affected by it. In La Gringuita: On Losing a Native Language, Alvarez writes about her experience with her mother tongue and her second

language, the one she learned during her school years in the United States. As a grown-up, she is fluent in English, but her Spanish is halting and childish, as she reached a plateau due to her lack of practice. For that matter, she can only communicate in Spanish as she used to when she was a little girl. English became her safe language since she can argue or even explain some complex issues only in her acquired language. Once again, Yo's own journey with language mirrors Alvarez's. The character even says that "language is the only homeland." (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 153) and it represents well the hybrid nature of a diasporic person. Alvarez describes becoming fluent in English as part of emancipation. In the essay, it is portrayed as a symbol of how being an immigrant also has positive sides, such as being able to create new stories for oneself through the mastering of a foreign language.

> Our growing distance from Spanish was a way in which we were setting ouserlves free from that old world where, as girls, we didn't have much say about what we could do with our lives. In English, we didn't have to use the formal *usted* that immediately put us in our place with our elders. We were responsible for ourselves and that made us feel grown-up. We couldn't just skirt culpability by using the reflexive: the bag of cookies did not finish itself, nor did the money disappear itself from Mami's purse. We had no one to bail us out of American trouble once we went our own way in English.
> (...)
> We could go places in English we never could in Spanish, if we put our minds to it. (ALVAREZ, 1998, p.63)

Notwithstanding, language is not the only aspect that portrays the unfixed nature of diasporic identities. It is also relevant to understand that "race and gender are forms of social identity that share at least two features: they are fundamental rather than peripheral to the self (...) and they operate through visual markers on the body."(ALCOFF, 2006, p.6); therefore, they represent beacons of one's identity formation and gender performativity.

Women's lived experience as diasporic subjects are not the same as men's under the same conditions. As theorist Linda Martín Alcoff discusses in her book *Visible Identities:* Race, Gender, and the Self, to understand identity formation one needs to assume that there are two instances in which one performs identity: the lived subjectivity and the public identity. So, what people experience intrinsically might differ from the way they present themselves publicly. For women in diaspora, this public identity has everything to do with their gender and the social rules they have to abide by in the communities they are inserted. These aspects may also be analyzed through Yolanda's experience and according to where she finds herself in.

According to Judith Butler, people are only socially legible when they can be defined by their gender, that is, when they behave according to certain patterns and standards that fit the binary female versus male; This notion implies that gender is performance as much as the concept of a public identity gives us the idea that performativity is an essential identity trait overall. Gender is inscribed in the body, in the way one dresses, behaves and functions socially. Butler states in her book *Gender Trouble:* feminism and the subversion of identity:

> Gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time. An open coalition, then, will affirm identities that are alternately instituted and relinquished according to the purposes at hand; it will be an open assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure. (BUTLER, 1999, p.22)

Thus, gender is performance and its core is changeable. In *¡Yo!,* Yolanda lives in between and she is able to perform gender according to where she is. Sex and gender are political categories that are part of the patriarchal system foundation. As an immigrant, Yo assimilates some traits from the American culture; when she is in the United States, she can perform her gender accordingly while when she finds herself in her homeland she behaves somewhat in agreement to the local gender standards.

In the chapter The suitor – resolution, one of her boyfriends, Dexter Hays says that "Yo is as American as apple pie", but he quickly adds "Well, let's say, as American as a Taco Bell taco" (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 194), signaling that he recognizes her hybrid identity and acknowledges her duality even more acutely that Yo herself does:

> She claims the litmus test is if you say Oh or Ay when you smash your finger with a hammer. There've been plenty of times when she's bumped into something going to the bathroom in his unfamiliar apartment in the middle of the night and let out a "shit!" He wonders what that proves about her, if anything. (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 194)

Yo is a hyphenated person who lives in-between cultures. This in-betweeness forces her to perform, not only in terms of gender identity but also in terms of identity in general. While in the United States she can be single, work and be an independent woman; however, in the Dominican Republic she chooses to hide some details of her love life and the fact that she does not appreciate going to church, so she is able to get along and maintain a relationship with her kin who already perceive her as a rebel and a failure for not conforming to certain

gender standards. This performance is conscious, whether conscious or not may become a tool for survival, a device that helps Yo achieve a sense of belonging. In an interview from 2009 with Elizabeth M. Huergo for the F. Scott Fitzgerald Literary Committee and MCTV,[6] Julia Alvarez discusses the idea of transgressing gender patterns and the sense of betrayal when doing so:

> And parents want to tell us "this is the right combination" for being *una muchacha decente, una muchacha educada* and your other culture is saying "in order to be a career woman you have to show up" even if *papi* is *enfermo* and in *el hospital.*
> (...)
> You have to make those balances yourself.
> (...)
> And I think females, too. In our original cultures, in our Latino cultures we were the caretakers. We were supposed to stay home and take care of the family and help out. Even though our parents have come here and they want our education and they want us ready to survive in this culture. These are centuries old currents that are running through them.
> (...)
> It is inside us, too. (ALVAREZ, 2009)

In conclusion, diasporic subjects are always discovering as they compare their distinguishing qualities and characteristics to the ones they do not possess. Living in between is an ambivalent experience that may evoke abjection and desire at the same time that it makes these individuals experience belonging and unbelonging simultaneously. Their identity is fragmented, hybrid and in a constant process of change. Women who possess diasporic subjectivities undergo many pressures and dilemmas. They have to make the balances themselves, as Alvarez stated in her 2009 interview mentioned above, in order to find out who they really are and who they want to be, apart from what both cultures demand from them, so they might have the chance to step out of the margins.

Julia Alvarez's works often portray journeys of self-discovery whose inspiration is drawn from her own experiences with family, relationships, displacement and memory. Alvarez herself is usually asked about her creative process and makes it very clear that although life is her raw material when she works with fiction, she keeps in mind that her creation is a work of art and not a simple description of facts. That is why it is safe to state that her praxis is neither solely fictional nor autobiographical, but actually a self-referential

[6] Available at https://youtu.be/HZ2xe2OFTX8. Last access on September 9th, 2018.

one. When asked to comment on how she created her first novel, *How the García Girls Lost their Accents*, Alvarez replied [7]:

> How do we as writers learn about life? From our experience. Our research. It doesn't just have to be library research. For a young writer asking for advice, Henry James said, "Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost." The writer is always researching, paying attention, learning things about people, about experience. And all that comes to bear on what you write. But this is the catch: You can't let what really happened tyrannize the story. The story has its own demands. It becomes its own kind of critter and organism, and you have to listen to that and its characters. So you have to change the "truth" of what really happened. You're not trying to do a record by show and tell. You're trying to create a work of art. (ALVAREZ, 2016)

Julia Alvarez's work is quite important when it comes to representing the lives of those who live in between. Her writing reveals their difficulties, their plights and struggles, but it also exposes their strengths, values and purposes. The artist herself is a positive representation of a diasporic subject. When dealing with themes such as diaspora, hybridity, identity and gender politics, among others, Julia Alvarez is able to give voice to individuals who are seldom heard. Her works shed light on those matters and her talent to tell stories makes it easy to appreciate her creations.

[7] Available at https://www.writermag.com/writing-inspiration/author-interviews/julia-alvarez-time-discovery/ Last access on November 29th, 2018.

2 HYBRID IDENTITIES AND THE PURSUIT OF HOME IN DIASPORA

We are islands, permeable countries.

It's in our genes to be a world made of many worlds.

Julia Alvarez

When thinking about borders and borderlands, scholars often ponder upon these concepts as "virtual", without negating the fact that they are constituted of concrete structures. Cartography as a science is not subjected to ordinary trends, nonetheless, it may be manipulated according to times and power relations in order to show aspects of it that might have been hidden in the past or whose relevance is debatable, therefore, borders are no longer considered to be fixed categories. When theorizing frontiers, Avtar Brah asserts that "borders are arbitrary constructions. Hence, in a sense, they are always metaphors. But, far from being mere abstractions of a concrete reality, metaphors are part of the discursive materiality of power relations" (BRAH, 1996, p. 198). Crossing frontiers imposed by nations entails not only a physical journey but also a metaphorical one.

In the previous chapter, I briefly discussed diaspora and cultural hybridism in some of the works of Julia Alvarez. In this chapter, I will add a new layer to this analysis by questioning the idea of home in diaspora. This chapter aims at investigating the effects of forced displacement, the process of hybridization of identity and the concept of home in Julia Alvarez's works *¡Yo!* (1997) and *Something to Declare* (1998). To enrich my examination, I will include excerpts of *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents* (1991) that are connected with the abovementioned topics. Additionally, I use interviews and essays from Julia Alvarez relevant to the present debate.

As the Indian critic Homi K. Bhabha puts in his introduction to *The Location of Culture* (1994), "we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion" (p. 1). Migratory movements have always happened for different reasons, however; during the previous century theories have been developed in order to deal with the outcomes of displacement regarding the identity formation of migrants and also the ways it affects cultural flows all over the world.

As I have briefly commented, cartography is being constantly rethought taking into consideration power relations among nations; thus, borders and their limits may be reconfigured according to the effects of processes such as Imperialism. Globalization takes an important role in this discussion when it is recognized that, in many aspects, it is a process that repeats patterns that were recurrent during colonial times by means of imperialist practices. Up to this day, capital and its courses are still concentrated in the hands of the most powerful countries which means that control over important political aspects is also theirs. These countries continue to seek monopoly, attempting at conquering other nations and, consequently, end up victimizing peoples (BRENNAN, 2004, p. 134).

There are many theories that address contemporaneity as postcolonial times: however, as I conjecture, the period we live in might be acknowledged as a time of interregnum. Even though colonization is officially over, former colonies still operate under coloniality, that is, colonial practices are still in place. Peruvian author Anibal Quijano coined the term coloniality to discuss the grim legacy of colonialism in Latin America. In Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality (2007), he argues that colonialism was a policy of domination – with political, social and cultural implications – imposed by Europeans over conquered countries. Even after the independence of former colonies, colonialism has continued to affect the relations of power in modern societies through Western Imperialism, a system that Quijano considers its successor. Therefore, the concept of coloniality describes the type of domination perpetrated by Western nations which operates within social structures as opposed to colonialism in which domination was vertically imposed by more powerful European countries. In this sense, coloniality benefits from the colonial structure of power that generated a series of racial, ethnic and social concepts discriminations.

Postcolonial studies, then, refer to research that focuses on shedding light on matters that have been ignored in the past such as the issues of marginalized peoples in formerly colonized countries. It is also committed to the study of the encounters that happen in locations where cultures clash, addressing topics such as diaspora, the question of home, identity formation, hybridism, the politics of difference and its multiaxial aspect, enforcing the importance of decolonial practices and more. Postcolonial criticism is also concerned with the artistic and cultural representation of the period and its subjects. As Timothy Brennan explains in his article Postcolonial Studies and Globalization Theory featured in a collection of essays called *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies* (2004) organized by Neil Lazarus:

> In the broadest sense, an intellectual movement driven by a critique of Eurocentrism and patriarchy. In its general arc, the work involves collecting and disseminating information, formulating arguments, or explaining concepts with the end of achieving emancipation for minority, marginal, or formerly colonized peoples. However, it is also and at the same time involved in questioning value - that is, it seeks to reorient cultural values attendant upon learning to understand and appreciate aesthetically the cultural achievements of those outside the European sphere. It seeks to show how earlier scholars in the West have been narrowly obsessed, culturally limited, and tendentiously ignorant of many of the world's most consequential artistic and intellectual creations. (BRENNAN, 2004, p. 132)

Many peoples still suffer from oppression from hegemonic nations in the form of imperialism and/or neocolonialism. Hence, as I have been discussing, the notion that we are already living in a world that moved beyond colonialism is questionable. The world today is a place caught between narratives which are part of both the present and the past; space cannot be ignored either when dealing with postcolonial theories, hence the importance of debating borders and routes.

Much like the colonial regime which dictated that difference needed to be erased and stratified society through the hierarchical politics which functioned according to eurocentric patterns, capitalism, which is strengthened by new commercial tides that are fostered by globalization, profits out of the notion that everyone should live under the same center's influence, desiring to possess the same commodities and that difference is good only when it can be marketed. Thus, if we think of coloniality, we cannot separate it from capitalism.

Literary production from migrants may function as a way to resist forced acculturation and hybrid identities that evolve over a period of time as a natural consequence of the deterritorializing process. Moreover, those representations are usually not promoted as negative or positive either, but ambivalent. By the same token, scholars are witnessing the rise of what is called decolonial theories in order to encompass the peculiarities and intricacies that contemporaneity has presented to the academic field.

Author Edward W. Said contributed to the understanding of decolonial narratives when he discussed exile and the term *contrapuntal* (my emphasis) to highlight the positive aspects of immigration in the essay Reflections on Exile (2000)[8].

> Seeing "the entire world as a foreign land" makes possible originality of vision. Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that—to borrow a phrase from music—is

[8] The essay Reflections on Exile was originally published in the literary magazine *Granta*, 13 (Winter 1984).

> contrapuntal. For an exile, habits of life, expression, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally. (SAID, 2000, p. 186)

Consequently, contemporary stories about displacement have a twofold aspect that needs to be taken into consideration. Although they are about the colonized/marginalized/oppressed people and most of the times represent their habits, culture, traditions, plights, and worldviews, the colonizer is also present in the subtext of the accounts. The literary accounts of the exile encompass the lived experience from both the homeland and the host land. It is necessary to adopt a contrapuntal reading that understands the hybrid aspect of these narratives.

In tune with Bhabha (1994) concerning the concurrence of cultures, I speculate that globalization, modern displacement of great masses and attempts at decolonization processes lead societies and individuals to a never-ending movement between here and there as coined by Freud in *Beyond the pleasure principle* (1920), the *fort/da*. *Fort* and *Da* were exclamations that Freud's grandson uttered when playing with objects. Freud noticed that they represented "gone" and "there" and a movement of going back and forth (1961, p. 8-9). To psychoanalysis, it was a way to explore compulsion episodes in traumatic neurosis cases. Eventually, the concept was adopted in Cultural Studies when Bhabha used it in *The Location of Culture* to illustrate the back and forth cultural movement in the context of decentering experiences. To enrich this discussion I align my thinking with Susan Friedman's elaboration of intercultural *fort/da* argued in her book *Mappings* from 1998.

Friedman narrates a story from Thongchai Winichukul's *Siam Mapped* (1994) in order to illustrate what she means by intercultural *fort/da.* The story basically tells of how the King of Siam contracted and expanded borderlands when dealing with both peaceful and war times between groups, at times this decision was a defense against difference among the people and at other times it syncretized their ways of living. This account illustrates how borders are unfixed unities and that the notion of difference might be manipulated in ways that sometimes mean resistance in the face of peril, but at other times represent a healthy exchange between cultures. Friedman, then, continues to explore the story in consonance with the concept of intercultural *fort/da*, stretching it a bit further:

> In substituting an intercultural *fort/da* for the psychoanalytic game, I am shifting the grounds of encounter from the mother/child dyad of the son's desire—a kind of

> ethnography of the dwelling—to a more broadly conceived intercultural encounter in which both "sides" negotiate the borders between difference, however equal or unequal the power relations between them. In tune with Clifford's notion of an ethnography of travel, I am locating story-producing encounters in the relational spaces between difference—all kinds of historically produced differences, those between societies and within societies; those formed by stratifications based on multiple axes of difference, such as gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, class, caste, national origin, and so forth; and those emergent in liminal borders between human and animal, human and machine, or matter and Spirit. (FRIEDMAN, 1998, p.155)

Friedman's acknowledgment of the negotiation that happens in the contact zones regarding sameness and difference and of the relevance of axes of difference are primordial to the discussion of the process of hybridization of identity. The result of the movement of trying to go beyond but also moving back and forth concerning the relationship between culture and identity formation is the emerging of transnational identities that will function in the space of cultural difference even when they are a part of a collective body. The deterritorialization of individuals leads distinct cultures to meet and collide, creating intricate power connections; thus, the process of hybridization of identity is an upshot of the dislocation and the intermingling of cultures. Author Ella Shohat addresses hybridity after elaborating on the term postcolonial in her essay Notes on the 'Post-Colonial (1992):

> The foregrounding of hybridity and syncretism in postcolonial studies calls attention to the mutual imbrication of ''central'' and ''peripheral'' cultures. Hybridity and syncretism allow the negotiation of the multiplicity of identities and subject positionings that result from displacements, immigrations, and exiles without policing the borders of identity along essentialist and originary lines. It is largely diasporic Third World intellectuals in the First World, hybrids themselves, not coincidentally, who elaborate a framework that situates the Third World intellectual within a multiplicity of cultural positionalities and perspectives. (SHOHAT, 2000, p. 135)

Shohat points out the fact that hybridity is a concept that denies any approach that essentializes the idea of identity, so identity is understood as an unfixed unity that is flexible according to subject's positionality. Regarding diasporic subjectivities this understanding is more explicit since they have to deal with the reality of living in-between cultures. The author also calls attention to fact that many diasporic intellectuals based in First World countries, but whose origins trace back to the Third World, are the ones responsible for creating the core of migrants' representation according to their own distinct experiences.

Some of these narratives have achieved worldwide success since their writers share a background that is privileged in the sense that their struggles usually have had less to do with

the lack of money or education than with issues concerning the adaptation to the host land, the assimilation process and the longing for home. Julia Alvarez, the author whose works are the object of this analysis, is one of the artists who takes advantage of a solid family structure, education and economic stability in order to disclose to the world the difficulties of exile and the issues some Caribbean people face up to this day. Nonetheless, it is relevant to emphasize that there are many diasporic writers who have come from poor families, who have not benefitted from wealth and a high social status but have managed to succeed both with critics and the public; such is the case with author Edwidge Danticat.

Notwithstanding, one cannot undermine the importance of migrant and diasporic literatures. Even when they are accused of being apolitical, such works are responsible for disclosing a plurality of "worlds". These types of literatures are diverse and not homogeneous. Oftentimes, it is through the mastering of the colonizer's language that a writer is able to represent the outcomes of forced displacement. According to the way authors choose to narrate their stories, some of them might not translate well while others will thrive with readers and critics. Regardless, although varied, migrant and diasporic literary productions contribute to represent and reveal the plights and aspirations of hybrid subjectivities.

In an essay from in Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay's *Questions of cultural identity* (1996), Zygmunt Bauman claims that "one thinks of identity whenever one is not sure where one belongs" (BAUMAN, 2003, p. 19). The unbelongingness caused by forced dislocation is a trope which is usually present in migrants' literary productions. The literary representations featured in contemporary works from diasporic authors may be noted as illustrations of what Stuart Hall named a crisis of identity in his essay *The Question of Cultural Identity* (1992). According to Hall, this crisis takes place in late modernity since identity started to be regarded not as a fixed entity, but as a fragmented experience. Hall asserts that changes in the conception of the modern subject during this period altered many aspects of identification, such as

> (...) the cultural landscapes of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, and nationality which gave us firm locations as social individuals. These transformations are also shifting our personal identities, undermining our sense of ourselves as integrated subjects. This loss of a stable 'sense of self' is sometimes called the dislocation or de-centering of the subject. "(HALL, 2007, p. 596)

For diasporic subjectivities, the de-centering of the subject as a characteristic of identity formation and the constant movement of becoming that it implies is often marked

by the duality resulting from the process of physical dislocation that entails emotional disruption as well. This dyad is related to living in-between cultures. The migrant not only has to deal with his/her own peculiarities concerning his/her identity but also with the fact that he/she will continuously have to negotiate the cultural aspects that may be a part of his/her set of identification traits.

When theorizing cultural identity in Cultural Identity and Diaspora (2010), Stuart Hall came up with two possible ways of noting the issue. Firstly, cultural identity might be regarded as part of one's family heritage, spread through generations as a component of a nation's culture and a bond between people from similar upbringings and same nationality which creates a sense of a constituted unity. The second perspective refers to *difference* and *similarity* (my emphasis); therefore, the individual is always performing his/her subjectivity according to positionality.

> Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (HALL, 2010, p. 236)

Hence, I reckon, pondering on the notion of hybridity is quite relevant to the question of cultural identity. Hybridity presupposes that cultural identities may also be formed in an interstitial space in which dialectical pairs are not considered a part of the process, given its multilayered aspect. Much to the contrary, the belief in totalizing binaries concerning identity formation enhances essentialism and unequal structures of power. The "'play' of history, culture and power" suggested by Hall takes into account negotiation between sameness and difference, fragmentation of life experience, ambivalence, and cultural translation. According to Bhabha (1994), hybridity is a key concept to colonial identity that disrupts the colonial discourse through mimicry. Corresponding, the ambivalent aspect of identity may function as a way to resist assimilation. An explanation of this concept is found in the *Key Concepts in Postcolonial Studies* (1998) from Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffitths and Helen Tiffin.

> Bhabha shows that both colonizing and colonized subjects are implicated in the ambivalence of colonial discourse. The concept is related to hybridity because, just as ambivalence 'decentres' authority from its position of power, so that authority may also become hybridized when placed in a colonial context in which it finds

> itself dealing with, and often inflected by, other cultures. (ASHCROFT et al, 1998, p.15)

Hybridity has been widely discussed by scholars, including Stuart Hall, Salman Rushdie and Homi K. Bhabha himself. Notwithstanding, the discussion I intend to foster takes into consideration space and time when reflecting on hybridity; thus, the influence of travel, migration and border crossing, nomadism, globalization, and capitalism are paramount to this study, especially because post-modern subjects occupy different positions and transit through many "worlds". Susan Friedman discusses the term in the chapter "Beyond" Gender: The New Geography of Identity and the Future of Feminist Criticism from her book *Mappings* and argues that,

> As a discourse of identity, hybridity often depends materially, as well as figuratively, on movement through space, from one part of the globe to another. This migration through space materializes a movement through different cultures that effectively constitutes identity as the product of cultural grafting. Alternatively, hybridity sometimes configures identity as the superposition of different cultures in a single space often imagined as a borderland, as a site of blending and clashing. "To survive the Borderlands," Anzaldúa writes, "you must live *sin fronteras* [without borders]/ be a crossroads" (195). In either case, identity is not "pure," "authentic," but always already a heterogeneous mixture produced in the borderlands or interstices between difference. (FRIEDMAN, 1998, p. 24)

Identity is not monolithic, but a crossing of many "selves" within the same individual. Identity formation, thus, is a never-ending movement toward self-awareness. Besides, the play between sameness and difference is natural and important in this process because it favors a better understanding of the self when the subject acknowledges the ways in which the other's world drifts or approximates to his/her own world. Difference, in this regard, is considered to be positive and a way to achieve social consciousness towards the importance of alterity.

To diasporic subjectivities, the process of subjectification may seem a little bit more intricate, due to the fact that these individuals are caught in-between cultures. The process of subjectification, in this sense, has to do with performance related to identification. The notion of intercultural *fort/da* comes into play again, since it is understood that the performativity aspect of identity is not a trait which belongs only to minorities, dominant groups also perform, especially when in the contact zones. Regarding the idea of mimicry concerning identity performativity, Susan Stanford Friedman states:

> The mimetic faculty, as Taussig reminds us, is based on a form of imitative play or representational performance of the other. Identification with a cultural group is acted out or performed through a repetition of the behaviors and beliefs associated with a collectivity. As an "imagined community" (to echo Benedict Anderson), groups contain individuals who reiterate the normative patterns of the group with which they identify. Additionally, intercultural encounters in the contact zone between differences often lead to forced or willing, conscious or unconscious repetitions of the other, as a kind of performance, often with a difference.. (FRIEDMAN, 1998, p. 76-77)

In *Something to Declare,* Julia Alvarez writes about her experience with dislocation and the effects of the displacement to her process of identification. In the essay La Gringuita: On Losing a Native Language, even the title is a direct reference to the hybridization of identity. Alvarez narrates some passages from her teenage years, including some of the times she spent in the Dominican Republic. There, she was able to make friends with a girl who was a diasporic subject as well. Notwithstanding, Dilita did not undergo a process of natural assimilation as Julia Alvarez, who considered herself a "New-England-hippy variety" (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 66), did. Dilita behaved, looked and performed more like a Dominican girl . Furthermore, Alvarez adds that as time went by she learned some things with her friend and passed as Dominican more easily. The following excerpt narrates an encounter with Mangú, Alvarez's boyfriend at the time.

> Las gringuitas, they nicknamed us. Dilita didn't mind the teasing, but Mangú could always get a rise out of me when he called me a gringa.
> (...)
> But though he teased me with that nickname, Mangú made it clear that he would find a real gringa unappealing. "You're Dominican," he declared. The litmus test was dancing merengue, our national, fast-moving, lots-of-hip-action dance. As we moved across the dance floor, Mangú would whisper the lyrics in my ear, complimenting my natural rhythm that showed, so he said, that my body knew where it came from. I was pleased with the praise. The truth is I wanted it both ways: I wanted to be good at the best things in each culture. Maybe I was picking up from Dilita how to be a successful hybrid. (ALVAREZ, 1998, p. 68)

In the essay Family Matters, Alvarez comments on the bonds inside a Dominican family, such as the one she is a part of, since most of the family members live close to each other (sometimes in the same compound) and their lives seem to be intertwined. The similarities and differences among them are part of who she is, a hyphenated person. However, by the end of the chapter, she compares the lives of her cousins to hers and concludes that the possibility of self-invention in the host land, which favors a process of

accepting the values from both cultures that most appeal to oneself and denying the ones that do not, is a good thing.

> My sisters and I entered this country and our turbulent teens at the height of the sixties, in the company of friends who were, many of them, dropping out of their families, joining communes, demonstrating against the war, spending the night in jail or in someone-they-weren't-married-to's bed. Meanwhile, back home, our female cousins were having their quinceañera parties in which they waltzed with their papis in sight of any relative still able to sit upright and sip a rum-coke. By twenty-five, many were leading settled lives with children, households, a battalion of maids to do their bidding. They knew who they were, Alvarez or Tavares, Bermúdez or Espaillat. But in America, you didn't go by what your family had been in the past, you created yourself anew. This was part of the excitement as well as the confusing challenge of America. (ALVAREZ, 1998, p. 115-116)

In another essay, Doña Aída, with Your Permission, the writer describes a situation in which she and the poet Aída Cartagena Portalatín were keynote speakers at a meeting of the Caribbean Studies Association. While the poet read her works in Spanish, Alvarez's read hers in English. Portalatín was not pleased with that and took Alvarez to talk, emphasizing the fact that she was a Dominican writer. Out of respect for the elder woman who is considered one of the greatest Dominican authors, she did not respond at the time; nonetheless, she wrote this short essay in which she describes herself as "mixed breed". The following passage illustrates the hybrid aspect of diasporic subjects I have been proposing so far.

> It's a world formed of contradictions, clashes, cominglings—the gringa and the Dominican, and it is precisely that tension and richness that interests me. Being in and out of both worlds, looking at one side from the other side—thus the title of one of my books of poems, The Other Side/*El Otro Lado*. These unusual perspectives are often what I write about. A duality that I hope in the writing transcends itself and becomes a new consciousness, a new place on the map, a synthesizing way of looking at the world. (ALVAREZ, 1998, p. 173)

In the previous chapter, I compared some of the themes present in *Something to Declare* and *¡Yo!* in order to sustain the hypothesis that Alvarez's works contain autobiographical coincidences. One of these aspects is the process of identity formation. In *¡Yo!* readers may also find passages which function as literary representations of real life experience regarding hybridization of identity due to dislocation and displacement, thus my comparison focused on the situations that involved the protagonist of the novel, Yolanda, in relation to Julia Alvarez's experiences.

In the chapter from *¡Yo!,* The Third Husband - characterization, a third-person narrator reports the process Yo goes through every time she and her husband, Doug, come back from a visit to the Dominican Republic. Even though Yo is well adjusted to American customs and way of living, she maintains some Dominican habits that puzzle her husband. Doug is a focalized character in this chapter which means that readers see Yolanda the way he sees her and are able to grasp his difficulties in understanding Yo's hybrid nature. The clash between both cultures is also clear in the text through Doug's reaction to the saucers Yo scattered all over their house to ward off evil spirits. The rituals she follows are part of her Dominican heritage.

> She is not a wannabe witch and she is not a leftover hippy. If you stand her pedigree right next to his, he should be fanning her with a palm leaf or carting stones up her pyramid. These superstitions—he mustn't call them that—are part of her island background, though to this day he has yet to hear one of her aristocratic old aunts talk about evil eyes or the spirits.
> So every time they get back from the island—all this spirit paraphernalia has to be nailed down. Then, there's bound to be some homesickness, and then, finally—he really can't figure out what breaks it, she's out in the garden asking him what is this weed called, and why do you put cages on tomato plants, and oh Cuco, come and look at this amazing, amazing butterfly. (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 259-260)

Diasporic subjects may live through the tension of being loyal to two places at the same time. Diaspora *per se* is not traveling, it implies forced displacement. To leave a country because its current state represents a danger to the well-being of its inhabitants must be a painful experience. Many contemporary works devote their narratives to telling the stories of migrants whose lives were changed through diaspora. Exile usually does not mean a free choice; it often implies banishment by official decree or a personal retreat in order to escape a series of horrifying situations. Leaving usually involves abandoning everything one knows and loves. Nonetheless, as a number of issues connected to the concept of diaspora, also presents a twofold perspective, since leaving one's roots behind may be connected with the hope for a better future and the possibility to reinvent oneself.

Diaspora is a term that was originally used to refer primarily to the dispersion of the Jewish peoples from Jerusalem to Babylon and also to the scattering of the Armenian and Greek. All the same, it is crucial to note that when discussing this concept one needs to acknowledge the relevance of the African diaspora, especially since neither the Jewish diaspora nor other migration movements might provide an adequate model to understand the history of black diasporic subjects. The African diaspora is a pivotal element to the analysis of

Caribbean literary productions by migrant writers as the area was one of the largest regional markets for enslaved people from Africa.

Between the late fifteenth century and the nineteenth century, around 12.5 million[9] Africans were taken from their homeland and forced to cross the Atlantic to the Americas. This shaped what scholar Paul Gilroy defined as the theory of the Black Atlantic featured in his work *The Black Atlantic:* modernity and double consciousness (1993) which emphasizes the idea that black "re-crossed" the Atlantic through countercultural manifestations that originated from the clash between white European and black African cultures. Gilroy states: "I want to develop the suggestion that cultural historians could take the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis in their discussions of the modem world and use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective" (1993, p. 15).

Recent migrations created new diasporas all over the globe: thus *diaspora* "now shares meanings with words like immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest-worker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community" (TOLOLYAN, 1991, apud HUA, 2008, p. 193). In her article Diaspora and Cultural Memory (2008), Ann Hua clarifies some basic aspects embedded in the concept:

> As Avtar Brah (1996) observes, it is easy to confuse between diaspora as a theoretical concept, diaspora discourses, and specific historical diasporas. Hence, it is important to differentiate between specific historical diasporas and diaspora as a concept (179). One should also be cautious of the 'uncritical, unreflexive application of the term "diaspora" to any and all contexts of global displacement and movement', since 'some forms of travel and tourism' and any attempt to demarcate all movements as disenfranchising can be problematic and misrepresent reality (Braziel and Mannur 2003, 3). It is also important to be cautious of diasporic discourses that tend to homogenize difference and multiplicity and to elide power struggles within the community to form what Paul Gilroy (2000) calls 'ethnic absolutism', in which all individuals of a collective history and racial descent.
> (...)
> It is crucial to recognize that a diasporic community is not fixed or pre-given: 'It is constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life; in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively' (Brah 1996, 183). (HUA, 2008, p. 194)

Hua's elucidation is crucial when it comes to analyzing literary representations of diasporic subjects. Although they are generally part of communities, they are not a homogeneous group; peculiarities and personal differences need to be acknowledged. Works from women writers such as Julia Alvarez, Sandra Cisneros, Jamaica Kincaid and Edwige

[9] Data taken from http://www.slavevoyages.org/. Last access on 2/13/2019.

Danticat, to mention some of them, are very important concerning the representation of difference and diversity among members of a given diasporic group. Through their accounts, readers are able to acknowledge that diasporic communities experience solidarity and power inequality at the same time. Issues similar to the ones encountered in the host country also oppress minority groups inside those communities. Diasporic communities are often racialized, gendered and not exempted from issues such as homophobia and ageism, especially because these subjects may pose as issues that permeate the society these individuals used to live in before immigrating. Avtar Brah discusses the topic in *Cartographies of Diaspora* (1996):

> (...) diasporic or border positionality does not in itself assure a vantage point of privileged insight into and understanding of relations of power, although it does create a space in which experiential mediations may intersect in ways that render such understandings more readily accessible. It is essentially a question of politics. Diasporic identities cannot be read off in a one-to-one fashion straightforwardly from a border positionality, in the same way that a feminist subject position cannot be deduced from the category 'woman'. (BRAH, 1996, p. 204)

In *¡Yo!* Alvarez offers the readers an accurate depiction of the disparities that diasporic communities may hold and how privilege distinguishes members. The García de La Torre family retreat to The United States in order to escape a brutal dictatorship in the Dominican Republic. They take with them their maid, Primi, and her daughter, Sarita. Both of them are constantly told they are part of the family, nonetheless Sarita feels that she had to struggle much more than the García girls to achieve her life goals while her mother had to give up having a life of her own to serve the family. In the chapter The wedding guests - point of view, Sarita is invited to Yolanda's wedding ceremony. After pondering if it would be good for her to accept the invitation, she decides to go because she wanted to see the García girls again. Sarita's reflections are poignant when it comes to the discussion of difference among diasporic communities' members and classism in Third World countries.

> Every time some of the García de la Torre clan go to introduce me to the groom's side of the family, they hesitate. "This is Sarita Lopez . . . the daughter . . . of a woman . . . whom . . . we were very fond of." And I'm thinking, go ahead and say it. She's the daughter of the maid who used to clean our toilets and make our beds and calm our rages and wipe away our tears.
> And then, please, go on with the story: she has made something of herself, the daughter. She got her B.S., then went to med school, and now owns one of the leading sports medicine clinics in the country. Sometimes, in fact, a patient will come in from the Dominican Republic, and I'll have to smile because I recognize the name.

> (...)
> And the truth is these four García sisters are the closest I've got to family, to people who are like me: all of us caught between cultures—but with this added big difference, I'm also caught between classes, at least when I go back to the island to visit. (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 226-227)

Sarita acquires agency in her life only after she finishes her educational journey and is able to leave the García's household, something that her mother could not do. Money is an important element in this situation since Sarita and her mother were very poor. Nonetheless, in the United States she had access to education, so she gets a chance to reinvent herself and become a successful doctor, climbing several degrees in the social ladder. Sarita's story displays quite well the dual aspect of diaspora. Had Sarita remained in the Dominican Republic, she would likely have had the same fate as her mother. Yet, when she is in her homeland or in the United States among people who knew her mother's situation, she is still the target of prejudice and discrimination. Matters are further complicated when Sarita's mother discloses that the girl's father is part of the De La Torre clan, something the whole family vehemently denies.

While familial bonds play a very important role in the fiction of Julia Alvarez, highlighting microsocial aspects, macrosocial elements also permeate it. The political implications of a dictatorship figure prominently in her work, both fictional and non-fictional. The Trujillo Era is often referred to in Alvarez's writings. In an essay called An American Childhood in the Dominican Republic (1987) published in *The American Scholar*, the author narrates her early years in the country under Trujillo's command. As she recalls, her family's social status provided them some privileges: "It was not just their money that gave them power (...) It was their strong ties with Americans and the United States" (ALVAREZ, 1987, p. 78). Alvarez also reports that during childhood, she and her sisters were prone to want many things that came from The United States, such as food items, in detriment to the ones that were part of Dominican culture. As readers may understand, the colonizer — in this case, the imperialist force — is present even when the narrative comes from the colonized. Alvarez continues the narration pointing out the American influence in the Dominican Republic, suggesting that the U.S., although it became a refuge for her family later on, also contributed to the situation which made them leave in the first place.

> About this time, American businesses and shops were cropping up all over Ciudad Trujillo, as the capital had been renamed in honor of *El Jefe*, our dictator. The shops catered to a growing community of American advisors, businessmen, and fortune

> seekers who had been drawn to the country by the cheap labor and tax breaks offered by Trujillo to his good friends up north. This was the decade of the fifties, "The Era of Prosperity," as Trujillo had proclaimed it. In addition to the ice-cream parlor, there was a new car dealership, Buchanan Motors, where we bought our blue Oldsmobile, and an outdoor movie theater, the Olympic, where we went once to see a Western. (In the middle of the cavalry rescue, a tropical downpour obscured the besieged wagon train in the desert.) There was also the American school started by a diplomat's wife, Carol Morgan; and since Mrs. Morgan was friends with my mother and aunts, we children were allowed to attend her school even though it was, technically, for *los niňos Americanos*. (ALVAREZ, 1987, p. 75)

It was the fear of getting murdered by Trujillo's secret police that prompted the Alvarez family to leave the country. Trujillo suspected that the father was involved in an underground movement that aimed at overthrowing him, so he kept the family under surveillance, as Alvarez described: "Every night, a black Volkswagen crept up our private entrance to the compound and sat on the driveway until dawn" (ALVAREZ, 1987, p. 79). What actually bought them some time and helped preserve her father's life was the fact that he shared his last name with another man, who was also a doctor involved in the movement, thus every time Doctor Alvarez was mentioned by peers who were arrested and suffering torture, the police thought they were referring to the other Alvarez man who had fled to Colombia.

.As I already debated in the previous chapter, Alvarez's experiences provided her with some raw material which she used to create some of her works. Her family's escape from Trujillo's henchmen and their exile in the United States are very similar to the situations portrayed in *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents* and *¡Yo!*. The major themes in her writing are identity and culture, hybridity and assimilation, home and exile, language and memory.

Forced displacement is often portrayed in literature as a painful experience. One of Alvarez's characters, Laura García, is a woman who — much like Alvarez's descriptions of her own mother's experiences with displacement — suffers from a deep homesickness. In *¡Yo!*, Laura is the narrator of an entire chapter named The mother - nonfiction in which she describes the difficulties she and her family had to face to adapt to the host country, The United States.

> I guess for each one in the family it was different what was the hardest thing. For Carlos, it was having to start all over again at forty-five, getting a license, setting up a practice. My eldest Carla just couldn't bear that she wasn't the know-it-all anymore. Of course, the Americans knew their country better than she did. Sandi got more complicated, prettier, and I suppose that made it hard on her, discovering she

> was a princess just as she had lost her island kingdom. Baby Fifi took to this place like china in a china shop, so if anything, the hardest thing for her was hearing the rest of us moan and complain. As for Yo, I'd have to say the hardest thing about this country was being thrown together in such close proximity with me. (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 21)

In the excerpt above, Laura describes her perception of how leaving their homeland affected each family member. Diasporic journeys, although many would think imply endings, are also about starting over again. They involve endings, but also create opportunities for beginnings and self-invention. Author Gayatri Spivak sustains the belief that the process of being on the move is vital to the formation of identity, she states: "If there's one thing I totally distrust (...) is people looking for roots." (SPIVAK, 1990, 93).

I align my thinking to Spivak's concerning the multitude of possibilities that rootlessness might offer, although I also acknowledge the fact that for many people being on the move is simply not a viable option. The process is not painless, though. It often entails a journey that will be filled with the search for belongingness and the duality of being caught between cultures in the pursuit of a better life. Besides the difficulties created by the adaptation to a new country, a new way of living, diaspora also means abandoning the comfortable psychological place of "feeling at home".

Scholar Jan Willem Duyvendak wrote a book on the subject named *The Politics of Home. Nostalgia and Belonging in Western Europe and the United States* (2011) in which he explains the meaning of "feeling at home'. His clarification is relevant concerning the uneasiness which is often depicted in migrants' literature. The unbelongingness which diasporic individuals are subjected to when dislocated may make it harder for them to experience peace of mind while in the host land.

> Feeling at home, then, is one of those emotions that eludes words. People may reveal, when urged to do so, that they feel 'at ease' when they feel at home, that they feel 'safe', 'secure' and 'comfortable', at 'one with their surroundings'. If one feels at home, one is at peace – a rather passive state where things are self- evident because they are so familiar. (DUYVENDAK, 2011, p. 27)

Dislocation, therefore, is movement while displacement is subjective. Moreover, because borders are fluid, so is the definition of home. Avtar Brah posits the question "Where is home?" in order to define what home, as a concept, means for diasporic subjects.

> Where is home? On the one hand, 'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the

> geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality. (...) In other words, the varying experience of the pains and pleasures, the terrors and contentments, or the highs and humdrum of everyday lived culture that marks how, for example, a cold winter night might be differently experienced sitting by a crackling fireside in a mansion as compared with standing huddled around a makeshift fire on the streets of nineteenth-century England. (BRAH, 1996, p. 188-189)

Feeling at home matters as Brah elucidates and this sentiment is acquired through a lived experience based on locality and social relations. While in *¡Yo!* there are not any chapters narrated by Yolanda herself, in *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents* readers are able to learn a bit more about Yolanda's thoughts since the narration of the chapters oscillates between first and third-person narrations. In the first chapter, Antojos, readers are presented with a third-person narrator that is going to introduce the García de La Torre third daughter, Yolanda and focalize the narration on her.

The chapter is paramount to the understanding of Yolanda as a woman who is constantly moving both physically and emotionally. She finds herself in the Dominican Republic after five years apart from the country and from her extended family. Since she is there, she is going to go on a trip to the countryside in the pursuit of some answers for questions about her own existence and identity. While driving through the fields of her homeland to get some guavas, she describes the country life and comes to a conclusion about her life.

> All around her are the foothills, a dark enormous green, the sky more a brightness than a color. A breeze blows through the palms below, rustling their branches, so they whisper like voices. Here and there a braid of smoke rises up from a hillside—a *campesino* and his family living out their solitary life. This is what she has been missing all these years without really knowing that she has been missing it. Standing here in the quiet, she believes she has never felt at home in the States, never. (ALVAREZ, 2010, p. 12)

The strangeness many diasporic subjects face when dislocated from their homelands is what Homi K. Bhabha has described as "the unhomely". One more time, Bhabha draws inspiration from Freud and uses the concept of the uncanny, coined by him in his essay "The uncanny" (1919) to develop the notion of "the unhomely". It is a state which is not circumscribed to the binary lacking a home versus having a home. "The unhomely" refers to the acknowledgment of the rupture of the line between home and world. The sensation of not knowing one's position in the world is originated from this sentiment which suggests that

one's home is not his/hers. In the essay called The World and the Home, the author explains the concept:

> In the stirrings of the unhomely, another world becomes visible. It has less to do with forcible eviction and more to do with the uncanny literary and social effects of enforced social accommodation, or historical migrations and cultural relocations. The home does not remain the domain of domestic life, nor does the world simply become its social or historical counterpart. The unhomely is the shock of recognition of the world-in-the home, the home-in-the-world. In a song called "Whose House is This?" Toni Morrison gives this problem of "unhomely" dwelling a lyric clarity: Whose house is this? Whose night keeps out the light in here? Say who owns this house? It is not mine. I had another sweeter....The House is strange. Its shadows lie. Say, tell me, why does its lock fit my key*?* (BHABHA, 1992, p. 141)

The notion of "the unhomely" is related to the idea that home is not a fixed locality. Home may be perceived as a fluctuant entity since it is acknowledged that even when returning is longed for, the actual process of going back to what one has left is not possible. Returning to the past is not possible, because the person who left is never the person who goes back, furthermore the homeland is also changed, thus the politics of return imply an imagined homeland. In the essay from *Something to Declare* called Our papers, Julia Alvarez describes why and how her family left the Dominican Republic. She was very young at the time they immigrated to The United States, Alvarez is able to recall feelings of nostalgia and longing for the homeland.

In the excerpt below, it is clear how these memories, even if based on true emotions, are also sugarcoated since they do not encompass the hardships and unpleasant aspects of life in the homeland, especially during oppressive times. In the case of Alvarez, even though the writer was a child who did not know the complete details and horrors of life in the Dominican Republic during the *trujillato*, she could at least get some glimpses of the danger hovering over her family. Nonetheless, oftentimes what prevails is nostalgia for the life left behind.

> For weeks that soon became months and years, I would think in this way. What was going on right this moment back home? As the leaves fell and the air turned gray and the cold set in, I would remember the big house in Boca Chica, the waves telling me their secrets, the cousins sleeping side by side in their cots, and I would wonder if those papers had set us free from everything we loved. (ALVAREZ, 1998, p. 19)

Yolanda's experiences similar longings for the homeland to the ones expressed by Alvarez in some of her essays. Still, as she does not narrate any of the chapters in *¡Yo!*, it is through Laura García's voice that readers come to know how hard it was, not only for Yolanda but also for all the García girls, to adapt to their new lives in the host land. In the

chapter The mother – nonfiction, Laura also chronicles the preoccupations she and her husband had to deal with while adapting to the new life. Besides the financial issues that establishing a career and providing for an entire family in a new country brought about, they also had to cope with the anxiety of knowing that their friends and family were still living under a violent dictatorship. Furthermore, the hardest thing for them, she states, was not being sure if they would get to stay (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 29). The kids, however, did not grasp everything that was happening at the time given their innocence and age; hence they act up with multiple questions and erratic behavior that expresses their suffering.

> The last thing I needed was their whining and fighting. Every day it was the same question, "When are we going to go back?" Now that we were far away and I wasn't afraid of their blurting things out, I tried to explain. But it was as if they thought I was lying to them with a story to make them behave. They'd listen, but as soon as I was done, they'd start in again. They wanted to go back to their cousins and uncles and aunts and the maids. I thought they would feel more at home once school began. But September, October, November, December passed by, and they were still having nightmares and nagging me all the long days that they wanted to go back. Go back. Go back. Go back. (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 29)

The kids longed for a life that no longer existed for them. As Alvarez stated in her essay Our papers, this sentiment is persistent and accompanies diasporic individuals even after they have already grasped all the complexities of missing "home" and the nostalgic feeling that foments the desire for a place which does not exist in reality or that may also be a site of horrors and trauma. As Avtar Brah suggests, "the same geographical space comes to articulate different histories and meanings, such that 'home' can simultaneously be a place of safety and terror" (BRAH, 1996, p. 180).

In *¡Yo!*, Yolanda is portrayed as a child who resorts to telling stories, mostly based on her experiences, as a way to cope with her displacement issues. The stories, therefore, mix facts and fiction. In a conversation with a social worker who came to her house to investigate why Yolanda is fond of telling disturbing stories, Laura García ends up revealing to the reader that the motive of Yo's behavior is the fact that she is terrified. As I conjecture, Yo's stories are ways to deal with the pain she carries inside herself and that as a child she cannnot elaborate well. The accounts fictionalize reality, disguising the fear and the horror of "the unhomely".

> "We're just concerned because the girls seem so anxious. Especially Yolanda."
> I knew it! "Has she been telling stories?"
> The lady nods slowly.

> (...)
> "Frankly, they are a little disturbing."
> "Disturbing?" I ask. Even though I know what the word means, it sounds worse coming out of this woman's mouth.
> "Oh, she's been mentioning things . . ." The lady waves her hand vaguely. "Things like what you were describing. Kids locked in closets and their mouths burned with lye. Bears mauling little children." She stops a moment, maybe because of the shocked look on my face.
> (...)
> And suddenly, I am feeling such envy for my daughter, who is able to speak of what terrifies her. I myself can't find the words in English—or Spanish. Only the howling of the bear I used to impersonate captures some of what I feel. (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 33-34)

The pursuit of home for diasporic individuals seems to be a never-ending paradox. For a decentered being, the process of finding home is a mechanism that encompasses the acknowledgment that he/she lives in-between "worlds" and that this locality is neither mapped nor physical. It is a movement of awareness regarding the fact that dislocation is connected to identity formation and that a diasporic subject is a hybrid subject. Furthermore, the idea of home in diaspora implies that home by itself contains a myriad of meanings. Home in diaspora may also represent the possibility of returning to the homeland and resignifying it, thus the movement of coming and going to fulfill one's need for belonging.

In the essay Doña Aída, with Your Permission from *Something to Declare*, Julia Alvarez comments on her hybrid nature and states that she is not a Dominican writer. She also refers to the plight of many other writers who have gone through similar processes of dislocation: "We're a mobile world; borders are melting; nationalities are on the move, often for devastating reasons. A multicultural perspective is more and more the way to understand the world" (ALVAREZ, 1998, p. 172-173)**.** Once in an interview to Heather Rosario-Sievert[10], Alvarez was asked if she considered herself Dominican or American. The writer's answer corresponds to what she later disclosed in her abovementioned essay:

> Our world is becoming a place with shifting borders, where nations form and reform. But what we're really creating are new languages. There are so many hyphenated people, combination of people who hear musical cadences in one language that come from another. . . . I'm not a Dominican writer. I can't pretend to be Dominican. But by the same token, when people ask me if I'm an American writer, I have to say I don't think of myself as being in the same tradition as Melville

[10] Available in https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08905769708594508

> or Hawthorne. I'm a hyphenated person interested in the music that comes out of the language that hears both languages. My stories come out of being in worlds that sometimes clash and sometimes combine. I'm a writer who is Latina and not a Latina who is a writer. What I want to do with language is what Joseph Conrad meant when he said: "To render the highest possible justice to the visible universe." (ALVAREZ 1997, p. 33)

Home and the feeling of belonging might be linked to intangible elements such as the bond one shares with his/her family, his/her own experiences away from the household and the memories created together. Diaspora journeys demonstrate that the notion of home is made of abstract components, such as memory and affection. Hence, home is neither here nor there; for hybrid subjectivities home may entail living in-between.

In the introduction to her book *At Home in Diaspora* (2005), Wendy K. Walters discusses the idea that for diasporic writers their work may represent a way to "construct alternative homelands" (WALTERS, 2005, p. 7). Literature, with its creative powers allows them to reinvent home.

> What I am suggesting, however, is that we can read contemporary diasporic literature as shifting from the concept of the origin as the site of Return to the concept of the diaspora itself as a home to which a writer experiencing racial exclusions might return, via their writing, through the literary construction of alternative narratives of identity. (WALTERS, 2005, p. 13)

Discussing diaspora and exile in the article Bodies on the Move: a Poetics of Home and Diaspora (2004), Susan Friedman reflects on the issues of dislocation, longing for home, imaginary homelands, the importance of the materiality of the body in diaspora and writing as a form of dealing with the effects of displacement. Focusing on the importance of dislocation when it comes to identity formation and belonging, Friedman quotes the author Carol Boyce-Davies to underscore the significance of writing as a creative process, diasporic writers who need to deal with the plural meanings that home acquires in diaspora: "For some writers, (…) exile is a desired location out of which they can create" (p. 114) […] "Writing home" has a double meaning writing as a "means of communication with home" and writing as "finding ways to express the conflicted meaning of home in the experience of the formerly colonized" (p. 129).

To Julia Alvarez home does not seem to be a perception of a locality or a label encompassing a nationality. The writer, as I ponder, has taken roots in language and through language is able to travel the worlds she inhabits while taking the readers in those journeys

with her. Her works are filled with representations of the world through a migrant's point of view. The author manages to approach such a complex theme as the location of home in diaspora with lightness, but also poignantly. Furthermore, Alvarez seems to be committed to portraying the struggles women face as diasporic individuals and highlighting the aspects of identity formation that concern gender and its implications in the lives of Latino women.

3 WHAT IT FEELS LIKE FOR A GIRL IN THIS WORLD: GENDER REPRESENTATIONS IN JULIA ALVAREZ'S WRITING

Literature is about being a complex, contradictory human being.

Julia Alvarez

As I write this chapter, the nominees for The Oscars 2019 are being announced. The 90-year-old celebration is dedicated to paying honors to the cinema and its makers. The ceremony showcases some of the boundaries concerning gender roles in western society. The arrival of celebrities is a show within the show. Women walk elegantly through the red carpet and are asked about who designed their dresses and the cost of the jewelry they are wearing while the men, wearing black tuxedos and bow ties, answer questions about the movies that got them there and future career prospects.

It is possible to infer, then, that according to gender expectations, women should be concerned with their physical appearance and maintain an aura of perfection while men are supposed to focus on their professional path and career prospects, even though the people in this scenario hold the same positions in the industry, the same industry which has been under attack because of gender pay gap issues and more recently because of sexual harassment suffered by actresses[11]. For most of its history, men have received more awards than women, something that clearly reflects women's lack of participation and influence in the business. The situation inside the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences illustrates the issue: by February 2018 only 28% of the Academy was composed of women.

Another example of how the binary masculinity versus femininity is carried out in society is also found in sports events. The *Super Bowl* in the United States and *the FIFA World Cup* are examples of gendered events. On these occasions, it becomes legitimate for men to act angrily in order to express their excitement towards their favorite teams and players who, on the field, give their best performance through confrontations and the

[11] As of October 2017, the Me Too Movement started by activist Tarana Burker became known worldwide when A-list Hollywood actresses decided to denounce sexual harassment in the workplace with sexual-abuse allegations against one of the most powerful men in the industry, Harvey Weinstein. It followed a number of other accusations under the same tone, fostering the debate around the theme and providing victims with the opportunity to find help.

displaying of their physical strength. Women, in this context, do not have much space since they may be noticed as too fragile to engage in these practices and also because of the idea that public displays of brutality by women are regarded as a type of failure to conform to gender norms.

Women athletes might not be seen as strong or able to achieve the same level of success as the men, even when they have similar or better results, such as the case of Marta, the Brazilian soccer player. Despite having received more FIFA Ballon d'Ors — the prize for the best player of the year — than any other soccer player, male or female, Martha still earns much less than famous male players. The situations described in the paragraphs above are contemporary representations of occasions in which gender is an important factor in the fruition of public events in western society.

In 1949, the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir stated in her book *The Second Sex*, a work which might be considered textbook on feminist theory nowadays, that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (2010, p. 330). The statement, well known and understood by now, refers to the fact the Beauvoir distinguishes sex from gender. She separates what is to be considered a biological reality from what is a social construct: sex is comprises a series of fixed anatomical traits while gender is built upon cultural meanings. Judith Butler, when discussing the difference between sex and gender in Beauvoir's work in the essay Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex, states:

> Gender must be understood as a modality of taking on or realizing possibilities, a process of interpreting the body, giving it cultural form. In other words, to be a woman is to become a woman; it is not a matter of acquiescing to a fixed ontological status, in which case one could be born a woman, but, rather, an active process of appropriating, interpreting, and reinterpreting received cultural possibilities. (BUTLER, 1986, p. 36)

There are many social norms which are related to what means to become a woman (and a man) in this world; the roles of women and men are well delimited in this context and maintained through socialization and performative acts. Hence, gender identity is a unity which is not circumscribed to the sex one is assigned at birth. The aim of this chapter is to discuss gender identity, expression and performance according to the experience of a diasporic subject and through the literary representations of Latino women featured in *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* (1991), *¡Yo!* (1997) and Julia Alvarez's accounts contained in *Something to Declare* (1998).

Beauvoir defined woman as the “Other” in relation to men, signaling that “the place of woman in society is always the one they assign her; at no time has she imposed her own law” (2010, p. 111). Noticing woman as the “Other” implies that the concept of womanhood itself is defined and measured by men and that whereas the man is considered to be a subject, the woman is not fully human, not an individual herself. Oppression, however, did not happen overnight and the domination of male over female came through the acknowledgment of an imbalance concerning physical strength. According to the author (2010, p. 96-97), maternity favored male’s oppression over female since it bound woman to her body. Some of the accounts on primitive societies tell of times in which women were also responsible for activities that required force and some of them, in specific social groups, even engaged in hunting and war battles. Nevertheless, the fragility of the body due to pregnancy and post-pregnancy states made it possible for men to dominate women. Reproduction became a burden for the ones who used to be warriors and as for ordinary women, Beauvoir explains “pregnancy, giving birth, and menstruation diminished their work capacity and condemned them to long periods of impotence” (BEAUVOIR, 2010, p. 97).

The perpetuation of matrimony and family as institutions is also a factor that must be taken into consideration in the discussion of a woman’s place inside patrilineal societies. In patriarchal regimes, women may be seen as possessions that originally belong to a father and later to a husband through wedlock. The stereotypes of gender are well outlined in this setting: men are the breadwinners who are allowed to leave the house in order to provide for their families and women are the caretakers whose sole purpose in life is to reproduce, nurture and serve the family. Thus, “family and private patrimony incontestably remain the bases of society, woman also remains totally alienated” (BEAUVOIR, 2010, p. 119).

The idea that motherhood is a woman’s destiny is an assumption based on biology that was created and spread in order to enforce the patriarchal system, thus subordinating and controlling women by keeping them confined to the domestic sphere. Moreover, the idealization of family and maternity also repress any gender and sexual expressions which deviate from the heterosexual norm. When these concepts are not questioned, women are not allowed to discover who they are; instead, they mimic patterns that are imposed by a sexist system.

Notwithstanding, biology is part of human nature and identity formation, thus it should not be taken for granted. If biology did not matter to the fulfillment of one’s gender identity,

society would not be thinking about the importance of sex reassignment surgeries for the psychological well-being of people who suffer from gender dysphoria. Furthermore, the importance of materiality for women from non-hegemonic countries is indisputable since they have to cope with a number of issues that women in more privileged countries do not, such as poverty, child mortality and precarious healthcare.

Female consciousness is not based only on how women perform gender, it is also important to consider the aspects of biology that corroborate to the realization of womanhood. For a woman to come to an understanding of her own body and its functions such as the ability to create life through the act of giving birth to a child is as empowering as being able to comprehend how gender standards may be harmful or useful to her experience. In *Of Woman Born:* Motherhood as Experience and Institution (1976), Adrienne Rich discussed the significance of materiality not only to the evolution of the feminist movement but also to women's lived experience.

> I have come to believe . . . that female biology—the diffuse, intense sensuality radiating out from clitoris, breasts, uterus, vagina; the lunar cycles of menstruation; the gestation and fruition of life which can take place in the female body—has far more radical implications than we have yet come to appreciate. Patriarchal thought has limited female biology to its own narrow specifications. The feminist vision has recoiled from female biology for these reasons; it will, I believe, come to view our physicality as a resource, rather than a destiny. . . .We must touch the unity and resonance of our physicality, our bond with the natural order, the corporeal ground of our intelligence. (RICH, 1995, p. 39-40)

Being able to recognize the body as a unity whose importance is essential to the formation of gender identity and the performance of gender itself is an act of radical femininity since it subverts the norm by reclaiming what the oppressor has taken as a tool for instituting control. As I conjecture, it is through the acknowledgment of both realities related to gender — the performative and the physical — that women take charge of their lives. Embracing materiality as a sacred part of gender identity contradicts the imposition of motherhood as destiny since it gives women ownership of their own bodies, so it provides them with a choice.

Motherhood is a theme that is present in two of the literary works that are under scrutiny in this study. Julia Alvarez discusses the issue in an essay named Imagining Motherhood featured in her book of autobiographical pieces, *Something to Declare.* In the text, she narrates the time in her life when her youngest sister gave birth to a baby girl.

Alvarez describes the bittersweet feeling of becoming an aunt again (she already had nieces and nephews from her other sisters) while dealing with the fact that in her mid-forties, she did not have an endless amount of time and the decision of not having kids was close to becoming unalterable.

> Then suddenly mid-forty, I realized what most of my women friends must have realized in high school. We are mortal. We don't have an endless supply of time. By now, I'd already used up half of mine or more, and I had only a couple of years left if I truly wanted a child. I could always adopt, but I had to make up my mind soon or I'd be following that poor kid to school on my walker, for heaven's sake. (ALVAREZ, 1998, p. 96)

Alvarez tells of her own doubts concerning what is her true calling — writing or being a mother? — and how they relate to the fact that, besides already debating with herself the urgency to have children because of her age, she still had to face the expectations of her Latino family. The familial cultural grounds remain quite patriarchal, hence women and men have fixed gender roles to fulfill. In developing countries, the basis of society may be rooted in many practices that were inherited from colonial times. In this sense, it might be expected from a woman to get married, be subservient to the husband, have children to carry the family name and avoid having a public voice. To Alvarez, the pressure of being a mother has much more to do with the maintenance of the system than with true willingness to engender children.

> The thought of putting aside—even for just a few years—what I had always considered my real calling, the writing, putting it aside now in my mid-forties when I was finally hitting my full stride, gave me cold feet. I came to realize with that straight, clear-eyed vision of a writer analyzing her fictional characters that I didn't really want to be a mother solely for the sake of being a mother.
> Yet I still felt the pressure to at least say I wanted to be a mother. For all our talk of feminism and pro-choice, willful childlessness continues to have a bad reputation. That Victorian view of childless women as not fully realized lingers. A woman who doesn't care to have a child is considered foolish at best. At worst, as I heard one lecturer proclaim, she is "committing genetic suicide." (ALVAREZ, 1998, p. 98-99)

At the end of the essay the writer comes to a conclusion that seems to have put all of her doubts to rest. She realizes that not being a mother will always be one of her losses in life, similar to what she missed by immigrating to another country and staying away from her kin or not learning the languages to read some authors, such as Dante, in the original. Alvarez concludes that the yearning is related to the loss of something she never had and never will have and that no one is able to have everything, "there isn't time enough for all that I once

meant to do with my life" (ALVAREZ, 1998, p. 100). Moreover, by probing into her own feelings, she finds out that part of her mourning over a childless life comes from the fact that she thought she would not be able to describe motherhood when writing. In the end, with the help of a friend, she understands she is able to imagine motherhood and through her imagination portray it in her work and that seems to be enough for her. Not having children is not considered a failure in Alvarez's eyes, on the contrary, it enabled her to continue pursuing her true passion which is writing.

Yolanda, the protagonist of *¡Yo!*, faces the same questions as her creator, Julia Alvarez. Not being a mother seems to be as big an issue to the character as it is to the writer. As I already discussed in the previous chapters, Yolanda might be seen as a literary representation of Julia Alvarez herself given the many coincidences between the author's experiences contained in her autobiographical pieces and the ones the character undergoes in the novel; nonetheless, readers may grasp these similarities only through other characters' reports since Yo is never given voice in the romance. In the chapter The night watchman – setting, Yolanda is in her cousin Mundín's house in the Dominican Republic trying to write a new book. During her stay, she gets close to the family that works in the house, especially to the caretakers Sergio and his wife. Yo reveals to Sergio's wife the reason why she does not have kids with Doug, her American husband: he had a vasectomy before meeting her. The fact that Yolanda does not have children intrigues both Sergio and José, a local who begins working as a night watchman in the house. The way the men interpret Yolanda's lack of children is related to their comprehension that marriage is only valid when a couple is able to have children.

> "You will not guess why she cannot have children?"
> "She is too old," José guessed, although he had assessed that she had six or seven years before the change would come over her.
> Sergio shook his head importantly, his eyes closing with the pleasure of knowing the answer. "The husband had himself fixed years back de propósito." On purpose.
> "No, no, no." The two men shook their heads in disbelief.
> "Like a steer," José added. It pained him to think of it. "Do they cut the thing off or—how do they do it?"
> Sergio slapped José on the arm and almost fell off his chair shaking with laughter. José smiled so as not to spoil the caretaker's fun, but the truth was that he took no pleasure thinking on the suffering of another man.
> Surely that was why the lady had come to the mountains alone this summer: to recover from the grief of a husband missing a vital part. But then, why had she let him do it? According to María, the husband was already fixed up by the time the doña met him. Then why marry him? José had wondered. But the lady had not

> explained this to María although it seemed she had shared most of her private business as if María were a friend, not a servant. (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 247)

After learning this detail about Yolanda's life, José decides to propose that Yolanda adopt the child his wife is expecting, for he realizes that the kid would have better opportunities in life if raised by a wealthy person such as Yo. In the end, the adoption does not happen, especially because José's wife, Xiomara, does not want to give up her baby and Doug does not want to adopt a child. Nonetheless, the whole situation shows that Yolanda thinks about motherhood and has been considering adopting a child, a topic that creates some tension between her and her husband.

Yolanda's feelings regarding maternity surface again in the chapter The father - conclusion in which the patriarch of the García de La Torre family discusses with his wife their daughter's preoccupations about being a childless woman and also some of his own views on womanhood and reproduction.

> "Doug says she is sad," my wife says. "I guess she went to a lecture at the college and this famous critic said that those baby boomers who never had children are committing genetic suicide."
> "Why go to a lecture like that?" I ask. Sometimes I think my children never use their brains to figure out what is good for them, only to be smart.
> "Papi, she didn't know what the man was going to say ahead of time. Anyhow, Doug says she is depressed. Maybe Sandi's new baby stirred things up. She's been telling Doug that women in the Bible who never had babies were said to have a curse on them."
> "That is an exaggeration." I shake my head, which is a safe thing to say when anyone tries to prove something with the Bible. But then I start to think that perhaps if I were a woman, I would feel the same way. Perhaps if I had all the equipment and I never used it, there would be a sadness, like letting part of myself go to waste. (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 294)

Later in the chapter, Yolanda tells her father of her worries and whereas in Alvarez's essay from *Something to Declare* readers find out the writer came to the conclusion that her true calling was writing by herself, in *¡Yo!* the protagonist is not able to come to this conclusion alone or so it seems to the reader since she is not narrating the story. It is her father who tells her about her *destino* as a writer in an attempt to cheer up his depressed daughter who is so overcome by her doubts regarding motherhood that she ends up questioning her life choices.

> I've just started to wonder, you know, did I go down the wrong road? Did I make a big mistake?"

> "We all have our destiny," I tell her. And suddenly she is very quiet for she can hear it in my voice — the way we can with people when they are talking from deep inside what they know.
> "Look at your father in 1939 having to run away to New York with no money in his pocket."
> "I thought you ran away to Canada? I thought you had two hundred and fifty dollars saved up?"
> "The important thing is I never thought I would get to be a doctor again. All my education lost. But that was *mi destino*. And even though everything went under in those years, that is what finally came up.
> "And you, my daughter," I add while she is listening so close, "your *destino* has been to tell stories. It is a blessing to be able to live out your *destino*." (ALVAREZ, 1998, 295)

Unfortunately, discussing gender roles in contemporary society also implies touching upon the matter of gender inequality which are closely related to the patriarchal norms that regulate gender performance. The standards which women are expected to follow in order to fulfill their gender roles are almost always restrictive and unfair. Furthermore, women are often held accountable for the emotional needs of others.

In 2012, Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie gave a lecture for the event TEDx called We should all be feminists[12] — that was later made into a standalone book with the same name — in which she shares her views on feminism, sexuality and gender construction. Gender expectations, according to Adichie, prevent people from being happier since they prescribe a set of rules that usually prevents the individual from being who she/he truly is. Here are some of Adichie's views on the issue:

> We teach boys to be afraid of fear, of weakness, of vulnerability. We teach them to mask their true selves, because they have to be, in Nigerian-speak—a hard man.
> (...)
> But by far the worst thing we do to males—by making them feel they have to be hard —is that we leave them with very fragile egos. The harder a man feels compelled to be, the weaker his ego is.
> And then we do a much greater disservice to girls, because we raise them to cater to the fragile egos of males. We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller. We say to girls: You can have ambition, but not too much. You should aim to be successful but not too successful, otherwise you will threaten the man. If you are the breadwinner in your relationship with a man, pretend that you are not, especially in public, otherwise you will emasculate him. (ADICHIE, 2012)

Then, if gender expectations and their social play are harmful, why do people keep performing gender in ways that perpetuate these patterns? The maintenance of difference between both gender poles is also responsible for creating and enforcing group boundaries

[12] Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg3umXU_qWc. Last access on January 26th, 2018.

and the sense of belonging among the ones who share the same gender identity. Compliance with gender norms are strongly encouraged and even rewarded. To take a detour away from this path might bring about negative outcomes. Any beings that, through their public identities, disrupt the notion of feminine/masculine are usually regarded with intense social disapproval since people who do not identify with their biological sex or that are non-binary may be viewed as abject beings for having failed to conform to the norms. The deconstruction of the norm is also a significant part of gender as Judith Butler elucidates in *Undoing Gender* (2004):

> Gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender might very well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized. Indeed, it may be that the very apparatus that seeks to install the norm also works to undermine that very installation, that the installation is, as it were, definitionally incomplete. To keep the term "gender" apart from both masculinity and femininity is to safeguard a theoretical perspective by which one might offer an account of how the binary of masculine and feminine comes to exhaust the semantic field of gender.
> (...)
> The conflation of gender with masculine/feminine, man/woman, male/female, thus performs the very naturalization that the notion of gender is meant to forestall. Thus, a restrictive discourse on gender that insists on the binary of man and woman as the exclusive way to understand the gender field performs a regulatory operation of power that naturalizes the hegemonic instance and forecloses the thinkability of its disruption. (BUTLER, 2004, p. 42-43)

The disruption and deconstruction of the idea of gender as a fixed unity indicate a threefold perspective: gender identity, gender expression and gender performance. As I reckon, gender identity is related to identification — male, female, non-binary — while gender expression presupposes the visibility of identity, how the individual will present gender publicly and be socially read. In tune with Jamison Green in Introduction to transgender issues, I understand that:

> "Gender identity" refers to a person's internal, deeply felt sense of being either male or female, or something other or in between. Because gender identity is internal and personally defined, it is not visible to others. In contrast, a person's "gender expression" is external and socially perceived. Gender expression refers to all of the external characteristics and behaviors that are socially defined as either masculine or feminine, such as dress, mannerisms, speech patterns and social interactions. (GREEN, 2000, p. 3)

Gender expression is not always a phenomenon that requires a complete awareness of gender performance. Gender performance concerns the way one complies with the

expectations related to the sex he/she chooses to represent socially; therefore, the performance is linked to the actions an individual takes to fulfill or deconstruct his/her gender role. Gender performativity is not a fixed or unchangeable entity; it varies according to cultures and might be a conscious process. If a woman is caught between two cultures and patriarchal systems, she may find it necessary to perform gender according to traditions from where she is at the moment. In some occasions, the host country offers more freedom of choice, nonetheless when back at the homeland she might choose to abide by rules that curtail her liberty in order to avoid confrontation.

In *¡Yo!*, the protagonist leads a life that comes closer to the American woman lifestyle than to the lives of her cousins back in the Dominican Republic. For that reason, whenever she visits her homeland, she chooses to hide some aspects of her life such as her involvement with a romantic partner. Even when she is already in her mid-thirties and divorced, Yo thinks it is better to pretend she does not have an active sexual life. When dating her American boyfriend, Dexter Hays, she feels he is not the kind of man her family would approve of since he does not fit the masculine role that upper-class families in the Dominican Republic find suitable for their women to marry. In this sense, Yolanda performs gender according to locality. In the excerpt below taken from the chapter The suitor - resolution, Yo explains to Dexter the reasons she has for not taking him with her in one of her visits to the homeland:

> But she says no. He has to understand that, down there, women don't have lovers out in the open. Down there, he'd have to clean up his act. Throw away his joints, get a nice pair of pants. Her aunts would try to convert him. "It's different, Dex. I mean, people are still old world, down there." (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 187)

Julia Alvarez's novels that feature the García de La Torre, *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* and *¡Yo!*, present many instances of how the socialization process in the Dominican Republic divided boys from girls according to gender standards. In the chapter The Human Body from *How the García Lost their Accents*, Yolanda narrates a story from her childhood which involves toys, her sisters and cousins. She begins telling the readers that the metaphorical borders between the extended family in the family compound in the Dominican Republic were very tangled, so they lived collectively and each cousin had another cousin with whom they spent the most time together.

In Yo's case, the cousin was a boy, a fact that by itself differed from the rest of the family's dynamic and after some years into their childhood, their mothers came to the

conclusion it was necessary to separate them. She recalls: “We were the only boy-girl pair, and as we grew older, Mami and Mundín’s mother, Tía Carmen, encouraged a separation between us” (ALVAREZ, 1991, p.). However, since they lived adjoined lives with little distance between houses and people, the separation process was impossible. The idea of separating girl from boy indicates that their upbringing should be different because boys and girls need to be socialized in different manners.

In the same chapter from Alvarez’s first novel, Yolanda recollects some of her grandparents' trips to the United States. She describes her mother’s reaction to one of the presents her grandmother brought her from the United States and how she, as a child, dealt with her mother’s disapproval of it without actually grasping all the gender implications around it. Toys are symbols for the delimitations between what is considered to be girls’ and boys’ spheres.

> When they did return from their New York City trips, Mamita brought back duffle bags full of toys for her grandchildren. Once she brought me a noisy drum and once a watercolor set and paintbrushes of different thicknesses for expressing the grand and fine things in the world. My American cowgirl outfit was an exact duplicate — except for the skirt — of Mundín’s cowboy one.
> My mother disapproved. The outfit would only encourage my playing with Mundín and the boy cousins. It was high time I got over my tomboy phase and started acting like a young lady *señorita*. “But it is for girls,” I pointed out. “Boys don’t wear skirts.” Mamita threw her head back and laughed. “This one is no fool. She’s as smart as Mimi even if she doesn’t get it from books.” (ALVAREZ, 1991, p.)

In *Something to Declare*, Julia Alvarez writes about gender expectations as well. In the essay Grandfather’s Blessing, among recollections of her relationship with her grandfather when she was a little girl, she describes some instances in which she proclaimed what she wanted to be in the future. From wanting to be a bullfighter until coming to the realization that being a poet was best, Alvarez changed her mind a couple of times and her grandfather’s reaction for the most of the time represented what Dominican society perceived as suitable for women.

> A bullfighter,” I announced when it was my turn. I had never seen a bullfight, but on the coffee table at my grandfather’s house lay a book on bullfighting. I had fallen in love with the trim men in their tight black pants and ruffly shirts, frozen in beautiful dance poses. Those pictures set me dreaming of the future.
> “Bullfighter?!” my grandfather lifted his eyebrows and chuckled again. “I don’t think there are any girl bullfighters,” he noted, not exactly discouraging me but letting me know the odds.

> (...)
> "I want to be a cowboy," I repeated to my grandfather when he corrected me. "I don't want to ride sidesaddle" was the best reason I could give him.
> "Well, well," he said, chuckling, the way grown-ups always did when what they meant to say was, "You are going to get over this."
> (...)
> "And I want to be a pilot and go to Nueva York and shop for toys, and I want to be a poet and write lots and lots of poems."
> "A poet?" my grandfather said, smiling dreamily. The room went silent, aunts and uncles bracing themselves for one of his recitations. But he did not recite. Instead, he took my face in his hand, tilting it this way and that, as if he had caught the big gold fish in his net and wanted to see it up close. "A poet, yes. Now you are talking." (ALVAREZ, 1998, p. 4, 5, 11)

For women living under a patriarchal system, agency over their own lives is not always possible. Alvarez was able to pursue the career she wanted; nonetheless, it is important to remember that she lived outside the Dominican Republic when her career took off. The writer comments on the lives of some of her female cousins and implies that life turned out a little different for them. They winded up complying to certain gender expectations and although there is no evidence to support the argument that this life was not what they wanted, it is possible to question whether they had the chance to reflect upon it before choosing the paths they chose.

In the essay Family Matters, Alvarez tells readers that she and her family, living in the United States and having assimilated some of the American culture, were marked as eccentric by their Dominican relatives. The preoccupation she and her sisters had with issues such as their identities and true callings was frowned upon. Here it is how she narrates the differences between herself and the cousins:

> Meanwhile, back home, our female cousins were having their *quinceañera* parties in which they waltzed with their *papis* in sight of any relative still able to sit upright and sip a rum-coke. By twenty-five, many were leading settled lives with children, households, a battalion of maids to do their bidding. They knew who they were, Alvarez or Tavares, Bermúdez or Espaillat. But in America, you didn't go by what your family had been in the past, you created yourself anew. (ALVAREZ, 1998, p. 114-115)

Any woman who did not conform to the Dominican ideal of femininity was considered odd and for the ones who were members of the upper-class, such as the Alvarez women, not having constituted a family may be viewed as a failure to perform their assigned gender role. Alvarez describes her aunt Títi, the one who did not get married, as one of her favorites and most interesting *tías*. The essay Of Maids and Other Muses illustrates many of

the expectations for Dominican women, but what I am interested in discussing now is how Títi's story represents the concepts I have been attempting to elucidate above.

> My maiden aunt Tití was a very different kind of aunt. She sat by herself on the couch with her legs tucked under her, reading a book. You asked her what a word meant, and she knew what it meant and a number of other things about that word as well. We were not supposed to mention that she was a *jamona*, an old maid, but children being what they are, my cousins and I made up a song, "Si las vacas volaran, Tití se casara." If cows could fly, Tití would marry.
> But Tití didn't seem to want to marry. She refused to work at catching a husband, which should have been her primary focus as a young, nice-looking, upper-class woman. Instead, she focused on her books and her beautiful garden. (ALVAREZ, 1998, p. 150)

The level of privilege a woman has may dictate how much freedom she is going to enjoy, hence agency is a ranked concept in this context. Notwithstanding, not even the most privileged woman is able to escape gender norms in patriarchal societies. Being raised in this context makes some beliefs, perpetuated with the help of the family, take roots in the psyche of an individual and for that reason become especially hard to be deconstructed. Therefore, many women who are not aware of how gender operates as a social construct only do what is socially accepted for them to do. The family may be a site for oppression as much as any other institution. For the diasporic subject, this experience is ambiguous since the family also represents safety and the sense of belonging in a foreign territory which may present itself in hostile ways.

In the chapter The cousin - poetry from *¡Yo!*, gender expectations and gender expressions are treated in a different way through the incidents involving Yolanda and her cousin Lucinda. In patrilineal societies, many of the gender standards already mentioned in this study are vertically imposed on young people; they may be able to play a role in this process. The passage with Yo and Lucinda not only illustrates gender performance but also indicates that young girls are able to question and even deal with some of the norms in ways that will help them to achieve what they want.

The chapter is narrated by Lucinda and she opens it by describing what she believes are the Garcia girls' impressions of the cousins they left behind in the Dominican Republic. The description itself contains a lot of stereotypes regarding Latino women and readers may wonder if these thoughts actually represent the García girls views on the cousins or whether they are Lucinda's projections of her own thoughts concerning her cultural heritage:

> Don't think I don't know what the García girls used to say about us island cousins. That we were Latin American Barbie dolls, that all we cared about was our hair and nails, that we had size-three souls. I don't deny I looked around me once I was trapped here for the rest of my life. I saw the women in their designer pantsuits loaded with gold, the little rounds of teas and parties. I saw the older tías with their daily masses and novenas, praying to ensure the family a good place in the next life while their husbands went off on business trips with pretty mistresses they pretended were wives. I saw the maids in their color-coded uniforms working way past overtime. And still, I spread my arms wide and gave myself to this island, which is more than the García girls ever did for their so-called homeland. (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 36)

Lucinda reveals that she blamed Yolanda for her fate: staying put in the Dominican Republic being a "hair-and-nails cousin" while Yo was "having (...) some first world fun" (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 37). When Lucinda was sixteen years old, her parents decided to send her to the United States to study because things had gotten worse on the island concerning the dictatorship. As soon as she got to school in the host country, Lucinda was put back a couple of grades because of the school years she had missed. Thus, she and Yolanda ended up in the same class. The way Yo and Lucinda performed gender was very different. Since Yo had gone through her formative years in the United States, she was a teenager whose personality was different from her cousin's, especially given the fact that in the host land Yo experienced life outside the family compound and was engaged in friendships with American girls. Moreover, in the United States, she was freer to break some of the gender norms imposed by the family in order to figure out what best suited her artsy and inquisitive nature. Lucinda felt this difference right away:

> I was Carla's age, and growing up together on the island, we'd been best friends. But at Miss Wood's I was put back a couple of grades on account of the missed years and ended up in the same grade as Yolanda. Which was a little hard on me. If I was sixteen going on twenty-three, Yo was fourteen and acting like a kid, a weird kid. And I had to be related to it.
> (...)
> And then there was Yo, who in some ways was the oddball in the group. I mean, Yo was pretty and lively and most everyone liked her if you could get her away from Trini and Big Mama. But like I said, she was still acting like a kid, trying to get attention by making scenes out of the most ridiculous things. (ALVAREZ, 1997, 39)

While Lucinda desperately wanted to be accepted by the in-girls and for that reason decided to fit into the gender mold that would help her to accomplish her goal, Yolanda wanted to stand out. Both representations depict girls who were active participants in the socialization process they were undergoing while in school. Yet, their gender expressions differed because they sought distinct results, even though they had similar objectives while

performing gender (belonging and being noticed, for instance), Yolanda wanted to be noted for her writing talent, her intelligence and intensity whereas Lucinda's main objective was to belong to the same group as the cool girls. Nonetheless, they had something in common which ultimately led to their fall out: their interest in boys.

Both Lucinda and Yolanda had a crush on the same boy from an all-boys prep school that was close to their all-girls boarding school. Roe, however, engaged in a teenage romance with Lucinda and the cousins had a fight that culminated with Yolanda asking Lucinda to give up on Roe because she was willing to do the same. Lucinda refused to do so but lived to regret her decision. Her parents were considering enrolling her in an American college to continue her education, but the plans were canceled because one of the *tías* read Yo's diary during their visit to the homeland and found out about Lucinda's romance with Roe.

According to Dominican traditions, enforced by the strong presence of the Catholic Church in the country and *machismo,* a girl should not have sex before marriage. Lucinda explained the issue herself: "Our eternal souls, if not our good marriages, hung in the balance if we gave up our virgin flower without the sanctity of holy matrimony (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 50). The revelation about Lucinda's beau made her parents decide to take her back to the island in order to avoid "the worse", in their opinion. After that, Lucinda's life followed the same course as her aunts' which included marriage and kids while Yo's life had distinct outcomes. Lucinda held a grudge against her cousin, even after recognizing her own success in life, because she felt that Yo had robbed her of the opportunity to choose a different path.

> Don't get me wrong, I turned out to be a happy woman after all. I've got five beautiful kids, the oldest the age Yo and I were when Roe came into our lives. I've got a string of boutiques selling my designs faster than my factories can make them. Wife, mother, career girl—I've managed them all—and that's not easy in our third world country. Meanwhile the García girls struggle with their either-or's in the land of milk and money.
> Especially Yo. And maybe because of her own struggles, she still feels guilty about me. Every time she comes down here and we all gather together, I catch her eye straying over to me, wanting answers.
> Those times, you know what I do? I turn to her and I flash her one of my hair-and-nails smiles, a smile I know she does not trust. And I see her wincing as if it still hurts her not to know after twenty years whether it was the right thing for me to end up with the life I'm living. Whether it's all her fault the hard times I've had along the way, the bad marriages, the problems with my parents, my kids without a live-in father. And looking at her, in her late thirties knocking around the world without a husband, house, or children, I think, you are the haunted one who ended up living your life mostly on paper. (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 52-53)

The way Lucinda distinguishes the Dominican women from her Dominican American cousins throughout the chapter, making use of stereotyped perceptions of gender performance, is essentialist in the sense that it portrays a picture of an unvaried group of women on the island. She does the same in relation to her immigrant cousins as if both groups were the only representations of the identities that participate in those spaces. For instance, Lucinda lives under the restraints of Dominican patriarchal society, but her social status gives her privileges denied to poor women in that society.

In the essay called Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses[13], Professor Chandra Talpade Mohanty discusses the political agenda of Western feminism and critiques the idea of the "Third World Woman" as a monolithic category that represents a homogenous group made of marginalized women. Mohanty defends that there are differences among these women and that their lived experiences are distinct because these variances are intersectional; the axes of oppression are multiple and may represent race, class, gender, culture, history at once. The simplification of the reality of women belonging to a group ends up perpetuating oppression not only because it denies women the possibility of being the writers of their own narratives but also because it creates a space of competition among women that only benefits the dominant part. The narratives that choose to homogenize women in "Third World" countries are often elaborated by "First World" thinkers who deliberately ignore the differences among them. Mohanty clarifies:

> This average third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being "third world" (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.). This, I suggest, is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions. (MOHANTY, 2003, p. 22)

In The cousin – poetry, Alvarez, by narrating incidents from Lucinda's perspective, denounces this essentialization of women's identity. What is more, none of the literary representations of female identities featured in this particular story are unidimensional. Besides focalizing on Latino women as diasporic subjects, the writer offers, throughout the narratives in *¡Yo!* and *How the García Girls Lost their Accents*, many representations of women in a Third World country. By the same token, in *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents*, Alvarez used Yolanda to represent a situation many Latina immigrant women have

[13] This essay was first published in 1986 in the journal *Boundary 2*.

to go through, especially when they are romantically involved with Anglo men: the process of exoticization.

In the Dominican Republic, Yolanda and her sisters are not considered women of color since their skin color varies from white to an olive tone, not to mention their social status, Sarita, the maid's daughter, specifies the differences between their colors when reinforcing the idea she could be a García girl, too: "For one thing, Sandi was fair and blond, Fifi was tall like an American girl, Carla and Yo were light olive, and I was *café con leche* with long, black hair and hazel eyes…" (ALVAREZ, 1997, p.58). In a country such as their homeland with a history of racial discrimination, especially towards dark-skinned people, being the color of olive was not considered a trace of Black ancestry, but closer to the Hispanic heritage. Nonetheless, in the United States Yolanda, Carla, and Sarita present the marks of difference, visible on their bodies through their skin color, something that brands them as outsiders, the Other. Although Yolanda cannot be seen as a black woman, in the host land she is definitely non-White.

For diasporic beings, the body represents much more than the mere experience of the flesh; it is through the body that the marks of difference become visible. It contributes to the experience of identity as a whole and also to the process of assimilation in the host country. The greater the similarities to the native's body, the less the individual is targeted as an outsider. For women, a body that displays their condition as immigrants is likely to influence the level of oppression they are going to suffer. As the critic Linda Alcoff explains in *Visible Identities:* Race, Gender and the Self (2006), "the reality of identities often comes from the fact that they are visibly marked on the body itself, guiding if not determining the way we perceive and judge others and are perceived and judged by them" (ALCOFF, 2006, p. 5).

In *How the García Girls Lost their Accents*, Yolanda's relationships with Anglo men are mostly portrayed as problematic ones since they have difficulties understanding her condition as an immigrant and easily judge her based on idealizations of the *latina* woman. In The Rudy Elmenhurst Story, her college boyfriend Rudy is described as an impatient young man that cannot understand Yolanda's refusal to have sex with him. Coming from a Latin culture that enforces sex as a taboo and whose Catholic beliefs are part of her cultural background, Yolanda needed a partner that understood her background and the difficulty in initiating her sexual life, but instead, Rudy, however, is depicted as a man who exoticized Yolanda given her Latino background.

> "You know," he said, "I thought you'd be hot-blooded, being Spanish and all, and that under all the Catholic bullshit, you'd be really free, instead of all hung up like these cotillion chicks from prep schools. But Jesus, you're worse than a fucking Puritan." I felt stung to the quick. I got up and threw my coat over my nightgown, packed up my clothes, and left the room, half hoping he'd come after me and say he really did love me, he'd wait as long as I needed to after all. (ALVAREZ, 2010, p. 99)

Concerning this scenario, the biggest task for Cultural Studies scholars, feminists and their allies, and women who are well aware of the patriarchal oppression is to continue the process of decolonizing the mind. It is urgent to question the hegemonic mindset that colonizes the experiences of women in the "Third World" and divides them into binaries that do not encompass their journeys. Minorities suffer from diverse oppressions and difference in this context is not only important but also a tool for survival when acknowledged and embraced. Negating difference is perpetuating dangerous stereotypes. In a non-fictional essay called The Myth of the Latin Woman which narrates the writer's experience as a Latina woman who immigrated to a country of Anglo culture, author Judith Ortiz Cofer, who was born in Puerto Rico, reinforces the importance of deconstructing stereotypes while acknowledging the levels of privilege that separate diasporic Latin women:

> There are, however, thousands of Latinas without the privilege of an education or the entree into society that I have. For them life is a struggle against the misconceptions perpetuated by the myth of the Latina as whore, domestic, or criminal. We cannot change this by legislating the way people look at us. The transformation, as I see it, has to occur at a much more individual level. My personal goal in my public life is to try to replace the old pervasive stereotypes and myths about Latinas with a much more interesting set of realities. Every time I give a reading, I hope the stories I tell, the dreams and fears I examine in my work, can achieve some universal truth which will get my audience past the particulars of my skin color, my accent, or my clothes. (COFER, 1993, p. 207)

In order to achieve success in decolonizing processes, the idea of coloniality must be taken into consideration. In the previous chapter, I clarified the term coloniality of power coined by the Peruvian sociologist, Aníbal Quijano. Here I am interested in the concept of coloniality of gender elaborated by the Argentinian feminist philosopher and activist, María Lugones.

> Modernity organizes the world ontologically in terms of atomic, homogeneous, separable categories. Contemporary women of color and third-world women's critique of feminist universalism centers the claim that the intersection of race, class, sexuality, and gender exceeds the categories of modernity.

> (...)
> So, to see non-white women is to exceed "categorial" logic. (LUGONES, 2010, 742)

Lugones argues that according to the idea of coloniality of gender, only the civilized are considered men and women; nonetheless, the subjects who can be viewed as human are measured against the White European Male standard. If one does not fit this model, then he/she is non-human.

> The semantic consequence of the coloniality of gender is that "colonized woman" is an empty category: no women are colonized; no colonized females are women.
> (...)
> Unlike colonization, the coloniality of gender is still with us; it is what lies at the intersection of gender/class/race as central constructs of the capitalist world system of power. Thinking about the coloniality of gender enables us to think of historical beings only one-sidedly, understood as oppressed. As there are no such beings as colonized women, l suggest that we focus on the beings who resist the coloniality of gender from the "colonial difference." (LUGONES, 2010, p. 745-746)

Theorizing coloniality of gender should help to deconstruct stereotypes of gender, subvert patriarchal distribution of power and question heteronormativity. It is important to acknowledge the reality of neocolonialism and imperialism as systems of oppression that pervade Third World countries. Additionally, formerly colonized countries still suffer from a number of problems related to colonial structures that operate from within. They contribute to the perpetuation of systemic corruption, poverty, and patriarchal violence. All of these factors ensure the maintenance of coloniality of gender as well. Professor Breny Mendoza comments on Lugones' rationale in an essay named Coloniality of Gender and Power: From Postcoloniality to Decoloniality:

> The coloniality of gender makes clear that gender grants civilized status only to those men and women who inhabit the domain of the human; those who lack gender are subject to gross exploitation or outright genocide. Thus Lugones's theorization of the coloniality of gender as dehumanizing practice that survives colonization helps make sense of contemporary issues such as feminicide, trafficking, and increased violence against non-European women. (MENDOZA, 2016, p. 18)

I have discussed previously the issue of gender expectations regarding women in the Dominican Republic; notwithstanding, Julia Alvarez's works offers literary representations of how coloniality of gender operates not only on the island — oppressing women of upper-class and lower-class in different ways — but also the ways it influences the lives of women who are caught in between cultures such as Yolanda and her sisters.

In the chapter The Wedding Guests - point of view from *¡Yo!*, one of Yolanda's *tías* narrates the way Primitiva, the maid that worked for the García La Torre family, was viewed by most of the family. What may catch readers' attention in this description is how the woman is portrayed as an object that belonged to all the relatives. A fact that supports this perception is how she was called by the family. Primitiva was a nickname used instead of her real name. It poses as a symbol for how lower-class women of color might, in fact, be considered as non-human and be deprived of any agency over their own lives. Primitiva was exploited as a servant and denied her own name, a detail that was condemned by her daughter, Sarita: "More than once, I had tried to get my mother to go back to her real name, María Trinidad" (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 66). In the passage below, readers come to know a little bit about the maid through *Tía* Flor's narration:

> She was my size back then, a tall handsome woman with cinnamon-color skin a little darker than the daughter's and jet black hair that matched her dark eyes. She had been with the family forever — each of us sort of inheriting her when a new baby arrived or we fell ill with a flu or threw a big party. Primitiva was everyone's right hand. (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 228)

Before dying, Primitiva reveals the identity of Sarita's father: he was Arturo, *Tía* Flor's husband. Hence, Sarita is related by blood to the de La Torre clan. Nevertheless, the revelation does not guarantee a place inside the family for Sarita. Since Primitiva was black and poor, she was treated as an object by most of the family, including Arturo. Not surprisingly, the revelation about her daughter's paternity is received with disdain and anger; thus, Sarita is never recognized as a member of the family. The maid, after all the years of service, is described by *Tía* Flor as a liar, an ungrateful woman who invented a story to hurt the ones who helped her and Sarita is dismissed as nothing more than the maid's daughter: "So even if she has the de la Torre dimple in her chin and the hazel eyes from the Swedish great-great-grandmother, even so, she is still the maid's daughter, no relation to *my* family at all" (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 229)

Julia Alvarez addresses the intersectional aspect of gender oppression in *Something to Declare* in the essay Of Maids and Other Muses. The author reminisces about the inspiration drawn from real women in her life, her muses, a group of people that includes *tías* and maids. Furthermore, she acknowledges the impact that those women had in her life and career through the diverse life lessons they taught her. She does not mention gender coloniality *per*

se; however, in the excerpt below Alvarez describes her perception of how oppression works in levels, hence some women are more oppressed than others.

> Of course, as I grew older, I began to see how severely the maids' lives were limited by poverty and how little freedom they had. Grown women, and they couldn't do the simplest things like live in their own houses or eat a nice cut of the meat they had prepared for the big table with the high-back chairs in the formal dining room with the Gauguin painting of two native girls hanging on the wall. Even pretty ones like Gladys who married "well," a chauffeur or guardia, left their positions as family maids to become wives and mothers, handmaidens to their own families. In fact, both classes, the maids and the tías—I began to see—were circumscribed either by poverty or social restrictions, and both were circumscribed by their gender. (ALVAREZ, 1998, p. 155)

As for Yolanda, a diasporic woman, the dehumanizing process in the host country starts when she is judged according to her physical appearance. As I have already discussed, the lived experience of a diasporic subject entails the notion of a public identity that displays difference. In the space of difference, positionality is especially relevant, however, the first noticeable feature is the body and a Latino female body is going to arise many pre-conceptions such as the ones I have already pointed out when discussing the process of exoticization of the Latino woman. In the chapter The landlady - confrontation from *¡Yo!*, Yolanda, although well-educated, is perceived as an inferior in her landlady's eyes. The white woman leads a life with fewer privileges, less financial power than her and even suffers abuse from her husband, but because Yolanda is a foreigner that comes from a Third World country and has a body that materializes her condition as an immigrant, she is automatically treated condescendingly. Here is an excerpt that illustrates this debate:

> I look at this skinny lady—she's about my age, in her middle thirties, colored like those old-fashioned sepia photographs that make everyone look like they got some Indian in them, with a long dark braid down her back, big intense eyes like people in scary movies on TV have—and what I think surprises me. I could be this person, all alone in this strange world where I'm not sure how to do things because things haven't turned out the way they were supposed to. (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 155)

It may take some time for the ones who are under the same system of oppression to realize that they may still reproduce patterns that benefit the dominant power. It has been seventy years since Simone de Beauvoir first published *The Second Sex*; notwithstanding women still have a long way to cover before being able to say that sexism no longer affects their lives. It appears to me, though, that acknowledging the intersectional aspect of

oppression and understanding the ways contemporary phenomena such as globalization and the strength of capitalism profit from *our* segregation, is paramount to the instigation of a successful process of decolonization of minds. In 1978, author Ian McEwan published a novel, *The Cement Garden*, in which he depicted the decaying of civility inside a family of orphaned children. The narrative plays with gender roles and gender construction. Julie, the oldest sister among four children, when discussing gender expression and performance, tells her brother the following: "Girls can wear jeans and cut their hair short and wear shirts and boots because it's okay to be a boy; for girls it's like promotion. But for a boy to look like a girl is degrading, according to you, because secretly you believe that being a girl is degrading" (McEWAN, 2016, p. 48).

The belief that being a girl was degrading pervaded society and dehumanized women. It still permeates some communities; nevertheless, as women gain a leadership voice, the world is forced to hear what they have to say. To be considered degrading, the idea of representing a failure is slowly being resignified through deconstructive acts of resistance. Thus, failing to conform to norms that are harmful should be seen as an achievement. It is with the help of the artistic expression of authors such as Julia Alvarez that some light can be shed over the importance of matters that are crucial to women. Literature, therefore, becomes a form to resist the erasure of *our* existences and to empower minorities as they are finally able to scream: "we are here. We exist. We resist."

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the closure of the present thesis, I would like to consider the idea of breaking silences as an empowering act of resistance in Julia Alvarez's writings. When I first read Julia Alvarez's work, I felt that I had encountered an author whose pieces "spoke" to me. The metaphor I use here is directly related to the fact that most of Alvarez's protagonists are representations of women, but not the ones I was used to reading about in canonical novels. Oftentimes, these women reminded me of myself, their skin was colored the same color as mine, their Latino families were big and lived so close together that at times when reading about them I pictured my relatives' faces in my mind. Alvarez started writing about "ethnic characters" when it was not common to expose such figures to the world. This was the first silence the author was able to break. In Julia Alvarez: Progenitor of a Movement: This Dominican-American Writer Weaves Passionate Sensibilities through her Works with the Gift of Seeing through Others' Eyes (2007), Elizabeth Martinez quotes Alvarez's comments on the importance of ethnic literature:

> I feel very lucky to happen to have been a writer at the watershed time when Latino literature became a literature that was not just relegated to the province of sociology," Alvarez says. "But I still feel there is a certain kind of condescension toward ethnic literature, even though it is a literature that is feeding and enriching the mainstream American literature … (ALVAREZ apud MARTINEZ, 2007)

The second silence Alvarez had to break in order to become a writer regards the Dominican legacy of violence. She was ten years old when the Alvarez family immigrated to the United States. By that time, Alvarez was able to notice that somehow her family faced dangers under the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo, but she was not able to fully comprehend the restraints, even threats the adults around her were experiencing. During a fascist government trying to exert freedom of speech is dangerous; hence many people choose to be silent in order to stay alive. Writing about that period of time in the Dominican Republic was a way to break with this silence dictated by oppression. The rupture, however, was not painless as Alvarez explains:

> I got brave; I began to write my story. Years later, when *García Girls* came out and my mother stopped speaking to me (except to utter ultimatums and banish me from

> her home), Maxine's[14] book pulled me through. Her story kept alive in me the faith that what I had done by giving voice to the silences was raise the furies, yes, but to transform them into better angles of our nature. My mother, who had grown up silenced and terrified in a dictatorship, could only pass that legacy on to me. (ALVAREZ, 2010, p. 295)

Julia Alvarez chose to continue with her writing project as a way of pursuing her true calling and fighting the erasure of not only her family's but also her homeland's history. Violence and brutality leave marks and some of them are more than physical imprints; they involve emotional and psychological damage. Alvarez's mother reluctance to accept the success of her daughter's novel is comprehensible once one understands that speaking up during times of repression may lead to an irrevocable silencing: the death of the ones who dare.

In order to fulfill her desire to become a writer, Alvarez had to deal with the traumas her family carried within Even if they were no longer living the horrors of the *trujillato*, the memories were alive. In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), Cathy Caruth discusses how trauma might affect survivors. She states that the "historical conception of trauma can also be understood as conveying the urgent centrality for psychoanalytic thinking of the relation between crisis and survival. [...]" and she claims that, "for those who undergo trauma, it is not only the moment of the event, but of the passing out of it that is traumatic; that *survival itself*, in other words, *can be a crisis*" (CARUTH, 1995, p. 9). Writing, therefore, becomes a way to give testimony of events which keep hurting the ones who cannot give voice to their pain. Translating trauma into words might be perceived as a healing practice since surviving leaves marks.

As I reckon, Julia Alvarez is able to write about topics which encircle narratives of pain and trauma in a plural manner that takes into consideration differences among subjects of the same community. Throughout this study, I have argued that Alvarez's praxis should be labeled as neither fictional nor autobiographical. Her writing encompasses both the fictionalization of History and real-life events. The writer also creates autobiographical pieces, novels which might be identified as entirely fiction and poetry that addresses both fiction and nonfiction.

I would like to point out that the term life writing practice, as I understand it, fits Alvarez's writing quite well since the writer is able to mix many narrative strategies and tell

[14] Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*

her stories through the use of different genres. Once again, I align my thinking with Smith and Watson's when they state that "many postmodern and postcolonial theorists contend that the term autobiography is inadequate to describe the extensive historical range and the diverse genres and practices of life writings not only in the West but around the globe" (2010, p. 3).

Alvarez's production, then, seems to represent a plurality of literary forms which might all lead to a place of writer's self-reflection. According to Smith and Watson, self-referential narratives represent a phenomenon related to a Western ideology of individualism, they state: "(…) readers seek out life stories in which autobiographical subjects fracture monolithic categories that have culturally identified them (…) and reassemble fragments of memory, experience, identity, embodiment, and agency into new modes of subjectivity" (2010, p. 124). The works which were discussed in the present thesis contain "coincidences" between the life of the protagonist of the novels, Yolanda, and Julia Alvarez's journey as I have illustrated through examples taken from *¡Yo!* and *Something to Declare*. It is not surprising, though, to find these similarities when analyzing Alvarez's work since she has made clear her belief that a writer's work should originate from what she/he experiences.

Based on my readings of Alvarez's works, I propose that her writing is deeply connected to the fact that exile is one of the most life changing experiences the writer has experienced. Therefore, if I might say, Julia Alvarez's characters and narratives represent the notion that the personal is always political. Her writing may also be perceived as a work of investigation. Alvarez has stated: "I write to find out what I'm thinking. I write to find out who I am. I write to understand things" (ALVAREZ apud REQUA, 1997); thus, life writing is a way to conduct this process of self-invention.

> Writers write not because they know things but because they want to find things out. And not just informational things – emotional ones, the whole landscape of human feeling, emotion and passion. They want to experience things. They want to discover. Frost said, "No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader." If you're not discovering, your words will die on the page. (ALVAREZ, 2016)

In order to "find things out", Alvarez addresses themes that are especially relevant to Latino writers such as cultural identity and the subjectification process of diasporic individuals, the location of home and ambivalence and hybridity. Since Alvarez experienced displacement, she is situated in what Homi Bhabha defines as the "beyond" which is "an intervening space, as any dictionary will tell you. (...) In that sense, then, the intervening

space becomes a space of intervention in the here and now" (BHABHA, 1994, p.7). In Julia Alvarez and the Anxiety of Latina Representation, Lucía M. Suárez argues that:

> Latina/o writers must invent themselves as they negotiate their double cultural affiliations: Latin American and North American. These two national identities are further complicated by multiple layers of ethnic and racial, cultural and genetic histories, which may include African, white European, and/or indigenous. (SUÁREZ, 2004, p. 118)

Regarding the condition of diasporic subjects caught between two places and cultures at the same time, one might understand that the process of inventing oneself and the negotiations between sameness and difference concerning cultural identity represent a constant movement back and forth between routes and roots. Susan Friedman defines this dialogical process as "[...] two sides of the same coin: roots, signifying identity based on stable cores and continuities; routes, suggesting identity based on travel, change, and disruption" (1998, p. 153).

The dichotomy roots versus routes is present throughout Julia Alvarez's stories. In her debut novel, *How the García Lost their Accents*, it is the forced displacement of the García de La Torre family and the constant trips back to the homeland in order to visit the extended family that instigate a process of searching for one's own identity. This process is represented mostly through Yolanda, but it also focuses on the other three sisters and on their mother, Laura García. In *¡Yo!*, readers are able to observe the issues related to living in between unravel in Yo's life through the perception of those who know her.

Adapting the term "translated men" used by Salman Rushdie in *Imaginary Homelands* (1991, p. 17), it is possible to affirm that Yolanda is a translated woman. She is a being who came from a culture and entered another one. In this sense, transculturalism is a system that involves translation. Yo's identity formation process is submitted to the same never ending process of becoming as any other person's is; however, as a hyphenated individual her identity presupposes fragmentation and ambivalence.

The notion of being a translated individual implies losses; nonetheless, it also encompasses the possibility of gaining something. It is from this perspective that I must return to the idea of self-invention. Diasporic subjects often have the opportunity to create themselves anew after the process of displacement and this idea is present throughout Julia Alvarez's works analyzed in this study. Yolanda, the character/ writer keeps pursuing new paths and questioning her own decisions whenever she finds herself in times of distress. Julia

Alvarez, the author, affirms in her autobiographical essays that she is constantly thinking about her hybrid transnational identity and that after immigrating she was able to envision paths in her life that differed from her family's Dominican traditions. Writing, then, becomes the space where one is able to establish a connection within him/herself and with the other. The following excerpt taken from *Something to Declare* illustrates Alvarez's awareness of her condition as a migrant writer.

> [...] I'm a mixed breed, as are many of us U.S.A. Latino/a writers. With our finger-snapping, gum-chewing English, sometimes slipping in una palabrita o frase español. With our roots reaching down deep to the Latin American continent and the Caribbean where our parents or abuelitos or we ourselves came from. [...]
> And though I complain sometimes about the confusion resulting from being of neither world, and about the marginalizations created on both sides—the Americans considering me a writer of ethnic interest, a Latina writer (meaning a writer for Latinos and of sociological interest to mainstream Americans), or the Dominicans reaming me out, saying she's not one of us, she's not Dominican enough—though I complain about the confusion and rootlessness of being this mixed breed, I also think it's what confirmed me as a writer, particularly because I am a woman. (ALVAREZ, 1998, p. 174)

The last element in Alvarez's literary production I would like to turn our attention to is the relevance of gender, especially when it comes to the lived experience of a migrant. Yolanda, the protagonist of *¡Yo,* performs gender according to locality since Dominican and American gender expectations often clash. The journey she puts herself through is rather conscious and she does so in order to avoid confrontation with her family. Notwithstanding, when it comes to making decisions about her life, Yolanda still suffers from being caught between two patriarchal systems and negating Dominican beliefs; for instance when she decides not to have children, she doubts herself and endures a great deal of stress. Yolanda, then, represents a diasporic woman who resists and fights the influence of patriarchy in her life, even though it is not a smooth and painless trajectory. In this sense, once again Julia Alvarez's image is reflected on her creation. Alvarez acknowledges the privileges she has had as an immigrant in the United States; at the same time she comments on the necessity to break free from her homeland's gender norms in order to fully grip her identity as a Latina.

> This is probably true for many of us Caribbean women writers. Our emigrations from our native countries and families helped us to achieve an important separation from a world in which it might not have been as easy for us to strike out on our own, to escape the confining definitions of our traditional gender roles. We also, many of us, achieved a measure of economic security, jobs in universities, say, that released us from the control of our papis and brothers and husbands and a patriarchal system

> that doesn't even pretend to be something else. For me, anyhow, as a writer, I had to free myself from certain restrictions—physical and mental—of being a Dominican female before I could rediscover and embrace the Latina in my writing. (ALVAREZ, 1998, p. 174)

In brief, I hope I have been able to clarify how Alvarez's life writing practices are plural and important to the present scenario we are all witnessing unfolding around the world regarding not only discrimination against immigrants but also a wave of traditionalism which oppresses women, especially the ones who are poor, come from developing nations and/or are not white. Although Alvarez comes from a wealthy family, the writer is able to create literary representations which may be viewed as reflections not only of her own experiences but also of the experiences of real-life minorities which are often erased from canonical literature. Alvarez, however, does not hide these figures; the writer chooses to make them visible through her craft. Julia Alvarez is a writer who seems to be passionate about breaking the silences that oppress people, especially women, and does so brilliantly.

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