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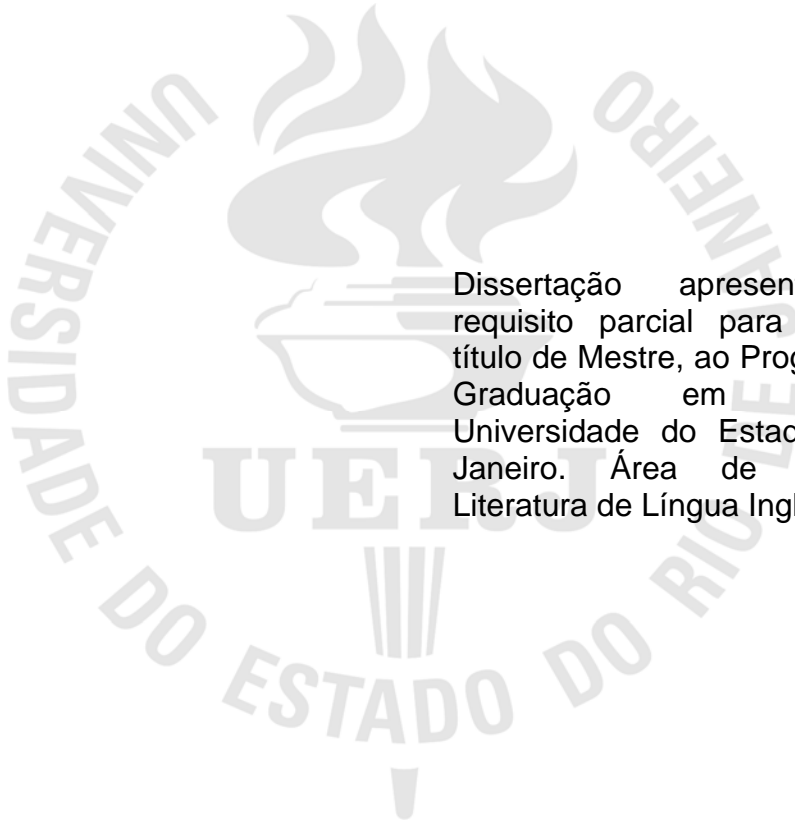
**A (her)story of one's own: fiction and autobiography in Julia
Alvarez's fiction**

Rio de Janeiro

2011

Alice de Araujo Nascimento Pereira

A (her)story of one's own: fiction and autobiography in Julia Alvarez's fiction



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: Literatura de Língua Inglesa.

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All art is autobiographical; the pearl is the oyster's autobiography

Frederico Fellini

RESUMO

PEREIRA, Alice de Araujo Nascimento. *A (her)story of one's own: fiction and autobiography in Julia Alvarez's novels*. 2011. 105f. Dissertação (Mestrado em Literaturas de Língua Inglesa) – Instituto de Letras, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, 2011.

Escritoras migrantes frequentemente publicam romances autobiográficos que mesclam ficção com suas histórias pessoais. Essas escritoras usam suas experiências pessoais para discutir questões coletivas relacionadas aos diversos tipos de deslocamento associados ao processo diaspórico. As migrações em massa das ex-colônias para as metrópoles dos países desenvolvidos cresceram significativamente após a Segunda Guerra Mundial, gerando ao mesmo tempo contato mais próximos e conflitos entre culturas. Essa dissertação pretende analisar os romances autobiográficos *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* (1991) e *¡Yo!* (1997) da escritora dominicana-americana Julia Alvarez. A família Alvarez migrou para os Estados Unidos em 1960 devido a perseguição política. Em seus romances, a escritora lida com os traumas do deslocamento e com o processo de crescimento de meninas divididas entre valores culturais diferentes. Pretendo discutir como Alvarez, em sua prática autobiográfica, problematiza questões relacionadas à migração, como gênero, hibridismo cultural, memória lacunar e identidades fragmentadas. Também analiso como essas narrativas contestam as convenções formais tanto do gênero autobiográfico como da ficção, frisando o quanto o limite entre o real e o fictício, entre o privado e o político, é tênue.

Palavras-chave: Romance Autobiográfico. Diáspora. Hibridismo. Julia Alvarez. Auto-representação.

ABSTRACT

Migrant women writers often write autobiographical novels intertwining their personal histories with fiction. These writers use their personal experiences to discuss collective matters related to different types of displacement associated with the diasporic process. Mass migration has significantly grown after the World War II, especially from former colonized countries to developed centers, increasing both contact and conflict between cultures. This dissertation intends to analyze the autobiographical novels *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* (1991) and *¡Yo!* (1997) by Dominican-American author Julia Alvarez. The Alvarez family migrated to the U.S.A. in 1960 because of political persecution. In her novels, the writer deals with the traumas of dislocation and with the growing up process of girls caught between different cultural values. I intend to discuss how Alvarez problematizes through her autobiographical practice issues related to migration, such as gender roles, cultural hybridity, discrimination, shattered memories and fragmented identities. I also examine how these narratives contest conventions of both autobiographical and fictional genres, blurring the boundaries between the private and the political, between facts and fiction.

Key words: Autobiographical Novel. Diaspora. Hybridity. Julia Alvarez. Self-representation.

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INTRODUCTION

We live in a time that is obsessed with “the here and now” and paranoid about capturing ‘real life’. A great number of hours of television programming is dedicated to reality shows, such as Big Brother and American Idol, with participants competing for a prize, and others in which cameras follow famous people in their daily lives. Both types seem to convey the message that the unscripted is more attractive and more authentic than the fictional. At the same time, the internet has allowed ordinary people to post texts, pictures and videos of themselves for the public, displaying private moments in the free and uncensored web. Social networks such as Facebook, Orkut, Twitter and MySpace give anonymous individuals the chance to show their lives and ideas to the world. All those factors prove that Andy Warhol’s prediction that everybody would have 15 minutes of fame is close to coming true; thus, privacy and anonymity in the current moment of globalization, mass media and audio-visual technology are not givens.

Literature also shares this interest in portraying private lives. It has probably been its pioneer through the genre known as autobiography. The autobiographical genre has been quite popular for a long time. Saint Augustine wrote what has been considered the first autobiography named *Confessions* in the fourth century. Political figures have also often written their own lives: for instance, Benjamin Franklin wrote *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (1869), Adolf Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf* (1925) and more recently, Barack Obama published *Dreams from my Father* (1996). Further, there has been a long list of autobiographies by writers, sportspeople, actors and singers. Many of them seem to have been written to satisfy curiosity about the lives of powerful, wealthy, influential and famous individuals, with the authors asserting themselves and guaranteeing that their version of facts will be recorded for posterity. However, even those who are not in the limelight write autobiographical works. We could wonder why ordinary lives would generate any interest. We must ponder what the roots of this fascination with private, real, common lives are and what fruits will be harvested from it. What is the role of the artist, especially writers, in this historical moment of almost total access to personal information and obsession with authenticity? I would say that it is to provoke audiences and readers; to lead them to question what exactly reality is and what intentions are behind the act of

representing it. Could we be heading to a time when fiction is talked about in the past tense? Could we be on the verge of witnessing the death of invention? I believe not, although personal histories can be important sources for creativity. This dissertation will attempt to explore the rich territory that lies alongside the border between fiction and reality; memory and imagination; the personal and the public. I believe literature has yet a lot to contribute to the discussion of this territory and one of the ways writers are doing so is by weaving their personal histories into their fictional texts, thus expanding the limits of both autobiography and fiction.

Although my original project to enter the Masters program of Literature of English Languages at UERJ focused on gender roles and women's contestation/resistance while facing disparate patriarchal demands from different cultural systems, the matter of personal narration kept appearing in front of me, in texts and in classes. Thus I decided to change my central argument, because the more I thought about it, more I realized how we tend to consider autobiographies and biographies as self-indulging entertainment, dismissing it as literature. I began to wonder the reasons for this, and the more I read about it, I changed my mind about autobiographical texts and realized there is a rich terrain for research and discussion. Even though the first idea is still present in the following pages, the issue of life narrative, its intentions, implications and characteristics, has become my main focus. We should keep in mind that the term "life narrative" includes, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue, various kinds of self-referential writing - *one* of them is autobiography (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 3, my italics).

It is necessary to discuss what autobiography is and how it differs from fiction before we can understand how their blurring is both innovative and symbolical. One of the most important theorists of postmodern autobiography, Leigh Gilmore, believes that "as a genre autobiography is characterized less by a set of specific formal elements, than by a rhetorical setting in which a person places herself or himself within testimonial contexts" (GILMORE, 2001, p. 3). But what do they testify? The author's specific position and his or her historical, social-political context must be taken in consideration when the text is being analyzed. The majority of autobiographies in the past have been produced by white, male, upper class and Christian writers. Women and people of color had previously been denied a voice in political, historical and literary discourses, and thus had scarcely published life narratives. However the political and social changes that occurred since the end of

the World War II has allowed marginalized groups to initiate or join cultural movements and artistic manifestations.

The migrations that took place in the last sixty years – largely from south to the north or from the east to the west – have transformed the developed world economically, politically and artistically. One topic central to my dissertation has been widely discussed within academic circles, political arenas and the media: women's role in these contemporary migrations. First, the issue of women's roles gained space during the 1960s with the feminist movement demanding more financial independence and sexual liberty for women. And even though it is 2011, there's still a lot to be done. In July 2010, the United Nations General Assembly created UN Women, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, which only highlights how, in spite of all advances, women are still victims of poverty, exploitation and violence around the globe. At the same time, massive migrations have been the focus of social-political discussions. Immigration upsets nationalist ideals of purists who, according to Susan Friedman, have become paranoid about "the invasion of outsiders into home turf to become the threat within the heart of the West – in Europe, from Muslim migrants; in the United States, primarily from Hispanic immigrants" (FRIEDMAN, 2009, p. 7). Women who migrate often perceive "the othering of women in diaspora" (FRIEDMAN, 2009, p. 18) which can happen through discrimination, exclusion from political arenas, exploitation of their labor and violence to their bodies. Migrant woman writers have often made use of their past in their literary works in order to convey the turbulence of their histories as both cultural insiders and outsiders.

The use and abuse of autobiographical data in fiction has been a common trait in contemporary literature, often found amongst novels by diasporic woman writers. The female characters in these novels, much like the authors, are often in transit, struggling with various kinds of discrimination and cultural differences, undergoing a process of identity formation and dealing with moral values, demands and expectations of multiple patriarchies. If we look closely, those experiences are not so different from the authors' own experiences. Such practice leads us to wonder: what's the intention behind this strategy? What is the limit between truth and fictions in the very specific context of dislocation, fragmentation, longing and hybridity? And in the broader spectrum, what are the consequences of that use to postcolonial literature? Julia Alvarez's novels *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* (1991) and

¡Yo! (1997) stand out due to the author's capacity of blending the autobiographical and fictional genres in order to contest dominant discourses and literary conventions.

This dissertation intends to investigate why and how personal histories and fictional narratives intersect within the postcolonial context; the consequences and effects of this intersection to postcolonial and diasporic literature; and the limitations of the use facts and fiction in autobiographies and autobiographical novels. To such an end, I am going to utilize as a primary source Julia Alvarez' works of fiction previously mentioned and her book of autobiographical essays *Something to Declare* (1998).

The first chapter attempts to define the difference between autobiography and autobiographical novel and pinpoint the characteristics of these genres contemporarily, specifically within postcolonial literature. French theorists were pioneers of this area of study, and we make use of Phillipe Lejeune's definition of autobiography as retrospective narrative of a life (LEJEUNE, 2009, p. 14). Although Lejeune's definition is still relevant, new media forms, textual possibilities and postmodernist questionings have opened up new horizons. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue, the publication of women's life narratives and the entry of minorities into discursive economy brought new voices into autobiographical genre (SMITH; WATSON, 1998, p. xiv). Further, Leigh Gilmore's and Linda Hutcheon's texts help us understand postmodern autobiographical discourses and their intentions. In addition, by reading from Ruth Klüger and Jorgen Straub, we are able to comprehend how the notions of truth, lies and memory become fluid in autobiographical novels.

It is paramount to discuss matters of identity, gender relations and writing in diasporic contexts in order to analyze the construction and the representation of the Self in personal narratives. In the second chapter I will define diaspora and discuss the role of narrative within it. James Clifford's and Susan Friedman's texts will help me argue that the participation of women in contemporary diasporic dislocations has been their most significant characteristic. Carole Boyce Davies and Wendy Walters propose that diasporic woman writers use their experiences in their novels in order to problematize political and ideological matters. Still in this chapter, I talk about the specific case of Caribbean diaspora and the migration of Caribbean people to the United States. Using works by Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah and Homi K. Bhabha, I also

discuss how the concepts of individual and cultural identities have changed over the past century and how migrations foster cultural hybridity.

Finally, I investigate how and why Julia Alvarez makes use of her personal history to discuss women's migration, belonging and cultural identifications throughout her work and especially in her novels *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and *Yo!*. Although critic Leigh Gilmore doesn't include Julia Alvarez's works in her book *The Limits of Autobiography*, we can consider this Dominican-American author is, similarly to the writers analyzed by Gilmore, one of those who "are concerned with the interpenetration of the private and the public and how its impact is registered in personal aesthetic, and legal terms" (GILMORE, 2001, p. 13). The selected novels by Alvarez are examples of "texts in which fiction and autobiography offer competing versions of real events, challenging the expectations that readers bring to both modes of narration" (McCRACKEN, 1999, p. 74). Writers like Alvarez, as Gilmore also argues:

Are more interested in the constitutive vagaries of autobiography, in how its weirder expansiveness lets them question whether and how "I" can be "here" or "there", what the self is that it could be the subject of its own representation, what the truth is that one person could tell it, and what the past is that anyone could discharge its debt in reporting it (GILMORE, 2001, p. 9).

It is important to make a few observations about some of the terms I will use. Julia Alvarez was raised in the Dominican Republic, thus she is often referred to as a Latina writer. The term Latino/a is used by literary critics Ellen McCracken and David Vázquez, but it might be considered too broad, since it could refer to artists from either Cuba, or Peru or Mexico, countries with disparate histories, cultures and political situations. Another label for writers like Alvarez is "Hispanic". However, Suzanne Oboler observes that it designates and encompasses people from a number of Latin American countries with "national, ethnic, gendered, social, racial, linguistic, and generational backgrounds whose sole commonality as a 'group' is that they have some past or present tie to the Latin American continent and Spain" (OBOLER, 1996, p. 291). The term "Caribbean" seems more accurate and appropriate, even though I can see the strategic essentialism in using the term Latina. As a matter of fact, Julia Alvarez argues that "By writing powerfully about our Latino culture, we are forging a tradition and creating a literature that will widen and enrich the existing canon" (ALVAREZ, 1999, p. 170). In addition, although the

characters in Alvarez's books use the word "island" to refer to the Dominican Republic, such use occults the fact that the country occupies only part of the island of Hispaniola, shared with Haiti.

The term auto/biography, with the slash instead of the words "autobiography" and "biography", seems more appropriate to our point and it will be used because it signals, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson observe, the interconnectedness of autobiographical narratives and biographies, "the slash marking the fluidity of the boundary between them" (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 256). Such "fluidity" is especially relevant in the case of Alvarez works as I see them, to a certain extent, as biographies of her Dominican family and their migration to the United States.

I will focus on this contact zone between the U.S. and Latino cultures. Commercial forces have already discovered this space as a new booming market, with the success of singers like Gloria Stefan, Jennifer Lopez and Pitbull; TV shows like *The George Lopez Show* and *Ugly Betty*, and films such as *Spanglish* and *A Day without Mexicans*. In spite of its commodification, Latino culture is not only changing the host country's culture, but also creating new artistic expressions that attempt to capture syncretism, resistance and assimilation of the diasporic subjects.

According to Ellen McCracken in the 1980s and 1990s there was a flowering of Latina women's narratives which, "after initial marginalization, became a desirable and profitable postmodern ethnic commodity" (McCRACKEN, 1999, p. 4) and this has happened, not only regarding literature but cultural production in general, as I have shown with the examples above, because "sameness is not as marketable in current conditions as is difference" (McCRACKEN, 1999, p. 5). Through autobiographical novels, perhaps we can see *difference* as adding to human existence, rather than diminishing or tainting it, enriching cultures instead of threatening them. The position as a hybrid subject allows writers a broader view that is able to criticize and praise, to miss and reject, re-interpreting linguistic and cultural meanings.

Additionally, woman authors of life narratives are often able to problematize issues that concern both the margins and the center, such as discrimination and exclusion, thus underscoring how the collective and the political permeate the private and individual. Hybridity is central in this study: both in terms of literary form and personal and cultural identities. Life narratives can work as political instrument of contestation and political transformation. Similarly to Shalini Puri, we believe that it's

necessary to connect “the poetics of hybridity to a politics of equality” (PURI, 2004, p. 1), that is, to connect diasporic literature to political awareness, equality not as idyllic universalizing value, but as a possibility that we can all contribute to; that can be imagined and constructed with the help of fiction.

Traveling through different values-systems affects not only cultures and societies, but the individuals themselves – those who write and those who read. Susan Friedman has posed the question: “What happens to the human spirit between worlds, to desire and longing as they cross and re-cross geographical and cultural borders, to the domains of intimacy and family in migration, dislocation, and relocation?” (FRIEDMAN, 2004, p. 190). The human spirit between worlds who is able to create and critique is capable of surviving and prevailing, as we can see in autobiographical novels by diasporic woman writers.

1. THROUGH THE LIFE NARRATIVE LOOKING GLASS: THEORIZING AUTO/BIOGRAPHICAL PRACTICES

*I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me
as good belongs to you.*
Walt Whitman

*All biographies like all autobiographies like all narratives tell one
story in place of another*
Helene Cixous

1.1 Genesis

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson begin their theoretical book *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* stating that although the act of writing one's life seems quite simple, it is "anything but simple", since the writer becomes "both the observing subject and the object of investigation" (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 1). Personal narratives are neither an uncomplicated nor a recent mode of storytelling, nor do they necessarily have a narcissistic or self-indulgent character. Additionally, the genre has gained importance and it has been said that the last quarter of the twentieth century has been a deeply biographical age in which personal narratives offer an important lens both on history and on the contemporary world (EGAN; HELMS, 2004, p. 216). These life writings might take shape as memoirs, diaries, personal blogs, and of course, our objects of study, autobiographies and autobiographical novels.

Strictly speaking, autobiography is a modern concept, which has found difficulty in being accepted in academic studies as a genre worthy of further attention. Smith and Watson observe that autobiographies were considered "too windy and unreliable [...] to be worthy of critical investigation" and the academic who did take it seriously, focused on the "lives of great men" (SMITH; WATSON, 1998, p. 5). In 1975, Phillipe Lejeune defined autobiography very rigidly as a retrospective narrative in prose, done by a real person about his/her own existence, focusing on the author's

individual history, particularly the history of his/her personality (LEJEUNE, 2009, p. 14). He argued that for a text to be considered an autobiography, the narrator, character and author must be the same and the narrative should be told in the first person. There must be what he names “the autobiographical pact”, a contract established between readers and the author when the name of the main character/narrator is identical to the name of the author, appearing on the book cover and intrinsically committing to telling the truth about that author’s life (LEJEUNE, 2009, p. 24, 37). Lejeune claims that if the name of the character\narrator differs from the name of the author, even in cases in which the readers have reasons to suspect or believe that the story narrated is identical to that of the author’s, the text is fictional, more specifically, an autobiographical novel (LEJEUNE, 2009, p. 24, 25). Such narratives can be characterized by the use of third person or by not naming the main character. In such texts, degrees of similarity can be detected, whereas in autobiographies, he claims, there isn’t any possibility for gradation: it is all or nothing (LEJEUNE, 2009, p. 25). Symmetrically to the autobiographical pact, he states that there can be a “novelistic pact”, which characterizes autobiographical novels as fiction. This pact is established by the patent practice of non-identity (author and narrator\character don’t share the same name) and certification of fictionality, made explicit by a subtitle such as *a novel* on the cover or in the blurb (LEJEUNE, 2009, p. 27).

These definitions are not unproblematic. Paul de Man, for instance, believes that there are exceptions to the norm Lejeune tried to impose, which lead to generic sterile discussions (De MAN, 1979, p. 920). Even Lejeune himself revised his positions in his 2001 text “Le Pacte autobiographique: 25 ans apres” , rejecting some of them, but justifying his rigidity with claims that such a theoretical strictness was necessary due to a lack of theoretical material at the time and to emphasize the importance of the pact (LEJEUNE, 2009, p. 74). Besides, though Lejeune had claimed in 1975 that autobiographies were not exterior to the novel form, he now believes that autobiography is neither a form of novel, nor the opposite, but both texts are particular cases of narrative construction (LEJEUNE, 2009, p. 75). Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue that autobiography is a case of life narrative that share features with the novel such as dialogue, setting, characterization and plot (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 5, 7). Each theorist has different views on the issue, but we should wonder about the role of the readership in this matter.

What is defended by many theorists is that the fundamental piece of the puzzle to distinguish novel from autobiography is the reader. Ruth Klüger, an autobiographer herself, affirms that the person who writes the novel asks the reader to make use of previous knowledge before reading the author's perspective of the facts. Thus, the impact of an autobiographical novel comes from how much the readers already knew or guessed, intuiting that at least part of the narrative is true (KLÜGER, 2009, p. 21). Paul De Man criticized this idea of the reader's position as judge, ironically claiming that with this idea of "pact", the reader would, then, become a sort of transcendental force or policing power who is allowed to pass judgment on whether the pact has been honored or broken (De MAN, 1979, p. 923). However, we are more inclined to agree with Klüger, since we believe meaning is not a one-way street; it is born in the relation that each reader establishes with the text; otherwise, the reader would be a mindless being.

Lejeune has also postulated that autobiographies, contrarily to fiction, intend to mirror the truth and the facts they present might be verifiable (LEJEUNE, 2009, p. 36). Leigh Gilmore argued that perhaps that's the reason why some authors prefer to write novels that only draw inspiration from their personal lives instead of autobiographies per se: the latter threatens writers with unsympathetic scrutiny (GILMORE, 2001, p. 4). Therefore, when considering autobiographical novels, the matter of boundaries between reality and fiction is much more complex. What is the limit between fictive, factual and just plain lie in this case? Klüger claims that although this line between them is blurry, it does exist; nonetheless, this distinction is established in the contract between writer and reader and mainly "if the expectation is directed to fiction or reality" (KLÜGER, 2009, p. 21). Paradoxically, in his 1975 text Lejeune also exemplified authors who defended that fiction was more truthful than autobiographies because they would be more authentic or deeper, allowing the reader to have access to an intimate truth, a common-place that he considers to be an unfounded illusion (LEJEUNE, 2009, p. 41, 42). He argued that this intimacy or deep personal truth supposedly achieved in novels is the same that all autobiographies intend; therefore it is *as autobiographical texts* that novels are more truthful (LEJEUNE, 2009, p. 42, my italics).

The matter of the difference between autobiography and novel, or if such a differentiation should or does exist has been widely discussed, especially since the issue of identity and of the moment of its apprehension. In *El espacio biográfico*:

dilemas de la subjetividad contemporánea Leonor Arfuch presents different views on such discussion. She shows that Jean Starobinsky argued that the problem was one of temporality: the subject who narrates is not the same as the “I” of the narrative and hence, even though there is an intention of sincerity, the narrative might slip into fiction (ARFUCH, 2010, p. 54). On the other hand, Arfuch puts forth Mikhail Bakhtin’s argument that an identity between character and author is impossible, even in autobiographies, because there isn’t a coincidence between the lived experience and artistic totality (ARFUCH, 2010, p. 55). We may link Bakhtin’s radical perspective to the current postmodern distrust in discourse, as discussed by Linda Hutcheon in *The Politics of Postmodernism*. According to her, the non-fictional is as constructed and as narratively known as fiction is (HUTCHEON, 1995, p. 76), thus postmodernism attempts to de-doxify the hierarchy between them. The very acts of editing, remembering and organizing experience in form of text with paragraphs, chapters and a title, are common to both fiction and self-reflective narratives, thus approximating rather than distancing them.

Avtar Brah has also approached the issue of the “I” who speaks in self-referential practices when using some passages of her life in the introduction of her theoretical book *Cartographies of Diaspora*. By using autobiographical technologies, Brah writes, she is speaking with the authority of an “I” and “me” as if they are pre-given realities, when her discussion shows that “I” and “me” had been changing all the time, stressing the instability of identity. On the other hand, she states that her signature is possible precisely because there was a changing core that she recognizes as herself. Brah then affirms that the autobiographical mode is useful for her purpose “as a disruptive device that *reveals* my narrative as an *interpretive retelling*” (BRAH, 1996, p 9, 10, author’s italics), thus highlighting, at least to a certain extent, the fictive nature of self-representation.

The label “autobiographical novel” has been utilized to refer to those texts in which there’s a blending of fiction with the author’s personal history, a term that appears to be quite useful in our discussion of Julia Alvarez’s works. A current literary French theorist, Phillippe Gasparini, explains that autobiographical novels are characterized by ambiguity, that is, they may be received either as autobiography or as fiction, no matter which one predominates or its measure of veracity (GASPARINI, 2004, p. 13). He argues that an autobiographical novel’s merit lies in its capacity to enforce the coexistence of two apparently antagonistic codes: fiction and

autobiography, respecting and denouncing them, simultaneously, in a space for negotiation (GASPARINI, 2004, p. 14). This space of negotiation interests us more because the negotiation of code is fundamental in postcolonial autobiographical practice by women, since the writers are constantly negotiating languages, cultures and their own subjectivities. One of the postcolonial woman writers who uses and abuses personal experiences in her novels is Dominican-American author Julia Alvarez, which is why her works were chosen for this dissertation.

Julia Alvarez has claimed that all novels are loosely autobiographical, but some are more loosely autobiographical and some more transparent than others (ALVAREZ, 2000, p. 165). In other words, all novels reflect to a certain extent the writer's experiences, beliefs, fears, personality and ideology. However, we must not underestimate the human power to create, imagine, re-invent, contest and transform, essential for the survival of art. Hence, we agree with Arfuch when she argues that in life writing what is relevant is not how much is true or fictive, but how it is told, what is shown, what is withheld, its self-reflexive quality that will be truly meaningful (ARFUCH, 2010, p. 73). In other words, even if a text is autobiographical, the strategies of self-representation are fruit of the individual's power of invention.

Beyond the theoretical discussions about the limits between fiction and auto/biography, one might wonder where this interest in personal narratives comes from. Why are these texts written and why is the public interested in reading them in the first place, even when they weren't written by a celebrity or an important public figure? The answer can vary from mere curiosity, to voyeurism, to an attempt of identification with others. Arfuch states that telling the history of a life is giving life to its history (ARFUCH, 2010, p. 42) implying the power of narrative in the process of our self-affirmation and echoing the postmodern belief that we construct and are constructed by and through discourse.

Arfuch also focuses on public interest in intimate narratives, contemplating different perspectives on the subject. She states that the narration of a life is an expression of the interiority and affirmation of "selfhood", which seems to refer both to the universal character postulated by Roland Barthes and to the illusion of eternity which, according to Phillippe Lejeune goes along with every reasoning of experience (ARFUCH, 2010). She also speculates that the use of one's own history is a symptom of modernity and the current obsession with "real time" and "what really happened". It exists for the unequivocal protection of the existence, of the mythical

singularity of the “I” (ARFUCH, 2010, p, 74). However, this interest in personal histories is not new; it has just spread, grown and changed, keeping up with the literary movements of the time and using new means of communication.

The western models of autobiographical texts are both religious and profane. On one hand, *Confessions* by Saint Augustine describes his conversion and journey toward God and spiritual enlightenment. On the other hand, *Confessions* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, telling about his childhood and coming of age, is classical example of personal life writing. Another example, although quite different in structure from the other two previously mentioned, is *Essais*, released in 1580 by French aristocrat Michel Montaigne, which is a collection of introspective essays on various topics. Of course, they are not the only ones. There were other autobiographical texts in the 17th and 18th century: some written by people close to public figures, revealing intimate details; others emphasizing the greatness of a historic figure; there were even diaries of common folk published. All of them made secrets known, often transforming gossip into literary material. Though these publications disrupted the duality of public versus private, only in the twentieth century was this arbitrary division explicitly and intensively questioned.

It is important to consider the implications and consequences brought by the separation of personal and public spheres through the publications of life narratives. Leonor Arfuch states that the access to the private inaugurated a voyeuristic look on other people's lives and at the same time, it established models, through which readers would learn how to live through testimonies (ARFUCH, 2010, p. 48). According to Arfuch, Rousseau's *Confessions* work as a reaction to society's impositions over one's conduct, intertwining public and private spheres (ARFUCH, 2010, p. 48), but it kept their separation, because collective attempts to enforce rules of behavior enhanced the dualistic division of individual/society. However, issues of politics, history and gendered or racial identities were not yet considered, since women and people of color were still excluded from literary discourse.

Autobiographies written by women, for instance, were scarce since writing equaled public exposure and the feminine belonged to the domestic realm. According to Helen M. Buss, women were allowed to speak in limited public scripts and their autobiographical texts were marked by an emphasis on virtues such as piety, submissiveness and domesticity (BUSS, 1998, p. 222, 226). Buss points out that Charlotte Perkins Gilman believed that the binary opposition between public and

private bestowed on women the role of moral mother who held high ethical standards, but with little or no power to enforce those standards (BUSS, 1998, p. 226)

Further, Smith and Watson observe that women had been writing and publishing popular autobiographies throughout the twentieth century; however, the criticism of women's autobiography began only in 1970s (SMITH; WATSON, 1998, p. 4). Some important texts must be mentioned here. The translation of Simone de Beauvoir's multivolume autobiographies interrogated the category 'woman' in the making of self-consciousness and during the Black Power movement of the 60s some life narratives dealt with the themes of racial and sexual exploitation, such as Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (SMITH; WATSON, 1998, p. 6). Latinas have also published their memoirs, including *Getting Home Alive* (1986) by Aurora Levins Morales and Rosario Morales, and *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) by Gloria Anzaldua. According to Lourdes Torres, these works "subvert Anglo and Latino patriarchal definitions of culture" (TORRES, 1998, p. 276). Feminist new historians and literary theorists have been concerned with recovering women's narratives, which helps breathing "new life into formerly ignored texts" (BUSS, 1998, p. 222), both personal and fictional. Smith and Watson note that there has even been a shift from the term "women's autobiography" to "women's autobiographical practices" and "women's personal narratives" so as to get away from uncritical Western understanding of the subject of autobiography (SMITH; WATSON, 1998, p. 29) while also escaping the entrapments of autobiographical formal structure. We will return to the issue of women's self-representation in the next chapter.

Another relevant issue is how literary theorists and critics deal with the proliferation of self-referential art: its strategies, its analysis, its politics and its place in the publishing market. Nowadays, the obsession with 'the real' histories spreads over a number of different genres, types of texts and media forms. Biographies, diaries, memoirs, interviews, correspondence, autobiographical film and even interviews or reality shows are part of the contemporary biographical space (ARCUCH, 2010, p. 60), in which classical life writings coexist with current media forms of self-fiction, revealing a general obsession in literature, plastic arts, cinema, theater and audiovisual for a more immediate expression of what was lived, that which is authentic, witnessed (ARFUCH; 2010, p. 37). The multiplication of life narrations is closely related to our particular historical moment.

The interest in the life of the author, according to Arfuch, is due to a curiosity about the details and backstage of their lives (ARFUCH, 2010, p. 60). Interestingly, Julia Alvarez comments on this obsession in one of her essays. She believes that: "if we didn't have this cult of the personality of a writer, we wouldn't have all this information about writers. Novels would just be novels, works that operate on their own art – which they must do over time, anyhow, if they are to last" (ALVAREZ, 2000, p. 166). What she seems to criticize here is the narcissistic motivation behind some of these writings and also the public's obsession with the "truth" and celebrities' lives. Paul Ricouer warns us to be cautious in relation to these two dangers of autobiographical writings: narcissism and the illusion of transparency (RICOUER apud GAGNEBIN, 2009, p. 133).

Regarding the first risk, Gagnebin analyses Paul Ricouer's argument that there has been a continuous praise of originality and uniqueness in order to disguise the individual's increasing insignificance within the capitalist world (GAGNEBIN, 2009, p.133, 134), leading to self-indulgence. As for the second risk, she argues that it was eliminated within the works of Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud and Frederick Nietzsche, who brought down the notion of the unified and self-sufficient self, thus making their testimonies suspicious (GAGNEBIN, 2009, p. 133). This matter of the unified, stable self will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Some critics insist that autobiography is not a genre on its own right at all. One of them is Paul De Man who argues that compared to epics or tragedies, autobiographies are embarrassing and self-indulgent, mere reportage or chronicle and such an elevation of status to genre is unjustified (DE MAN; 1979, p. 919). However his definition must be taken in consideration. He writes that autobiography is "a figure of reading or understanding" and that the autobiographical moment happens when there is "an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution" (DE MAN, 1979, p. 921). The paradox is that, although there is a latent particularity and uniqueness in autobiographical practice, the "I" that enunciates itself seeks to replicate and identify with the other (ARFUCH, 2010, p. 49). Nonetheless, if we consider postmodern and post-colonial autobiographical texts, it is possible to envision purposes beyond narcissistic interests: namely a practice that is politicized and historicized, and that also challenges and subverts literary traditional forms and strategies.

1.2 Autobiographical texts and Postcolonialism

Homi K Bhabha suggests that postcolonial perspective sprung not only from the so-called Third World countries' colonial testimony, but also from "discourses of 'minorities' within the geopolitical divisions of East and West, North and South", intervening in the ideological discourses of modernity which attempt to homogenize "histories of nations, races, communities, peoples" (BHABHA, 1994, p. 171). Postcolonial theory and literature developed in the 1960s when a number of writers from formerly colonized countries began to publish works that contested the predominantly white, upper class, Christian literary canon. These works "deal with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies" and with the study of controlling power of representation, marked by Edward Said's *Orientalism*. The term, "postcolonialism" is now used to analyze the discursive operations of Empire, the subtleties of subject construction in colonial discourse and these subjects' resistance and the various responses to colonialist incursions and their contemporary effects on independent nations (ASHCROFT, 2002, p. 186, 187). Catherine Hall suggests that colonizers and colonized are intimately linked by histories and it is necessary to think this relationship as ambivalent: the 'other' is always the object of desire and derision, of envy and contempt (HALL, 1996, p. 67, 70).

Many postcolonial writers are "producing their best sellers from the heart of colonial and neo-colonial centers" and they "stage and identify with transcultural experiences" (MARDOROSSIAN, 2005, p. 1). Those artists are not a part of mainstream art movements or of white European/American elite groups; on the contrary, they question those canonical writers and mainstream's conventions in their works, bringing forth oppressed histories, marginalized cultures and heterogeneous subjectivities. Their works criticize how much Western history conditions us to see human difference as simplistic binary opposition to one another through "systematized oppression" the ones that are seen as different can be made "to occupy the place of dehumanized inferior" others (LORDE, 1997, p. 374).

A number of these migrant artists came from South America, Central America, Mexico and the Caribbean islands. They utilize personal life stories to weave their fiction, such as Michelle Cliff, Gloria Anzaldua, Cristina Garcia, Jamaica Kincaid and

Julia Alvarez. These authors immigrated to United States at a young age and often make use of self-referential narrations to discuss postcolonial concerns, such as historical discourse, racial discrimination, gendered identities and cultural hybridity.

The migration to former metropolis and new imperialist powers in search of better economical opportunities, political exile and life quality has resulted in the production of new cultural forms and syncretic artist expressions. Even though the history of formerly colonized peoples had been dismissed, ignored, misused or silenced by the dominant elites, the presence of those colonized peoples in the former metropolis has allowed space for questionings. Many immigrants obtain access to education and job opportunities in their host countries and become musicians, painters and writers. Publishing houses have given authors from formerly colonized peoples and their children a place to shift perspectives and offer an alternative to official history in their literary works, through historiographic metafiction and often through personal narratives, such as memoirs, autobiographies and autobiographical novels. Regarding the latter, Smith and Watson argue that the fluidity of the boundary between the autobiographical and the novel has characterized narratives by writers exploring “the decolonization of subjectivity forged in the aftermath of colonial oppression” (SMITH; WATSON, 2001, p. 10).

There are several differences between classical autobiographies and contemporary autobiographical practices, not only in the texts themselves but in their readership, how they are criticized and are theorized about, especially when studied in a postcolonial context and within a postmodern framework. It is important to note that although Julia Alvarez’s works can be considered as both postcolonial and postmodern because of her works’ aesthetics and thematic preoccupations, not all postcolonial works are postmodern, or the other way around. Furthermore, we should assert that being contemporary is not equivalent to being postmodern. Postcolonial art and criticism have political agendas and concerns, searching for more space for social action and change. While postmodernism is interested in deconstructing orthodoxies, it does not seem to make the move into political agency (HUTCHEON, 1995, p. 157), but postcolonialism allows theories of agency that go beyond text and art. Although both movements question historical discourses and dominant ideologies, the two terms mustn’t be confused or used interchangeably.

In the introduction to the collection of essays *Decolonization and the Politics of Discourse in Women’s Autobiography*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue that

the Western autobiographical tradition is based on the common sense of identification of one human being with the other, which would theoretically make everyone and anyone a potential autobiographer. However, this humanist subjectivity often seems to endorse fear, intolerance or ignorance toward class, gender, racial or religious differences. They argue that “not all subjects are “I”s. Colonized subjects are seen as an amorphous collectivity, in which the Other disappears as part of a group of indistinguishable bodies” (SMITH; WATSON, 1998, p. XVII). Although it may be argued that independence processes have already granted autonomy to past colonies, currently, (neo)colonial relationships are still taking place under other ties of dependence and postcolonial subjects still have to deal with inferiorization, stereotyping and social-political exclusion.

In addition, Smith and Watson point out that the “I”s in the classical autobiographies, in spite of coming from different cultural backgrounds and historical contexts, were always rational, unified and cohesive, all possessed agency (SMITH; WATSON, 1998, p. XVII). Postmodern intimate narratives though, show subjects as fragmented and often, subaltern. In order to differentiate past autobiographical practices from postmodern ones, Caren Kaplan compares them:

In modern autobiographical discourses, for example, the self that is constructed is often construed to be evolving in a linear fashion from a stable place of origin towards a substantial present. In postmodern autobiographical writing such a singular, linear construction of the self is often untenable or, at the very least, in tension with competing issues (KAPLAN; 1987, p. 189).

Since postmodernism distrusts universalizing narratives and is interested in decentering dominant cultural forces and ideology, problematizing, as Linda Hutcheon observes, the notion of the “centered self” by challenging self-representation (HUTCHEON, 1995, p. 40), it is in tune with the postcolonial political project. Besides, both postmodernism and autobiography are interested in theorizing the subject (GILMORE, 1994, p. 3). Hence, autobiographical writings by non-white, non-Christian, non-Western, homosexual, lower class individuals challenge dominant discourses and differ from mainstream literature, because through the act of narrating their own ‘ex-centric’ personal histories, they are not only affirming their individuality, but it is also possible to transform margin into center.

Regarding literary theory, Leigh Gilmore claims that postmodern debate has shaken the pillars of autobiography studies since elements such as history and

subjectivity that used to be considered points of stability in one's life are no longer taken so. She points out that, postmodernists are skeptical about generic typology and offer insights on how ideology and representation function (GILMORE, 1994, p. 5). Contesting dominant ideologies is fundamental in postcolonial literature in order to stress the homogenization and exclusion it imposes on the Other.

All the changes that occurred in the second half of the twentieth century – technological, political and ideological – have also resulted in shifts in autobiographical practices and made the intersection between life narrative and postcolonial literature possible. The constant and fast flow of money, goods, labor, information and people across national borders allows individuals to maintain contact with their homelands and culture, to form alliances and transcultural affiliations. Besides, although it has been defended that we live in a post-national world where race and nationalities are old-fashioned concepts, the revival of ethnic nationalism in Eastern Europe and fundamentalist movements seem to prove otherwise (HALL, 2007, p. 630). Therefore, it's possible to conclude that nationality, ethnicity and religion, in spite of homogenizing imperialist tendencies, are not dated concepts, but relevant in global politics and identification processes; consequently, they have impact on narrations of the Self.

Another difference between classical autobiographical narratives and postmodern ones is that the latter do not see identity, community and history as separate entities. David Vázquez ratifies Mikhail Bakhtin's argument that "fiction should maintain a tangible and vital link to history" (VAZQUEZ; 2003, p. 388); therefore, fiction ought to connect with past events. Moreover, Susanna Egan and Gabrielle Helms highlight that contemporary writers of autobiographies situate their stories in well-developed contexts of family and community thus enriching the possibilities within life-writing practices (EGAN; HELMS, 2004, p 216). Vázquez explains that rather than emphasizing liberal individualism, Julia Alvarez constructs her autobiographical novels so that subjectivity only obtains its authority through its relationship with her community (VAZQUEZ, 2003, p. 384). Further, even though some autobiographical texts choose prioritizing the individual or the political, the texts that are most successful, according to Ellen McCracken, are those that link and intertwine the personal and the political, the individual and the community, and connect personal and political empowerment instead of exaggerating subjectivity

(McCRACKEN, 1999, p. 65). In other words, it's by blending voices and foregrounding their heterogeneity that life narrative has gained new perspectives.

The link between individual, community, history and narration is paramount in the analysis of postcolonial and postmodern self-referential practices. Linda Hutcheon affirms that "all past events are potential historical facts, but the ones that become facts are those that are chosen to be narrated" (HUTCHEON, 1995, p. 75). But who chooses? In general, we can safely state that the political and economical elites do, albeit free will has been portrayed as natural or given since Illuminism. However in the construction of life narratives it is an individual who chooses what will be in the text. Thus, as Ruth Klüger affirms, autobiographies are a personalized form of historiography, History written in the first person (KLÜGER, 2009, p. 24). They offer "subjective 'truth' rather than 'fact'" (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 10). This statement can be fundamental to understand the use of the individual's history as part of novels in a postcolonial context. Since the peoples from poor countries, non-Western cultures and non-white traditions have been marginalized, excluded and homogenized, the power of narrative and story-telling makes it possible for a change in perspective, a different version of the official facts of History, a History which has roots in privilege and gets its authority from the ideology of the elites who seek to maintain that privilege through discourse and economical and political domination. Therefore, the individuals who migrated and are able to navigate through more than one cultural system can use their own experience to mediate, expose and contest historical discourse. Henceforth, according to Smith and Watson, the autobiographical moment becomes "a site in which cultural ideologies intersect and dissect one another in contradiction, consonance, and adjacency" (SMITH; WATSON, 1998, p. XIX).

1.3 Autobiographical practices by women in transit

The autobiographical practices by women from marginalized groups, according to Smith and Watson, may doubly serve as entry into the discursive economy through language and as a form of creative and political intervention. Nonetheless, they also caution that, entering this realm can also validate the

meanings coined by the colonizers (SMITH; WATSON, 1998, p. 19), disguised as natural truths, especially considering the Foucauldian and Lacanian conceptions of identity as being determined by power structures. Regarding this issue, It's been claimed that: "Women have a history of reading and writing in the interstices of masculine culture, moving between use of dominant language or form of expression and specific versions of experience based on their marginality " (KAPLAN, 1987, p. 187). Therefore, it becomes paramount for these writers to revise their positions and use non-traditional strategies and techniques if they are to claim their place in literature, academic discourse and politics. Additionally, Linda Hutcheon believes that by making use of postmodern parodic modes of installing and subverting conventions, women's representation can be 'de-doxified' (HUTCHEON, 1995, p. 151).

David Vázquez, in his analysis of Julia Alvarez's works, defends that Latina writers like her, use processes of oppositional historiography to work through particular personal and collective traumas that emerge from each social and cultural situation (VÁZQUEZ, 2003, p. 385). Women who have been displaced from their homelands equally face great challenges. Diasporic women have to deal with preconceptions about their gender and race, discrimination and oppression in different spheres of their lives, besides class difference, religious prejudice and heterosexism. James Clifford points out that the diasporic movement can either free women or renew patriarchal domination over them (CLIFFORD, 1994, p. 313, 314). People who migrate from postcolonial societies, where the patriarchal system is stronger, to cultures where women are more empowered, like the U.S.A., are likely to have conflicts and struggles inside the family circle.

Migrant woman writers portray the tensions between their present and past in their works, writing about their internal struggles and familial conflicts due to the often antagonist cultural values which permeate their diasporic experiences. Furthermore, having access to these women's life histories through autobiographical practices may "authorize an alternate way of knowing (...) an account of the world as seen from the margins, an account which can expose the falseness of the view from the top and can transform the margin as well as the center" (SMITH; WATSON, 1998, p. XX). These writings question homogenizing tendencies of globalization and patriarchies, and even the sisterhood of a predominantly white and elitist feminist movement.

Feminisms aimed to debunk the binary conception of personal as opposing the political. Linda Hutcheon points out that this was a contribution to postmodernism, because it entails that the limits between private and public history must be rethought (HUTCHEON, 1995, p. 160). Additionally, Vázquez states that by making the private explicitly public, female autobiographers foreground the fact that their work has been excluded from the dominant narrative structure (VAZQUEZ, 2003, p. 386). Hence, personal narratives by diasporic women shed light on a marginal individual's perspective in their specific historical, cultural contexts and simultaneously contesting patriarchal systems.

Latino/a narratives often use autobiographical texts to expose plural models of group formation and community identity (VAZQUEZ, 2003, p. 384). The trauma caused by dislocation due to political or economical exile and the sentiment of not-belonging to a specific location or cultural system complicates autobiographical writing by diasporic woman authors, who do not disassociate personal identity from family and community. But they question how the writers can connect with their community and feel part of it when they are no longer in their homeland, deprived from everyday contact with it. How can they feel comfortable and safe when an imperialist culture is constantly undermining their cultural bonds? How can they develop community self-esteem when the host country perceives their presence as undesirable or threatening and 'different' or 'exotic' are the politically correct terms for 'inferior'? And further, how can a woman navigate through these troubled waters when the host's culture and your homeland's often have conflicting value systems? It just may be the merit of these autobiographical works to portray these internal struggles perhaps raising awareness and beginning debates about immigration, women and cultural syncretism in the 21st century.

As we have argued, there are great disparities between classical autobiographies and postmodern ones, especially those by women in a diasporic context. If the "first" autobiography, Rousseau's *Confessions*, showed the rebellion against social rules which dictated his behavior (ARFUCH, 2010, p. 48), the postcolonial autobiographical writings by diasporic women go farther, contesting gender roles, boundaries between fiction and reality, the literary canon and official History. Besides, as David Vázquez argues, the superposition of history and the impact on individual's daily lives allow them to resolve the trauma of dislocation and exile as well as clear space for feminine agency (VÁZQUEZ, 2003, p. 401). If the

political purposes of these self-reflexive works differ, they all seem to come from the need to identify with others, but at the same time, affirming one's unique experience.

The deeply invested self that speaks the events relies heavily upon the hope that its version will resonate with the meaning constructed by my various "imagined communities". My individual narration is meaningful primarily as collective re-memory (BRAH, 1998, p. 10).

Nonetheless, beyond the scope of theoretical problematizations, dilemmas, contradictions, political implications and literary strategies and criticism, Julia Alvarez expresses hope that this use of personal experience in fiction may be a tool to transmit knowledge to the next generation, becoming useful in educating young people and also developing solidarity. She states that: "We are rewriting ourselves with our writing and talking and our sharing of stories. Now that we, *mujeres* of my generation, are becoming the elders of the tribe, we want to pass on some of what we have learned from the struggles we had to take on" (ALVAREZ, 2007, p. 235).

1.4 Truth and Fiction in autobiographical texts

As we have already affirmed, Ruth Klüger believes that there are lines that divides lies, truth and fiction, lines which matter to the reader because he/she values the difference between fiction and falseness (KLÜGER, 2009, p. 25). The reader does not want to be fooled. However, when it comes to postmodern autobiographical novels this issue is more complex. First, because readers are curious about this distinction and because the internet offers the tools to discover what is true or not (at least readers believe so); and secondly because of the complexity of the processes of memory and ideological interpellations. These two reasons make such distinctions blurry both for readership and for literary critics. It is that blurriness that interests us. It's not our intention to investigate what is fact and what was invented by Julia Alvarez in her novels, but to analyze how she weaves fact and fiction in the construction of her characters and stories.

Klüger believes that it is not really important whether the facts narrated happened precisely that way or not; what matters is that their narration transmits a deeper truth about its author (KLÜGER, 2009, p. 25). Leonor Arfuch complements

that, it's not so much the content that counts – the collection of events and attitudes; what matters are the fictive strategies of self-representation (ARFUCH, 2010, p. 73). These strategies may include doubting the trustworthiness of authors, questioning memory and challenging homogenizing concepts and practices.

One of the aims of postmodern literature is to contest master narratives and re-present the past. This begs the question: how does the present gain access to the past it intends to tell? We very often narrate the past, but what are the conditions of this knowledge? Linda Hutcheon has asked those questions, and she answers that we can only know the past through narration, the circumstantial evidence we can see now. She affirms: "Knowing the past becomes a question of representing; that is, of constructing and interpreting, not of objective recording" (HUTCHEON, 1995, p. 74). Similarly, Jorgen Straub affirms that our memory is not a video camera which records the past faithfully and impartially, but it depends on the interpretation from the "I" of the present so it might rewrite the past under the light of new experiences and new expectations about the future (STRAUB, 2009, p. 84, 85). Furthermore, the psychoanalytical studies of the memory's mechanisms were profoundly unsettled when Freud's research led him to the unconscious, and Linda Anderson states that "the notion that the present can retroactively alter the past was one of Freud's major insights" (ANDERSON, 2004, p. 61).

Memory is affected by external facts such as culture. Author Julia Alvarez comments in one of her essays how her family reacted to her autobiographical novel, *How the García Girls Lost their Accents*. The final section, which focuses on the final days in the Dominican Republic is, according to her, the most fictive. Her family began recalling that day, but soon noticed that "Everyone's last day was so different from another's last day" and one of her sisters confounded their memories with a scene from a movie:

One sister remembered that we pushed the car down the driveway, afraid to turn it on in case the secret police, the SIM, would hear our departure. My older sister laughed when she heard that story. "That's from *The Sound of Music*!" In the movie there is a scene of the Trapp family pushing the car down their driveway to avoid being caught by the SS. No doubt my sister, still traumatized by our departure, had extrapolated that scene because it captured the emotional truth of what had happened to us (ALVAREZ, 2000, p. 165, 166).

Taking those analyses into consideration, we can conclude that the memory of an author cannot register all facts to later put them down on paper. He or she recalls

facts, but the way they are portrayed depends on how the present self interprets these events and which facts are going to be chosen or not to be narrated, depending on the author's choices. Concerning this choice, Susanna Egan and Gabrielle Helms believe that current texts tend to focus less on a life-so-far and more on a central issue in their experience, for instance, sexuality or dislocation (EGAN; HELMS, 2004, p 232). In this way, life narratives tend to be less linear, less universalizing and less concerned with transparency.

The role of the narrator/author who recalls is equally essential. If in classical novels or autobiographies, the narrator is omniscient, the postmodern autobiographer could not know all facts, nor could he/she pretend his/her book had been written by an inhuman all-knowing force. Ellen McCracken affirms that the autobiographical simulacrum occludes its own simulation, establishing itself as testimonial representation: "an accurate, firsthand account of the events in a person's life", opposite to the novel, where the narrative seems to be written by no one, the autobiographical text declares "the power of simulation, that she or he is creating a representation of real life" (McCRACKEN, 1999, p. 73).

We also need to consider that, often, experiences of migration are motivated by war, extreme poverty, political persecution, natural disasters and at times, they are marked by physical or psychological violence, hence recollecting can be difficult, painful, even unwanted. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson affirm that those suffering the agony of traumatic memory are often "haunted by memories that obsessively interrupt a present moment" (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 20). David Vázquez explains that it is through the accounts of the trauma of separation that individuals can work through them. He writes about the insights of Dori Laub and Shoshanna Felman, who believe that re-narrating is really about the articulation of rupture itself, as victims of traumatic events often find it difficult to accurately assess the event, what is truly important is their "ability to represent what was previously unrepresentable" (VAZQUEZ, 2003, p. 389). Thus, narrating one's own history "can work as therapeutic intervention" (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 22). As a matter of fact, it's been claimed that in Julia Alvarez's works, she offers her "specific negotiations with the process of memory through her writing" (SUÁREZ, 2004, p. 119). Leigh Gilmore points out an ironic twist: "Language is asserted as that which can realize trauma even if it is theorized as that which fails in the face of trauma" (GILMORE, 2001, p. 7).

Nonetheless, even when a personal experience does not involve traumatic events, the search for “what really happened” through narrative might generate frustration and confusion in individuals. The truth becomes undecidable when one is both the narrator and protagonist of the narrative, in autobiographical writing the truth must be seen as an “intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life” (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 14, 15).

The matter of what the ‘truth’ is exactly must be rethought, not only because of the traps and limitation of memory, but also because “we all speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific, what we say is always in context, positioned” (HALL, 2003, p. 234). These positions vary according to contexts and to the factors that as Audre Lorde explains differentiate individuals and groups: those who fall outside what she calls the “mythical norm” – and in American society that means being white, Christian, heterosexual, thin, young – are excluded or inferiorized (LORDE, 1980, p.375).

Furthermore, using personal experiences in fictional works is in tune with the postmodern objective of questioning boundaries between genres. Along with other authors, Julia Alvarez manages to undermine hierarchy between fact, fiction and history, making them all equally valid historical sources (VÁZQUEZ, 2003, p. 385). These authors often use magical elements or dreams in their fiction to challenge Western rationalism and scientific discourse.

Another reason for the use of personal experience in novels is the possibilities given by fiction, as Haitian author Edwidge Danticat explained in an interview when asked why she changed her memoir into novel. She classifies her first novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* as an “emotional autobiography” in which the truth is in the feeling and not in the events (LYONS, 2003, p. 186). At the same time, this strategy allows authors to distance themselves from their own pasts and be more critical and perhaps less self-indulgent or narcissistic. Several critics, as will be discussed later, have explored the reasons and effects of such distance in texts. In addition, when authors give up on confessional sincerity (SCHOLLHAMMER, 2009, p. 107), they gain freedom to create characters and facts, play in the gaps of history and memory, as well as protect their families and loved ones. Leigh Gilmore argues that the ways in which some writers bring trauma into language might be inimical to the conventions of truth telling, which are too narrow and too restrictive (GILMORE,

2001, p. 3). Moreover, postmodernism cannot see autobiographical works as transparent because, as Hutcheon also affirms, it challenges "the realist notion of representation that presumes the transparency of the medium" (HUTCHEON, 1991, p. 34); in other words, all narratives, whether autobiographical or not, are constructed and interpellated by ideologies, they are never neutral. Further, the *biographical space* offers us a rich and broad framework, that encompasses more than just autobiography and memoir, but that welcomes various forms of life writing, unsettling conventional genre boundaries and conventions. We should also exam autobiographical practice under the light of postmodern and postcolonial literary theory, taking it to new heights, where individuals may go beyond the fact/fiction opposition and beyond self-centeredness; a space where there are new possibilities for accessing the past, understanding the present and imagining the future.

2. IDENTITY, WOMEN AND THE NEW DIASPORA

Who in the world am I? Ah, that's the great puzzle
Lewis Carroll

*The diasporic experience, as I intend it here is defined, not by
essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary
heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of identity which
lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity.
Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing
and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and
difference*
Stuart Hall

Identity and diaspora are two fundamental concepts in the discussion and understanding of postcolonial literature. Both are profoundly connected and intertwined, although they have different social, political, psychological and literary implications and have been reconceptualized in the past few decades. They must be thought of in individual, collective, national and cultural terms. Nonetheless, for the sake of clarity and organization, we are going to discuss them separately at first, so as to later discuss them in the context of diasporic women's autobiographical practices.

2.1 Brave New Diasporas

Diaspora comes from a Greek word which means 'to scatter' or 'dispersal'. James Clifford explains in his 1994 influential text "Diasporas" that the term was first coined to refer to the various migrations of the Hebrews, their dispersal and their desire of return to the 'promised land' of Israel. Currently, Social Sciences and the Humanities use the term to refer to the displacement and scattering of peoples, across the globe, not only due to collective victimization, but "scrambling for a better life", especially in the post-World War II period (FRIEDMAN, 2009, p. 7, 9). Further,

according to Jane E. Braziel and Anita Mannur, the theorization of these new diasporas has flourished during the 90s in area studies, ethnic studies and cultural studies as a major site of contestation, although they state that it's necessary to understand what exactly is meant by the term and its importance right now (BRAZIEL; MANNUR, 2003, p. 2, 3).

It is undeniable that migration has always existed. Further, according to Susan Friedman "mobility has been a, if not *the*, defining trait of the human species", always present in human history (FRIEDMAN, 2009, p. 8, author's italics). It has resulted in territorial conquests, commercial trade and wars. But the term 'diaspora' has much more specific social-historical traits. Theorists have cautioned against applying the term uncritically "to any and all contexts of global displacement and movement" (BRAZIEL; MANNUR, 2003, p. 3) without considering specific geopolitical and historical circumstances. In addition, these transglobal traversals of the 20th century present several differentiating factors from previous ones: globalizing forces and technology have increased and sped the flux of goods, information, money and, of course, people. Globalization has increased the knowledge we have of other countries and cultures, and facilitated continuous contact of displaced people with their kin and places of origin. Friedman argues that these advances have increased diasporic consciousness because the immigrants' old home "can be much more present" in their lives (FRIEDMAN, 2009, p. 9). These changes contribute to new transnational relationships, artistic movements, political, social and intellectual debates. Thus diaspora becomes more than a geopolitical phenomenon; it's an important framework and epistemological trope for discussion of the dynamics between the global and the local nowadays.

These movements are not merely a matter of touristic traveling, adventurous journeys, and search for lucrative trade or cultural curiosity. They mostly have a more permanent character, sometimes forced, and do not refer to individual exile, but to communities. They might be motivated by political persecution, unemployment, financial difficulties, lack of proper housing and educational opportunities, and limited access to quality public services. The inequities within and between countries, Stuart Hall suggests, are the fruit of poverty and underdevelopment, the "legacies of Empire everywhere" (HALL, 1999, p. 3), implying the responsibility of the imperialist forces in the post- 1960s waves of migration. We must note that not all immigrants are part of a diaspora: a white male French chef living in Brazil is as much an immigrant as a

Haitian babysitter in France, but the first is not part of a diaspora. The historical, geopolitical and ideological contexts set them apart and these are fundamental in the understanding of diasporas.

Migrating to countries where (supposedly) there are better jobs and schools, adequate housing available, higher salaries and political freedom is the ideal that drives a lot of people away from their homelands to wealthier countries, dreaming of a happier, safer life. However, not rarely do immigrants live illegally, without speaking the language of the host country and working in low-paid positions so as to send money to their families in the country of origin or bring them to the new abode. Braziel and Mannur argue that at the psychological and ideological levels, diasporas are marked by ambiguity because, on a historical level, it literally and negatively refers to communities of people who have been “dislocated from their native homelands through migration, immigration or exile as a consequence of colonial expansion, but epistemologically suggests the (more positive) idea of fertility, of dispersion, dissemination and the scattering of seeds” (BRAZIEL; MANNUR, 2003, p. 4). The position these individuals occupy is often conflicted due to the expectations they have created, the material and financial difficulties they often deal with, institutional prejudice they sometimes suffer and longing they feel for the place and people they have left behind. Caren Kaplan emphasizes that ambivalence characterizes the paradoxical situation of these disenfranchised subjects: “this location is fraught with tensions: it has the potential to lock the subject away in isolation and despair as well as the potential for critical innovation and particular strengths” (KAPLAN, 1987, p. 187).

We should also highlight that in spite of not always being a voluntary sojourn and not always corresponding to the expectations of the traveler, it has been affirmed that “not all diasporas sustain an ideology of return” (BRAH, 1998, p. 16). Although diaspora remits to an idea of journey, it paradoxically involves, as Avtar Brah reminds us, an intention of “settling down, about putting roots elsewhere” (BRAH, 1998, p. 182), thus, belonging instead of a stable concept, becomes a more fluid one.

These movements bring complex consequences to individuals, communities, nations and nation-states at practical, economical, political and ideological levels. Debates on immigration policies and its social effects and costs for public funds are constant in political debates and media in wealthy countries. In 2011 we have witnessed several discussions on the matter since the world’s current economical

crisis and popular protests are causing political turmoil in the Middle East and Northern Africa, both responsible for increasing migration fluxes to and within Europe. France has threatened to revoke the Shengen Treaty, the agreement which allows free circulation for citizens of the European Union, due to the high flux of immigrants in its territory and Italy is showing a similar preoccupation. The terrorist attack in Oslo, Norway by a xenophobic, right wing assassin who killed more than seventy people, is a terrifying example of white supremacist and Eurocentric ideologies. Migration has already radically impacted U.S.A.'s demography. The 2010 census discovered that 1 in 6 Americans is of Hispanic descent and also that the Asian population grew 43% over the last decade (CBS NEWS, March 24, 2011). Paradoxically, it's been reported by Democracy Now! Website that during the Obama administration U.S. deportations of immigrants reached a record high: nearly 400,000 people in fiscal year 2011, the highest total in eight years. Even though globalizing forces attempt to make borders fluid or invisible and nations seem like dying entities, the inequities capitalism entails, with its material and palpable effects on people's lives, the asymmetries of access to power are brought forth and the discourses of multiculturalism, international solidarity, racism and classism clash on the media and political discourse. Gayatri Spivak adds that, because of the neo-liberal economic system, the removal of barriers severely damages any possibility for social redistribution (SPIVAK, 1996, p. 245).

In spite of immigration being seen and portrayed by a conservative part of the media, politicians and society as a social "problem", often encoding, as Friedman suggests racial and religious narratives that "presume the superiority of Western modernity and the backwardness of the unlighted Rest" (FRIEDMAN, 2009, p. 8). Diaspora studies encompass not only questions of immigration, but also of racism, cultural hybridity, adaptation/resistance, longing/belonging. They incorporate multidisciplinary debates and contribute to important discussions about citizenship, democracy and transnationalism in the contemporary interconnected world. These individuals and groups are claiming their space in political, academic and artistic arenas.

Diasporic communities and new hybrid cultural forms stress the need for contestation of paradigms. Firstly, Jane Braziel and Anita Mannur argue, diaspora forces us to "rethink the rubrics of nation and nationalism, while refiguring the relations of citizens and nation-states" (BRAZIEL; MANNUR, 2003, p. 7) and even

lead us to question, like Carole Boyce Davies, if nationalism is a trap forged within eurocentricity (DAVIES, 2001, p. 12). Second, diaspora offers “dislocated sites of contestation to the hegemonic, homogenizing forces of globalizations”(BRAZIEL; MANNUR, 2003, p. 7). Homogenization and erasure are possible dangers these individuals face and many attempt to resist every day, through political activism or artistic creations. However there is also the possibility of fruitful contact, herein producing new cultural forms, new identifications, new alliances, as defended by Stuart Hall:

Across the globe, the process of so-called free and forced migrations are changing the composition, diversifying the cultures and pluralizing the cultural identities of the older dominant nation-states, the old imperial powers, and, indeed, of the globe itself (HALL, 1999, p. 16).

These new cultural forms are born from the daily contact and interaction between migrants, their descendents and natives. Avtar Brah coined a very useful concept in her book *Cartographies of Diaspora* (1996) in the discussion of these relations: the *diaspora space*. Her central argument is that this space is inhabited by the diasporic subjects and by those represented and constructed as ‘indigenous’, foregrounding the “entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of ‘staying put’” (BRAH, 1996, p. 16), that is to say, these migrants, their political debates and cultural productions, plus the day-by-day contact between immigrants and citizens, affect other diasporas and the country’s natives. In short, as Susan Friedman argues, immigrants change the societies into which they migrate as well as being changed by them (FRIEDMAN, 2009, p. 20). It’s this interaction that unfortunately still provokes discrimination and exclusion, but it also produces new deterritorialized cultural forms.

Unfortunate results from these interactions are discrimination and exclusion. Racist and ethnocentric discourses and practices, whether institutionalized or fruit of daily incidents of physical or psychological violence, are issues faced by minorities in general. Avtar Brah recalls her first encounter with this when she went to England and was called a “Paki”, an offensive term referring to Southeastern Asians. She explains that she “was now constituted within discourse as a racialised insider/outsider” and that particular offence “signified the inferiorised Other” (BRAH, 1998, p. 9). Nonetheless, she also points out that “racism simultaneously inhabits

spaces of deep ambivalence, admiration, envy and desire” (BRAH, 1998, p. 15). Although Brah is telling of her specific experience in 1970s Britain, discrimination is a common experience amongst diasporic individuals, present in narratives, whether autobiographical or fictional. The contradiction is that, although racialization keeps excluding and alienating ethnic minorities, there is also the parallel discourse of assimilation that attempts to “straighten” or erase the cultural and linguistic markers of the site of origin, attempting to modify behavior, eating habits, appearance, values and language.

Diaspora cannot be seen as a mathematical equation which always has the same result. It is a complex and ambivalent lived experience and also an interpretive device. Leila Harris argues that “If, on one hand, diasporic displacement may lead to marginalization, exclusion and anguish for not belonging, there is, on the other hand, the potential for agency, autonomy and synthesis” (HARRIS, 2007, p. 123). Its motivations, circumstances, effects and consequences must be contextualized so as not to become a universalizing framework or acquire a crystallized meaning. The blending of homeland’s cultural traditions with the hosts’, namely hybridism and syncretism, is “a powerful creative resource which is able to produce new cultural forms which are more appropriate to late modernity” (HALL., 2007, p. 629). Homi K. Bhabha believes that the “interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up a possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (BHABHA, 1994, p. 4). This creative force that welcomes difference is clear throughout diasporic women’s writings. Suzanne Oboler defends that diasporic writers such as Gloria Anzaldua and Guillermo Gomez-Pena suggest that “hybridity involves the negotiation of conflicting meanings attributed to multiple racially based identities” (OBOLER, 1996, p. 299). Diasporic subjectivity encounters in art and literature a space for inventing, expressing and defining itself, whether in terms of hybridity or resistance, assimilation or rejection.

All in all, in spite of the particularities and unique character of each diasporic group and its members’ multiple positionings, we must acknowledge its points of confluence and adjacency. Regarding these similarities, James Clifford states that: “A shared, ongoing history of displacement, suffering, adaptation or resistance may be as important as the projections of a specific origin” (CLIFFORD, 1994, p. 306). Finding, rebuilding and creating the silenced history of this place of origin motivates

research and novels, critical texts and articles, but as Clifford tries to explain, there are common elements among diasporas that should be taken in consideration that can help forge new solidarities

If diasporic writers have been marginalized in a sense, being seen as ethnic or exotic, they have also enjoyed a privileged critical position of insider/outsider and have utilized it in both fictional and non-fictional works. Carole Boyce Davies's discussion of Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*, a non-fiction book which analyses the tourist culture of Antigua, her island of origin, underscores how Kincaid is able to perceive "the many idiosyncrasies, anomalies and perversions wrought on a Caribbean slave society and their legacy on today's people" (DAVIES, 2001, p. 124). Thus, for diasporic writers such as Kincaid and Julia Alvarez, the relationship to the homeland is permeated by a critical eye.

2.2. Tales of the New World

Immigrants and racialized minorities are often asked where they are from. Susan Friedman observes that "no matter what passport one carries, the body that looks 'foreign' is subjected to a variety of gazes – from the curious and rude to the dangerous and violent" (FRIEDMAN, 2004, p. 191). This apparently innocent question about nationality is made in airports, job interviews or daily conversations. Wendy Walters believes that when one answers this inquiry with the place he/she was born, it implicates a geographic answer that attempts "to unite space and place and to fix this with a notion of time: in many instances, however, one's entry into the world becomes an insufficient answer or an incomplete explanation for either what is home or what's one geographic (or national) identity" (WALTERS, 2005, p. xix). Diasporic subjects are often hyphenated, that is, they identify with more than one culture, thus answering this question can be unsatisfactory in terms of evoking a unique national identification. Cuban-American, British-Indian or Sino-Canadian are just examples of how these individuals disrupt the notion of a single place of origin or of a unique cultural identity.

Mass population movements, which originate these hyphenated identities, have increased after the 80s in all directions, mostly to North America, Australia and

Western Europe (BRAH, 1998, p. 178). These dispersed peoples usually go from what used to be called Third World or underdeveloped nations to hegemonic ones, such as the United States, England, Canada, France, the Netherlands and Germany. It isn't unusual for non-white and non-Christian immigrants living in North America, Australia and Western Europe to have to face racial and religious discrimination in various forms and degrees. Nonetheless, they might also discover new political articulations and possibilities for empowerment in their new places of dwelling. Here I am going to focus on the migration from the Caribbean to the United States, since that is the situation Dominican-American writer Julia Alvarez went through.

In order to discuss Caribbean diaspora we first must understand its historical context and political situation. The history of the West Indies has predominantly been constructed from the European perspective and the legacies of colonization still affect the islands at all levels. Christopher Columbus arrived in the Caribbean islands in 1492, representing the Spanish Crown, searching for spices, silver, gold and fertile lands. The colonization process strictly speaking began only later, fueled by the desire of European nations, including Spain, to exploit the riches and natural resources of the New World and supported by the Catholic Church with its missionary project. The islands attracted conquerors and adventures from France, England, Spain and the Netherlands. But agriculture required a massive work force for sugar plantation, a need met by the trade of African slaves. The various indigenous peoples who inhabited the islands were enslaved, slaughtered or Christianized, which resulted in the virtual disappearance of their histories, languages and cultures.

According to Stuart Hall's text, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", there are three main presences that characterize the Caribbean. The *Présence Américaine* of the indigenous peoples that inhabited the islands before colonization, with its silences and suppressions. The other two presences he describes are *Présence Européenne* and *Présence Africaine*. The first one, whose abuses still mark the islands, is characterized by power, expropriation and imposition, whose abuses still mark the islands. The latter is the "unspoken, unspeakable presence", repressed by the traumatic experience of slavery, although it is in the everyday customs, words, names and rituals still practiced, a presence which Hall claims everyone in the Caribbean must come to terms with (HALL, 2003, p. 240-244).

These presences mark Caribbean histories, peoples and its geographical borders. The independence processes that took place in the 1800s and 1900s,

largely influenced by European ideas about the creation of autonomous nation-states, resulted in the birth of several island-countries in the region. Carole Boyce Davies believes that the Caribbean arbitrary national borders based on language, colonial political heritage, land and sea allow the Caribbean to understand and question “the formation of nations based only on island boundaries” (DAVIES, 2001, p. 12), highlighting the very specific and complex relation between Caribbean nations. In spite of sharing colonized pasts and neocolonial presents, these nations still assert their own identities through language, ethnicity, religion, food and customs, being united by shared history of exploitation and slavery, but differentiated by geography, culture and circumstances.

Shalini Puri argues that it’s been quite difficult for the inhabitants of the Caribbean islands to imagine themselves as a people. Their history of colonial subjection and postcolonial dependency has made national sovereignty and regional self-determination hard to sustain (PURI, 2004, p. 12). We argue that literature can fulfill – at least partially – the gaps and silence history has left.

2.2.1 The Caribbean and the U.S.A.

The relationship between the United States and the other countries in the American continent, especially those which are economically and politically fragile, has been moved by commercial interests and self-defense claims since the 19th century. On one hand, the U.S. has defended the ideal of the Monroe doctrine (1823), known for the slogan “America for the Americans”, which rejects Europe’s interventions and influence. Further, the creation of the O.A.S. - Organization of American States in 1889 intended to promote political dialogue between South, North and Central Americas. On the other hand, it’s been claimed that within the hemisphere itself, the U.S. has often “followed Europe's footsteps in its construction of Latin America as inferiorized, equally rendering that continent's ‘difference’ as symbolically invisible by making the hemisphere's name, America, a synonym for the United States” (OBOLER, 1996, p. 294).

The U.S.A.’s foreign policy toward the Caribbean and Latin America in general at the beginning of the 20th century, during President Theodore Roosevelt’s term

(1901-1909) and the following decades, is known as “the big stick” policies, implying threat and military superiority. Washington constantly intervened in its neighbors political affairs so as to defend its financial and economical interests. Later on, however, during Franklin Roosevelt’s presidency during the 1930s, the U.S.A. stepped back and its foreign policy toward other American governments is known as “Good Neighbor Policy”, a period of less ostensible political and military interventions. Nonetheless, after the end of Second World War, the polarization between socialism and capitalism deeply transformed the way the U.S.A. conducted its international affairs. The Cold War began and Latin America and the Caribbean suffered the pressure of allying with Washington’s capitalist interests. The fear of communist governments so close to the American territory led the U.S.A. to support numerous dictatorships in South and Central America, as long as they maintained a pro-U.S.A. economy and politics. Cuba, for instance, had suffered military and political interventions by the U.S. since its independence from Spain in 1898. However, in 1959 Cuba’s pro-American President, Fulgencio Batista, was forced to leave the country by a nationalist movement led by Fidel Castro. Cuban immigration to the United States after 1950s had a mostly political characteristic due to Fidel Castro’s socialist government, which upset the Cuban elite. Due to the economical and social difficulties the country has faced since then a great number of Cubans have migrated to the U.S.A. Currently, according to the American census of 2010, there are over 1, 7 million Cubans living there¹. On the other hand, the Dominican migration which interests us at present happened under different circumstances which will be further discussed.

2.2.2 The land of opportunity

The United States has embodied the figure of protector and investor, but paradoxically, it has also assumed the role of a power which intervenes, threatens and exploits. Since the independence processes from their colonizers – mainly France, England and Spain - that occurred during the 19th and 20th centuries, the

¹ U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2011, p. 3.

small nations of the Caribbean islands have been under the imperialist influence of the United States, leading many Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Haitians, Jamaicans and Dominicans, among others, to seek political asylum and/or economical opportunities in the “land of the free” up north. Due to linguistic, ethnic, cultural and historical-economical differences, this movement, like many others, has resulted in a “tension between the culture of the country of origin and that of the adopted homeland, one representing the past and the other the future of the immigrant” (LUIS, 2000, p. 839). However these tensions don’t need to be paralyzing; they may become source for creativity and political debate, perhaps creating new bridges for understanding.

We ought to analyze firstly the circumstances of these migrations, which happened toward the United States. That is not to say that they did not occur to other destinations such as to Canada, Western Europe and to other Caribbean islands; however, we will focus on the flux to the United States. Carole Boyce Davies believes that Caribbean identities are products of numerous processes of migration and “as a result many conclude that the Caribbean is not so much a geographical location but a cultural construction based on a series of mixtures, languages, communities of people” (DAVIES, 2001, p. 13), in other words, Caribbean identities are results of multiple intersecting diasporic journeys, forced and voluntary, old and new, such as African and Asian. All of them produced particular cultural forms in each nation. Julia Alvarez describes the Caribbean as “a string of islands, a sieve of continents, north and south, a sponge, as most islands are, absorbing those who come and go” (ALVAREZ, 1999, p. 175). It’s even been affirmed that the Caribbean presences, as Hall discusses them, undo the generalized claim that hybridity and the nation-state are opposites (PURI, 2004, p. 6).

The recent Caribbean emigrations, which happen mostly to the U.S.A. and to the United Kingdom, the new and the former hegemonic centers respectively, grew significantly between the 1950s and 1980s, for several reasons. In the post-World War II period, most Caribbean, Asian, Latin American and European economies were weakened or collapsing. Since The U.S.A. was the significant exception, it made loans to the struggling countries that needed to be rebuilt, and it attracted immigrants from all over the world, seeking better lives. Besides, in 1965, the Immigration and Nationality Act Amendment² allowed larger number of immigrants to enter the U.S.

² (WIKIPEDIA, 2011)

since it had ceased to forbid entrance based on proportion of the immigrants already there. Regarding the immigration to the U.K., it can be explained by the fact that the country's industry needed a larger work force to recover after the war, thus immigration was encouraged. Until the Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962, all Commonwealth citizens could enter and stay in the United Kingdom without any restriction. Besides, during the Cold War, the U.K. also received political refugees from communist European countries.

Regarding Caribbean migrations, the political and economical struggles of each of those nations motivated people's dislocation. Nonetheless, we cannot disregard the disparate circumstances that differentiate Latin American and Caribbean migrations, as it may be not only useful, but necessary to "examine more fully the meaning and implications of Latinos' heterogeneity in the U.S. context" (OBOLER, 1996, p. 311).

The great number of Caribbean people and other immigrants from Latin America and Mexico has impacted the U.S.A.'s immigration policies, right's conservative movements as much as its political and cultural scenarios, especially after the 1970s. Literary critic Ellen McCracken states that during the 60s and 70s, Hispanics were a growing minority refusing to be acculturated, finally getting recognized. McCracken defends that: "Narrative played a central role in social change from the start, for indeed such sociopolitical realignments are impossible without critical re-deployment of narrative" (McCRACKEN, 1999, p. 3). In other words, writing was and is a fundamental tool to raise political awareness and initiate crucial debates about racism and social injustices.

2.2.3 The Dominican Republic: specificities

The Dominican Republic, located on the island of Hispaniola, where Haiti is also located, has as its capital Santo Domingo, the first capital of Spain in the New World. After the Dominican independence from Spanish rule in 1821, the Dominican Republic faced conflicts with Haiti that desired to unify the island under the same government; the Hatians succeeded and separated only in 1844, the Dominican Republic gained political autonomy (PONS, 1998, p. 120, 164). The Dominican

Republic tried to strike a treaty in order to annex itself to the U.S.A. in 1871, but the American Senate did not approve it. Frank Moya Pons explains that in the end of the 19th century, instead of exporting wood and raising cattle, the island was now producing sugar, cacao and coffee and exporting to the U.S. (PONS, 1998, p. 279).

By 1905 it's said that the country had accumulated a debt with other countries of about 40 million dollars due to devaluation of the Dominican currency and recurring financial crisis (PONS, 1998, p. 280, 293). The United States occupied the Dominican Republic's territory from 1916 to 1924 to avoid European interventions and secure the construction of the Panama Canal. Moya Pons also informs us that American officials took charge of ministries and the military government censored the Dominican press and forbade public meetings until 1920; American militaries believed to be in a mission to correct the economical, political and social life (PONS, 1998, p. 321, 322, 330). Thus, we can perceive how the U.S.A. exercised political and financial power over the Dominican Republic.

In 1930, General Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, who was, as Richard Lee Turits observes, "a lower-middle-class man with a few years of schooling", that had joined the Dominican National Guard in 1919 and rose through the ranks of the military, was named commander-in-chief by then president Horacio Vásquez. Turits adds that "when a small civilian-led rebellion was organized to unseat Vásquez in 1930, Trujillo, through his control of the army, was in a position to facilitate a coup" (TURITS 2002, p. 603). Trujillo was elected president virtually unopposed and his authoritarian government lasted more than 30 years, a period of "nationalist and populist version of modernization" (TURITS, 2002, p. 604), but also of political persecution, imprisonment, torture and assassination of those who opposed the regime as we can see in various Alvarez's works. His regime tried to lead the country to development and wealth through populist policies, and Turits states that "his reformist project of modernity promised to forge a peasant social base for the regime, foster agricultural self-sufficiency, which was critical in the global economic depression of the 1930s, and increase internal revenues" (TURITS, 2002, p. 604)

One of the symbols of political struggle against Trujillo's authoritarian regime is the Mirabal sisters, whose alias was *Las Mariposas*. Julia Alvarez's second novel *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994) tells the personal histories of the sisters, blending historical facts and fiction to create her novel. In the book's postscript she informs the readers that the characters of her novel are neither the legendary nor the

actual Mirabal sisters, but the ones of her creation (ALVAREZ, 1994, p. 324). The novel seems to highlight how much lives were affected by the regime, both for those who stayed and those who left and how much of Dominican history was lost due to the dictatorship. For Jessica Cantiello, Alvarez's works expose her English-speaking audience to Dominican history and also refuses Trujillo's mandate of one official history (CANTIELLO, 2011, p. 88).

We can perceive the instability and hard times in the Dominican Republic's history in one of Julia Alvarez's essays, namely "An American Childhood in the Dominican Republic" in which she states that the last three generations of her family had witnessed "half-a-dozen revolutions, changes of governments, as well as hurricanes, droughts, earthquakes and several American marine occupations" (ALVAREZ, 1987, p. 71), highlighting the link between personal and political, private and public. Lúcia Suarez argues that in this essay, Alvarez betrays her "colonial" subjectivity, since her "American childhood" is shaped by historical dependency on the United States (SUÁREZ, 2004, p. 122). We believe, however, though that the title and the content of the essay are ironic because even though her childhood was privileged, it was marked by American imperialist discourse and how the upper class wanted to associate itself with "superior" American values.

It's been reported that United States' President Franklin Roosevelt would have commented regarding Trujillo: "He might be a son of a bitch, but he's our son of a bitch", which can explain his long permanence in power with the U.S.A.'s support. Paradoxically, the political persecution and authoritarian regime motivated Dominicans, including the Alvarez family to leave the island for US democracy, showing the contradiction of American policies. In 1961 Trujillo was assassinated, but political struggles continued. Suárez informs us that in 1965 The Dominican Republic was militarily invaded by the US to defeat the Constitutionalist forces (SUÁREZ, 2004, p. 123). She also notes how the number of Dominicans admitted legally in the U.S.A. increased significantly between 1965 and 1966, and it continued to grow during the 1966 and 1970 period (GRASMUCK; PESSAR, 1991, p. 20 In SUÁREZ, 2004, p.123). More recently, the number of Dominicans living in the USA has increased again, going from around 700.000 in 2000 to over 1, 4 million people, according to the 2010 census³.

³ U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2011, p. 3.

2.3. Women on the road

Diaspora should not be used as monolithic or generalizing term, because it runs the risk of becoming an essentialist terminology, eliding the particularities of these sojourns, taken under disparate circumstances by individuals from varied backgrounds. These subjects cannot just be amalgamated under a single flag. Black, Asian, Jewish and Caribbean diasporas are just some examples; they might be political or economical; forced or voluntary, legal or illegal. Furthermore, diaspora does not “transcend differences of race, class, gender and sexuality” (BRAZIEL; MANNUR, 2003, p. 5) or differences of generation, place of origin and religion. Therefore these categories intersect and position the subject inside different discursive sites that are shifting and multiple, converging and diverging. Focusing on women in contemporary migrations, we are to consider their fundamental role, the possibilities these movements present to them, the particularity of female displacement, plus how they represent themselves in diasporic narratives.

Patriarchy has been the dominant ideology that defines gender roles. However, the term must be understood in order to discuss what women problematize in literature. In the text “Sisterhood: political solidarity between women”, feminist theorist Anne McClintock affirms that the oppression over women is perpetuated by “institutional and social structures, by the individuals who dominate, exploit or oppress; and by the victims themselves. Male supremacist ideology encourages us to believe we are valueless and obtain values by relating to or bonding with men” (McCLINTOCK, 1997, p 396). This foregrounds the patriarchal discourse that leads society to believe that women are inferior to and should be dominated by men. However, patriarchy is stronger in some cultures than in others, and processes of migration and globalization can provoke shifts in the positions of both oppressor and oppressed

James Clifford has analyzed the issues of diaspora as gendered experience in the 20th century and believes that women’s lives in this situation “can be doubly painful”, not only because of “material and spiritual insecurities of exile”, but due to the “claims of old and new patriarchies”, although they also may find displacement conducive to “renegotiation of gender roles”, since new spaces for political and economical autonomy are opened (CLIFFORD, 1994, p. 314). Gayatri Spivak

believes that the most significant difference between old and new diasporas is the “use, abuse, participation and role of women” (SPIVAK, 1996, p. 250) in contemporary diasporic movements. Additionally, Avtar Brah sees this phenomenon as the feminization of migration linked to the new labor division required by internationalization of capital which relies on women workers, with women having become “emblematic figures of contemporary regimes of accumulation” (BRAH, 1998, p. 179). Therefore, a woman from the Caribbean living in the U.S., in spite of running the risk of suffering double oppression and othering, both in the domestic sphere and the external world, might equally claim agency and conduct her own process of empowerment through work, solidarity, political engagement and artistic production, including our object of study: literature.

Women, like displaced peoples in general, have long been idealized, silenced, misconstrued and/or objectified in dominant discourses. Through appropriation and re-writing, which often come accompanied by irony and parody, women writers, especially postmodern and postcolonial ones, manage to criticize power inequities and other social issues while highlighting the fact that they had been excluded from narrative economy and the political sphere. Though the patriarchal ideological system in place cannot simply be denied or erased, feminisms have found tools that might help implode it, narrative being an important one. Women’s self-representation allows access to the lives that had been ignored by historical discourse and literary publications.

As discussed in the previous chapter, women’s autobiographical practices have only gained space in publishing houses in the 1950s and academic attention after the 1970s, for apparently they were “not deemed appropriately ‘complex’” (SMITH; WATSON, 1998, p. 4). According to Smith and Watson, undoubtedly there had been a few exceptions: Virginia Woolf did produce a diary and she left an unfinished autobiography called *Sketch of the Past* (1940). In the fifties, they explain, some famous women’s lives, like Mary McCarthy’s *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (1957); and unknown ones with involving stories became bestsellers, such as *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Coming of age stories by African American writers also became popular, such as Maya Angelou’s *I Know why the Caged Birds Sing* (1959). In the broader sense, women’s writing was recovered by feminist historians and bibliographers who shifted the focus of their disciplines from “large-scale political events to the social history of everyday” (SMITH; WATSON, 1998, p. 6). The aspects

that call attention and differentiate them from the predominantly white men's self-referential narratives are both formal – through lack of linearity or unity – and thematic – dealing with issues of home, family, exclusion. These narratives may offer, according to Avtar Brah, crucial insights “into the politics of location” and contestation of naturalized identities (BRAH, 1998, p. 180).

2.3.1 Themes in diasporic women's writing

A theme that is constantly present in diasporic woman's writing works is the issue of home. This issue primarily evokes two ideas: the feeling of belonging to a nation or a people and the personal space of our daily lives where family ties are constructed. Avtar Brah suggests that the first invokes 'home' in the form of a simultaneously floating and rooted signifier, [...] the narratives of the 'national' (BRAH, 1998, p. 3). The latter, Brah argues, has been a trope depicted as female space and “connotes our network of family, kin, friends, colleagues and various 'significant others'. [...] That is, a community 'imagined' in most part through daily encounters” (BRAH, 1998, p. 4). Regarding this naturalization of the home as associated to the feminine, Rosemary George claims that it has served to present both - women and the home - as “mutual handicaps, mutually disempowering” (GEORGE, 1999, p. 19), excluding women from the public/political spheres.

“Home” can have multiple layers of meanings. For some subjects, George argues, the words “home”, “home-country” and “feeling at home” are givens, for others they are used for political, reactionary purposes (GEORGE, 1999, p. 5-, 6). Whether home means belonging to a domestic space or a nation, both are problematic for the disenfranchised women of diaspora and a recurring theme in their writings, as Carole Boyce Davies argues:

Migration creates the desire for home, which in turn produces the rewriting of home. Homesickness or homelessness, the rejection of home or longing for home become motivating factors in this rewriting. Home can only have meaning once one experiences a level of displacement from it (DAVIES, 2001, p. 113).

Nonetheless, the longing for the homeland present in many migrant writers' works is also longing for an irrecoverable past. Therefore, the desire to return to the land of origin "can neither be fulfilled nor requited and hence, it's the beginning of the symbolic, of representation" (HALL, 2003, p. 245). Through artistic expression diasporic subjects are able to invent, criticize and desire a Home; however, it isn't an idealized or utopian version of it, but a site where affection and contestation are hand in hand. Besides, it does not necessarily imply a wish to return, since going back would also mean losing what had been gained in the host country – friends, partners, a career, customs.

Writing about home also means to establish communication with it, but it also expresses its conflictive meanings in the experience of the formerly colonized (DAVIES, 2001, p. 129). Similarly, Brah believes that there is a creative tension between 'home' and 'dispersion' in terms of diasporic contexts, for the diasporic consciousness inscribes a "homing desire while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origins" (BRAH, 1998, p. 193), in other words, there is a desire to belong somewhere, although it doesn't equate with nativist claims. For Susan Friedman, the "'new migration' has blurred the boundaries between the old home and the new, a before and an after, a homeland and a host land", bringing about new "forms of sedimented and multiply communal identities" (FRIEDMAN, 2009, p. 10).

Clifford states that "diasporic forms of longing, memory and (dis)identifications are shared by a large spectrum of minority and migrant populations" (CLIFFORD, 1994, p. 304). Remembering the homeland and the family home can be both comforting and painful, since home can be, at the same time, "a place of safety and of terror" (BRAH, 1998, p.180). When one's childhood was marked by poverty, abandon, violence, war, or rupture, then the domestic space can no longer be represented as an untroubled and idyllic locus, but often as a place of conflict, contradiction and suffering. However, the desire for a homeland and search for a place of origin, whether reconstructed or invented, might also offer a site of identification and resistance, as it does, for instance, in the case of African diasporas, since blackness has been a factor of exclusion even in cases where no geographical displacement has occurred. African Americans, for example, in spite of being American citizens have had to struggle for equal rights.

Diaspora hybrid cultural forms have become a site for problematization and revolution, resistance and syncretism; they are "deployed in transnational networks,

built from multiple attachments, and they encode practices of accommodation with, as well as resistance to, host countries and their norms" (CLIFFORD, 1994, p. 307). In this manner, these cultural expressions involve constant negotiations. Besides, literature is a key site where diasporic authors engage or debate concepts of racial identity, diasporic community and postnational citizenship (WALTERS, 2005, p.15).

Life writing provides personalized views of diasporic communities and on the experience of dislocation. Nonetheless, this representation of the collective filtered by the individual can be problematic as far as making the life of one stand for the lives of many. Leigh Gilmore states that criticism of autobiography offers writers the opportunity to "promote themselves as representative subjects, that is, as subjects who stand for others" (GILMORE, 2001, p. 4). However she also argues that this representativeness has its limits, since it is hard sometimes to distinguish "mine" from "ours" without falsifying either in these context (GILMORE, 2001, p. 5).

Concerning Latino/a writers in the U.S.A., Ellen McCracken argues that they have become "desirable and profitable postmodern ethnic commodities" (McCRACKEN, 2003, p. 4). Diasporic writers, such as Caribbean ones, often face a problem of finding their place in the market without being categorized and limited to a particular niche. As McCracken observes, these writers are valued by the publishers and the press for presenting what many perceive to be the exotic Other (McCRACKEN, 2003, p. 5). Lúcia Suárez posits that Latino/a writers "must invent themselves as they negotiate their double cultural affiliations: Latin American and North American" (SUÁREZ, 2004, p. 118). Julia Alvarez confesses she sometimes complains against being part of neither world – neither American nor Dominican – because she is classified as an ethnic writer by Americans, limiting her readership to Latinos/as and putting her in the position of sociological interest; by the same token she is rejected by Dominicans for not being one of them (ALVAREZ, 1999, p. 174).

Nevertheless, through their fictional, autobiographical and semi-autobiographical texts, migrant woman writers are able to problematize female agency in diasporic contexts, while subverting the traditional western male voices of life narratives. Migrant women's narratives often highlight how gender and women's experiences are flashpoints of complexity of the new migration, positing how violence – against the female body and spirit – is a core element in migration's turbulence (FRIEDMAN, 2009, p. 23).

Both migrant authors and their female characters “are influenced by two or more cultures and develop hybrid identities in consequence of the ruptures that result from the cultural and geographical displacement they experience” (HARRIS, 2007, p. 123). Alvarez declares that she is an American-Dominican writer and adds: “That’s not just a term. I’m mapping a country that is not on the map” (ALVAREZ, 1999, p. 173). She stresses that the ambivalence of this position is what attracts her: “It’s a world formed of contradictions, clashes, cominglings – the *gringa* and the Dominican, and it’s precisely that tension and richness that interests me. Being in and out of both worlds, looking at one side from the other side” (ALVAREZ, 1999, p. 173)

As Rosemary George affirms, literature may serve as a site of resistance to dominant ideologies (GEORGE, 1996, p. 5). Moreover, we agree with Wendy Walters’ argument that maybe authorship allows these writers to construct a diaspora space, “a space more habitable than the spaces of exclusion in particular home countries” (WALTERS, 2005, p. 18). In other words, the homing desire of these diasporic writers maybe fulfilled through their narration/writing. Walters further explains that:

We can read contemporary diasporic literature as shifting from the concept of origin as the site of Return to the concept of diaspora itself as a home to which a writer experiencing the racial exclusions might return, via their writing, through the literary constructions of alternative narratives of identity (WALTERS, 2005, p. XIII).

I have been using the term ‘migrant’ instead of ‘immigrant’ so far, however, it wasn’t a casual choice. Carine Mardorossian argues that over the past few years some exiled postcolonial writers have reconfigured their identity as migrant, rejecting the label of exiled and forcing readers to rethink the difference between experiencing exile and representing it, instead of preoccupying themselves with the condition of exile *per se* (MARDOROSSIAN, 2005, p. 114). The term “migrant” seems to reject the negatively constructed idea of ‘immigrant’, often associated with victimization and exploitation. Instead ‘migrant’ carries a notion of constant journey, of not belonging anywhere and at the same time everywhere. The term though, should not be idealized, confounded with a privileged cosmopolitanism, which has seemed, according to Bruce Robbins “to claim universality by its virtue of independence [...] a luxurious free-floating view from above” (ROBBINS, 1998, p. 1).

Although Suzanne Oboler discusses Gloria Anzaldua in her text, I believe that Alvarez’s works may also be included among those which are: “rearticulating

Latinos/as' multiple roots in the Americas as a whole, in order to understand, interpret, and reassess their respective communities' voluntary or forced experiences of exile" (OBOLER, 1996, p. 292). These migrant Caribbean woman authors are able to discuss not only their female hybrid identities but also the ruptures that led them and their communities to where they are and the specific conditions of their dislocations, looking at past, present and future; here and there, us and them not separately, but as interconnected forces.

2.4 Identity issues

It's paramount to discuss identity if we are to analyze and interpret migrant women's life writings, so as to understand who are the "I"s and "we"s in their self-referential narratives. From what position do they speak? How does the "I" come to be what it is? What discourses are interwoven beneath the surface of the text? Should "we" and "I" be separated or are they contained in one another? What is the relevance of these writings at this historical moment?

Identity is, at this moment, probably one of the most debated, theorized and contested epistemological concepts in several academic fields. These discussions have sprung from the shifts and disruptions this concept has suffered and caused in the last forty years or so. They have impacted history, psychology, sociology, anthropology and literature. Identity must be thought in terms of the individual and the cultural spheres, albeit not separately, as we believe they are inextricably linked. Furthermore, these major changes have also impacted life writing in general.

Stuart Hall argues in *The Question of Cultural Identity* that there have been five great de-centerings which have modified forever the manner in which we conceive, theorize and write about identity. Firstly, Hall explains, Karl Marx's affirmation of men being produced by the historical conditions given, implicating that men were not entirely in control of their own destinies. Second, the discovery of the 'unconscious' by Sigmund Freud, destabilizing the notion of a unified and self-knowing subject. Thirdly Lacan's theory of the "I" as constructed through other people's eyes, meaning that we are constituted through our relations with others and their perceptions. Fourthly, Ferdinand Saussure's description of language and

discourse not as personal, but as an arbitrary social construction. Finally, Michel Foucault's argument that we are constantly regulated and watched by disciplinary powers, such as state, police, school, and so on. All in all, those ruptures meant that neither individual nor national identity could be taken as unidimensional, complete and stable (HALL, 2007, p. 606-610). Further, we must stress that "identities materialize within collectivities" and they are marked in terms of categories, such as gender, nationality, ethnicity and so on (SMITH; WATSON, 2001, p. 55).

Concerning self-thematization and personal identity, its transitional character had already been noticed by Michel Montaigne in his essays. Straub observes that the French aristocrat said he was portraying his own transition (STRAUB, 2009, p. 80). In postmodern autobiography, Linda Hutcheon writes, the challenge to self-representation is exemplified in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* in which the author warns the reader to consider the character as part of a novel (HUTCHEON, 1995, p. 40).

Feminisms have equally played a role in contesting stable identities, as much as its naturalizing constraints, which have resulted in stereotyping, exclusion, interiorized discrimination, violence and political silence. By making the private public, the feminist movement and writers have found in autobiographical practice the literary space to contest the patriarchal systems that had often silenced and oppressed them, deconstructing its demands and impositions. Linda Hutcheon points out that postmodern feminist authors politicize the personal in their "reevaluation of life-writing" with great self-consciousness, representing the self and others in history, thus revealing the "problematic relation of the private person writing to the public as well as personal events once lived" (HUTCHEON, 1995, p. 161), underscoring the separation between lived experience and its representation. However, when women debunk patriarchal demands and values in their autobiographical, they also need to build their own subjectivities. Linda Anderson believes that "The autobiographical subject is cast adrift from patriarchal origins and must endlessly reinvent themselves, their location and community along with new forms of autobiography" (ANDERSON, 2004, p. 120).

In "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", Hall reminds us that there are two ways in which we can conceptualize cultural identity. One based on common history, language and ancestry, "a sort of collective 'one true self'", with unchanging and stable "frames of reference and meaning"; the other way of thinking it is as

construction, constantly transforming process, “a matter of ‘becoming’ as much as of ‘being’” (HALL, 2003, p. 234-236). The two are useful when discussing diasporic subjects, hybridity and self-referential narratives. The hybrid “I” is ambiguous and unstable, therefore, the “I” captured in their life writings is equally slippery. As it has been argued, the tensions and negotiations that characterize these types of displacement result in the fluidity of hybrid identities (HARRIS, 2007, p. 123-124). We must also see that they are always fruit of a time, a place, a specific position:

Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, of an identity as a “production” which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation (HALL, 2003, p. 234)

These questionings have brought major shifts in several fields of study and are fundamental when discussing diasporic identities and hybrid subjectivities. It has been affirmed that: “Diasporic traversals question the rigidities of identity itself – religious, ethnic, gendered, national” (BRAZIEL; MANNUR, 2003, p. 3). According to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, new immigrant narratives have recently appeared, exploring a postethnic identity that challenges earlier versions of ethnic identity as fixed in place, history, and culture (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 156,157). Hence, identity being thought of as a ‘production’ instead of ‘ready’ has not only destabilized essentialist, totalizing conceptualizations of the individual Self, but also contested binaries: I/they, men/women, insider/outsider, black/white, native/foreigner.

Homi Bhabha argues that identities are constructed through a process of alterity (BHABHA, 1994, p. 175), that is, through difference, both in relation to and opposition to the Other, homes are, according to Rosemary George, constructed in a similar manner. She believes that home is “the place where one is *in* because an Other(s) is kept out” (GEORGE, 1996, p. 27). Bhabha also argues that what allows the “exercise of colonial power through discourse” is an “articulation of forms of difference – racial and sexual” (BHABHA, 1994, p. 67), which is perpetrated on diasporic subjects and attempts to keep Other(s) out. But the opposition between I/you/they can be re-thought in autobiographical novels, where the “I” that narrates is not patent, thus exclusion/alienation can become inclusion/recognition.

Contesting the way in which western Humanism used to define identities has contributed to modifying representations of the Self in texts. These contestations

were the causes and consequences of social and political movements of the second half of the twentieth century, such as Feminisms, Civil rights, indigenous political organization, which allowed voice and space to those who had been marginalized, objectified, silenced and homogenized. Linda Hutcheon points out that, in postmodern texts, subjectivity is always gendered, rooted also in class, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation (HUTCHEON, 1995, p. 39). Smith and Watson underscore that this multiplicity of identities “are not additive but intersectional” (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 36). Moreover, when Hutcheon analyses Roland Barthes’ postmodernist autobiography, she stresses that postmodernist self-representation like his are aware of “the doubleness of the self, as both narrator and narrated” (HUTCHEON, 1995, p. 40), a position permeated by ideology, memory and the mechanisms of self-imagining.

Autobiographical practice by diasporic authors “move the “I” toward the collective and shift the focus of the narration toward an as-yet virtual space of community, across and beyond the old boundaries of identification” (SMITH; WATSON, 2001, p. 132). Caribbean woman authors often make use of postmodern strategies in their self-referential works, positioning themselves historically and acknowledging the role of class and race in subjectivity. In Carole Boyce Davies’ study of black women’s writings, she also affirms that the questioning and reclaiming of meanings of metanarratives of self and identity are destabilized in Caribbean women’s writings. She states that:

For the Caribbean woman, confronting racial discrimination and foreign bias, Caribbean male phallicism and American imperialism, the relationship to Caribbean identity has to be problematized. It cannot be a flat, unidimensional relationship or experience (DAVIES, 2001, p. 116).

The use of autobiographical practice allows migrant woman writers, who are in the privileged position of insider/outsider of both American and Caribbean cultures and norms, to re-write their homelands and inscribe their private experiences of migration within the male-dominated public sphere of literature. While discussing women’s roles and behavioral demands within often conflictive cultural contexts, these authors problematize questions of home, homeland and difference. These writers equally manage to contest the white male canon, subverting format and

techniques of life narratives, contest dichotomical boundaries between genres, identities and genders.

3 PORTRAIT OF THE MIGRANT ARTIST AS A YOUNG WOMAN: JULIA ALVAREZ'S LIFE NARRATIVES

Some writers seem simply to decline autobiography's constraints, to slip by them gracefully without being caught up in their demands, and in doing so reveal the potential for self-representational writing without the explicit presence of its most familiar requirements.

Leigh Gilmore

In my *familia* fiction is a form of fact.
Julia Alvarez

3.1 Julia Alvarez's autobiographical practice

Julia Alvarez was born on March 27th, 1950 in New York, United States. She often writes about her childhood in the Dominican Republic although she was not actually born there. The writer clarifies her place of birth in the "About me" section of her website "Guess the first thing I should say is that I was **not** born in the Dominican Republic. The flap bio on *García Girls* mentioned I was raised in the D.R., and a lot of bios after that changed *raised* to *born*". Alvarez was actually born in the U.S.A., but when she was three months old, her parents' returned to the Dominican Republic. There, her family led a comfortable life, living in the family compound. Alvarez's father got involved in a plot to assassinate President Rafael Trujillo, who had been in power since the 1930s. When the regime began to suspect his political activities, Mr. Alvarez had to evacuate the family in a hurry to New York. At the time, Julia was only ten years old. Julia Alvarez informs us that her father, who was a doctor, obtained a fellowship to study cardiologic surgery in a New York hospital. At the time, to leave the country everyone needed a permit from the government, a permission doctor Alvarez managed to acquire by pointing out that in case Trujillo had heart problems, there would be no heart surgeons in the country to save him (ALVAREZ, 1999, p. 16).

In 1984, Julia Alvarez published her first book of poetry, named *Homecoming*,. She also worked as a professor at several universities and writer in residence at

Middlebury College. She moved often, taking jobs in different parts of the U.S. In 1991 she got tenure at that same college, which she gave up later. Nowadays, she is married, lives in Vermont and dedicates her life to writing. Besides writing, she is engaged in other activities as well. She and her husband have a coffee farm in the Dominican Republic where they have developed a program of sustainable farming and built a school for the workers family's children.

In spite of her current success, becoming a writer was not really an option for a Dominican woman. In fact, it might not have happened had they stayed on the island. Growing up in the Dominican Republic, where a large portion of the population was not able to read, and reading was not a cultivated habit, she did not have much contact with literature. However, she explains "The power of stories was all around me, for the tradition of storytelling is deeply rooted in my Dominican culture" (ALVAREZ, 1999, p. 138).

She also claims that her first muses were Scheherazade, the storyteller from the classical book *One Thousand and One Nights*; and the maids who raised her and her sisters. Regarding her profession, Alvarez explains that her migration to an English-speaking country was responsible for her becoming a writer, "Not understanding the language, I had to pay close attention to each word -- great training for a writer. I also discovered the welcoming world of the imagination and books". Alvarez recalls that after a while, the inevitable happened and she began to speak her native tongue, Spanish, with an accent; she says she only retained childhood Spanish (ALVAREZ, 1999, p. 61). It wasn't a total loss, though. Lúcia Suárez suggests that Alvarez's use of syntax in English sometimes reminds us of English with Spanish grammar (SUÁREZ, 2004, p. 129).

This experience of cultural and geographical displacement permeates Julia Alvarez's body of work, and as we have already mentioned, she believes that all novels are loosely autobiographical (ALVAREZ, 2000, p. 165). *How the Garcia Girls lost their Accents*, her first novel published in 1991 and her third, *Yo!*, published in 1997 are examples of this belief. In her novels we can see that exile has positive and negative effects, even though it's been said that the negatives are emphasized and remembered, since the positives are easily internalized (CAMPELLO, 2008, p. 104). Both novels focus on Yolanda García, her family and their enforced migration from the Dominican Republic to the U.S.A, and the internal struggles to deal with their fragmented identities. Moreover, in the introduction to *Something to Declare*,

published in 1998, she explains that the book is dedicated to the readers who, she writes, have asked so many good questions and who want to know more than she has told in her books (ALVAREZ, 1999, p. xiv). Additionally, a number of her essays draw inspiration from her personal struggles, such as “An American Childhood in the Dominican Republic”. Alvarez also uses the technology of self-representation in her second novel *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994) and utilizes some passages of her adolescence in her non-fiction book *Once upon a Quinceaneras* (2007).

As a matter of fact, it’s been suggested that there is an anxiety of representation in her works caused by “broken memories that intersect Julia Alvarez’s national identity(ies) and self-presentation” (SUÁREZ, 2004, p. 117). Besides, Jessica Cantiello argues that given the prevalence of autobiographical elements in almost all of her publications, “it is striking that Alvarez has not written a conventional autobiography or memoir, but instead has presented versions of her life, or pseudo-memories, across non-fiction essays, novels, and poems” (CANTIELLO, 2001, p. 86). Although Cantiello points out this fact, it is not really so surprising after all, considering Alvarez’s mistrust of memory, her fragmented identity and her passion for inventiveness. Alvarez seems to underscore throughout her body of work, that autobiography has certain limitations and constraints, such as their supposed transparency and truthfulness. If a subject’s personal history is marked by rupture, dislocation and fragmentation, being truthful and transparent might be almost impossible, if not undesired, tasks. Alvarez also comments in the postscript to *In the Time of the Butterflies* that “A novel is not, after all, a historical document, but a way to travel through the human heart” (ALVAREZ, 1995, p. 324). As Leigh Gilmore argues, “the limits of autobiography [...] might conspire to prevent some self-representational stories [...] if they were subjected to a literal truth test” (GILMORE, 2001, p. 14); therefore, writing autobiographical novels makes much more sense.

Self-thematization is a recurring attitude throughout Alvarez’s works, crossing through her very rich production of poetry, children’s books and essays. Hybridity, history, migration and women’s roles are often present in her novels and other writings. However, they are never treated as linear, stable and unidimensional tropes – instead, they are treated as ambiguous and unstable tropes. Her work also stresses how the notions of truth and memory are opaque, especially in the context of dislocation and rupture. She constantly reiterates her particular position in-between cultures:

The discrepancies between what is true and not true, known and unknown, seem to haunt Alvarez, resulting in a body of literature that, despite its light-hearted expositions, interrogated Dominican American Latina identity from her particular perspective: a woman of color who is considered 'white' in her country and privileged on many levels as well as coming from an exiled Dominican family (SUÁREZ, 2004, p. 118).

The book of essays *Something to Declare*, which is the closest to a traditional autobiography, has two central focuses: migration and writing. Concerning migration, Lucia Suárez states that the essays show maturity, not dwelling merely on the dynamics of being or not being American, but on the advantages that being American could hold, especially since in Dominican culture education for women was not a given (SUÁREZ, 2004, p. 125). As for writing, it is in a way connected to migration due to the issue of language. Although Alvarez stresses that she has always been a storyteller, whether to get rid of a punishment or defend herself, she believes "it's no surprise, given my island oral tradition, I became a storyteller" (ALVAREZ, 1999, p. 138-139). The subdivision of the essays in two sections "Customs" and "Declarations", it's also been argued, underscores the interdependence of culture and language, and "such double-entendres accentuate the role of language as a metaphor for identity, Dominican and American, in the writer's world view" (WALL, 2003, p. 128). The book reveals the cultural luggage Alvarez has accumulated throughout her hyphenated experience (HARRIS, 2007, p. 129). One of the gains of exile that is present through this book of essays, and through her literary production as well, is the comprehension and consciousness of the advantages and disadvantages this condition fosters (CAMPELLO, 1998, p. 110), in other words, her position as a hyphenated subject is a mixture of burden and privilege.

Julia Alvarez deals with crucial questions in her autobiographical practice.. For instance, how does a diasporic woman handle gender oppression in a bicultural context? And how does this apparently abstract concept affects women's lives even though many have achieved financial autonomy and equal rights under the law? What are the gains and losses for women who leave their homelands, forcedly or not? These questions do not have easy, straightforward answers. Novels such as Alvarez's first and third utilize the author's experiences to point out their complexity and the material effects of ideologies on people's lives. According to Ellen McCracken, Alvarez "[reveals] immigrant identity to be the unstable site of ethnic, class, and, especially, gender battles" (McCRACKEN, 1999, p. 32). We believe

Alvarez manages to use the personal to discuss the collective and highlights how they are constantly interwoven. However, her work also considers her position an upper-class, Dominican-American woman and as an artist.

How the García Girls Lost their Accents and *Yo!* are able to disrupt traditions and conventions on both aesthetic and thematic levels. Ellen McCracken defends that Alvarez uses transgression “to reveal identity to be an unstable category, undergirded by gender, ethnic and class ‘trouble’” (McCRACKEN, 1999, p. 6). We also believe, like David Vázquez, that “in the fictional/historical world of Alvarez’s novels, fact, fiction, history and personal memories exist as equally valid sources” (VÁZQUEZ, 2003, p. 385); therefore, the author questions the supposed hierarchy that privileges archival data and lessens the value of the fictive as much as of the everyday experiences of ordinary people. By blending autobiography and fiction, Alvarez transgresses pre-established boundaries between genres and contests dominant narratives. Furthermore, Carine Mardarossian includes Julia Alvarez in a group of Caribbean women writers who are “producing their best sellers from the heart of a neocolonial center”. The Dominican-American author “exemplifies a new aesthetics that urges us to rethink postcolonial approaches to literature in light of the global changes that have transformed our world” (MARDOROSSIAN, 2005, p.1).

Themes such as patriarchal systems, discrimination and the matter of belonging are important in her work and she deploys her personal history in order to problematize them. Besides serving as tools for contestation and resistance, according to David Vázquez, life writing and narrating can even have a therapeutic effect: “the superposition of history and the impact on individual’s daily lives allow them to resolve the trauma of dislocation and exile as well as clearing space for feminine agency” (VÁZQUEZ, 2003, p. 401). Hence, self-representation is at the same time medicinal, artistic and political.

3.2 Little Women

How the García Girls Lost their Accents (1991) was Julia Alvarez’s first novel published by Algonquin Books. It was critically acclaimed, receiving, according to Ellen McCracken, laudatory reviews in newspapers across the country and in

magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* (McCRACKEN, 1999, p. 11). The story of the García family immigration to New York deals with several issues, such as women in diaspora, fragmentation of memory and identity formation. It circles around intersecting migrations: from the D.R. to the U.S.A., from childhood to adulthood and from Spanish language to English. Aesthetically, it disrupts genres boundaries and binary oppositions, mixing autobiography and *Buildungsroman*, fact and fiction, personal and collective memory. Though we can perceive how Alvarez drew from her own experience to write this piece of fiction, we must reiterate our belief that her novels are, like Edwidge Danticat's, *emotional autobiographies*.

Yolanda García, the third sister, is the character who mostly resembles Julia Alvarez herself, being perceived as the writer's alter ego. The fact that the character becomes a teacher and a writer reinforces this perception, although there are other factors that lead us to wonder about their similarities. Besides sharing a similar family history, both got divorced at a young age and both have no children. Nonetheless, William Luis observes that Julia Alvarez in order to undergo a search for her origins, Alvarez had to change her place of birth from the United States to the Dominican Republic (LUIS, 2000, p. 843).

It is also important to note that this novel moves away from individualist perception of one's history and stresses the family's experiences and relationship. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson point out that "there has been an outpouring of memoirs about family" (SMITH, WATSON, 2010, p. 154,155). Although Smith and Watson haven't discussed Alvarez's work, it's easy to perceive how this autobiographical novel highlights familial relations and dynamics between mother and daughters, father and daughters and between the sisters. The book begins with the genealogical tree of the García/de la Torre, the father's and the mother's family, respectively. Further, each chapter focuses on a member of the family, providing different perspectives. David Vázquez explains that, in this manner, "rather than emphasizing liberal individualism, Alvarez constructs her autobiographical novels so that subjectivity only obtains its authority through its relationship with her community" (VAZQUEZ, 2003, p. 384).

The novel portrays the growing up process of the four García sisters, Carla, Sandra, Yolanda and Sofia. This process is marked by their enforced migration and the loss of their extended family, language, homeland and culture. The process of maturing and entering into womanhood is an important part of any personal narrative

by women and it's no different, not only in this novel, but throughout Alvarez's body of work. The characters here deal not only with familial conflicts and sexuality issues, but also with cultural double binds faced by girls and women in transit. Regarding these difficulties, Julie Barak argues that "Growing up is a trying enough task, but growing up caught between varying and conflicting cultural expectations is, of course, even more bewildering and alienating" (BARAK, 1998, p. 160)

As previously mentioned, James Clifford discussed the issues of the post-WWII new diaspora as a gendered experience and concluded that women's lives in this situation can be doubly hurtful, due to the demands of old and new patriarchies, though they might also encounter new opportunities for agency (CLIFFORD, 1994, p. 314). For the García sisters, American culture opens up new possibilities, just as it did for the Alvarez women. In *Something to Declare*, Alvarez recalls when she and her family used to watch the Miss America pageants, where the contestants, she observed, talked about going to college and decided what to do with their lives, in contrast with her homeland culture, which instructed women to be good housewives and mothers (ALVAREZ, 1999, p. 42). For the four Garcías, the Dominican Republic might have represented, as Priscila Campello argues, a place where they were watched and controlled, where they had few options besides growing up to be mothers and housewives; wherein exile meant a rupture with patriarchal tradition (CAMPELLO, 2008, p. 73-74).

However we believe that Julia Alvarez does not write a celebratory piece on American feminism or multiculturalism or a praise to American culture. Instead, she recognizes the double oppression women of color suffer in spite of the supposedly more liberal and equal cultural environment. Julie Barak points out that, for the Garcia sisters, the process of maturing, especially during the rebellious sixties, was even more complicated "*because they are girls and growing up is more difficult for girls as they mature and come face-to-face with the double standards and demeaning cultural myths about women's bodies and women's roles in a patriarchal society*" (BARAK, 1998, p. 160, author's italics).

The fact that the four girls are caught between patriarchies is central in the novel, since they deal with expectations and demands from both cultures. For instance, when Yolanda is asked to write a speech for Teacher's Day, she's inspired by Walt Whitman's poem "Song of Myself", which praises self-valorization, yet her father is outraged when he sees her bold text. Since she wrote "recklessly" and

“passionately” until “she finally sounded like herself in English!” (ALVAREZ, 1992, p. 142-143), Yolanda is later made to rewrite the address by her outraged father. The discovery of her voice, as Jennifer Bess points out, does not go unchallenged by Carlos, who tears the speech to pieces. When she reads him the speech, he is horrified by her “Americanization” because for him a young woman who challenged the male figures or authority was American, not Dominican. Further, Jennifer Bess argues, “Carlos’s reaction and absence of the original speech undermine her sense of agency” (BESS, 2007, p. 88-89). Nonetheless, later in the same chapter, he gives her a typewriter as an apology, which shows, as Campello argued, both his humiliation for being compared to Trujillo when Yolanda calls him by the dictator’s nickname, “Chapita”, and his recognition of her talent and calling to become a writer (CAMPELLO, 2008, p. 67).

At another instance, in the chapter entitled “A Regular Revolution”, youngest sister Fifi is forced to return to her home country as punishment for using marijuana. This return brings about great modification in Sofia’s manners and looks. When the other three sisters go to visit her, they immediately notice the change in her behavior. Fifi “who always made a point of not wearing makeup or fixing herself up* (ALVAREZ, 1992, p. 117) had fake eyelashes and beauty parlor hair, looking like one of their “hair and nail” cousins. She starts dating an illegitimate cousin who is, according to the sisters’ assessment, “quite the tyrant, a mini Papi and Mami rolled into one” (ALVAREZ, 1992, p. 120). The three sisters plot against that relationship, using the oppressor’s rules to free their sibling from a potential pregnancy and imminent marriage, since the “macho” boyfriend refuses to use a contraceptive. They let the aunts and their mother, Laura, know that Fifi went out alone with her boyfriend and as a result, they are allowed to take Fifi back to the States. Ellen McCracken suggests that these subcultural tactics constitute as a real revolution as the one their father had engaged in against Trujillo, and thus compares parental authority to state authority (McCRACKEN, 1999, p. 159). This passage of transgression not only highlights the importance of solidarity between women in order to debunk patriarchal impositions, but also the permeable line separating political and the private, since the small-scale revolution they promote reflects larger-scale issues. Thus, imagining home (and representing it) is, as Rosemary George argues, “as political an act as is imagining a nation” (GEORGE, 1996, p. 6)

Furthermore, according to Barak, the Garcia girls' assimilation is complicated by the wealth and social position they enjoyed in the homeland, which caused their blindness to their privilege until they go to the U.S. and face economic difficulties (BARAK, 1998, p. 160). The loss of their social status, especially during the first few months of the girls living in the U.S. is felt by the entire family. They wear second-hand clothes and rent a small apartment. In the chapter "The Floor Show", in which the family is invited to dine in an elegant restaurant with the Fannings, the American couple who was helping Carlos, they have their first fancy night out on the town. In the taxi:

[Sandi] realized with a pang one of the things that had been missing in the last few months. It was precisely that kind of special attention paid to them. At home, there had always been a chauffeur opening a car door or a gardener tipping his hat and a half dozen maids and nursemaids acting as if the health and well-being of the de la Torre- García children were of wide public concern (ALVAREZ, 1992, p. 154).

The effects of their reduced circumstances persist even after their financial situation improves, which Alvarez confirms in *Something to Declare* when she recalls how father insists on turning off the lights early to reduce the light bill, even though with time he made more money than he had back in the Dominican Republic, but she observes that, "He could not afford the good life; he could only pass it on" (ALVAREZ, 1999, p. 49).

It's also important to note that patriarchal oppression is not a monolith, but it is present in both contexts in different ways. It can be juxtaposed with class and racial oppression as well. Hence, the experiences of women rendered subaltern are not homogeneous, because there's no "common oppression" (McCLINTOCK, 1997, p. 396), a fact that Caribbean woman writers like Alvarez don't ignore. In spite of being "women of color", the García girls did not come from a poor, rural, working class background as it's clear in the chapter "The Blood of the Conquistadores". They descend from the colonizers and were part of the Dominican elite. Both the Alvarez's family and the fictional Garcías have always been a part of the upper class and the grandfather, both Alvarez's and García's, held a position in the United Nations. Just like Julia Alvarez's father, Carlos Garcia is a doctor who managed to send his daughters to Catholic schools and private colleges. Hence, they occupied the positions of both oppressed and oppressors at different times. Jennifer Bess posited that the author was:

Unwilling to represent the semi-fictional family's history through the binary paradigm of victim/oppressor, Alvarez instead utilizes the flexibility and inclusiveness of the genre of the novel to reify what Donaldson has called the Miranda Complex—the condition of occupying the seemingly contradictory roles of victim and heir simultaneously (BESS, 2007, p. 79).

Nonetheless, their high social status doesn't mean they are not vulnerable to the authority of the Trujillo regime. As a matter of fact, fear is what is highlighted throughout that same chapter, when some SIM guards, Trujillo's police, go to the family house trying to find Carlos and interrogate him. When he sees the men arriving, he runs into hiding, passing the children who are playing in the patio. When Yoyo sees him, he puts his finger to his lips, asking her to keep her mouth shut. Jessica Cantiello argues that "In the context of ethnic autobiography and fiction, the father's finger held to his lips serves as a visual representation of the familial and cultural injunctions that warn the writer not to expose the secrets of the community" (CANTIELLO, 2011, p. 90). It's Don Victor, the American who works for the embassy, who manages to make the guards give up their pursuit Carlos.

Ellen McCracken also believes that the novel foregrounds how "the abuse of patriarchal power as the root of the trouble that forced her family to leave their country" (McCRACKEN, 1999, p. 30). As we can see in the genealogical tree that is in the beginning of the novel, the Garcías and de la Torre have "the blood of the conquistadores", who have been substituted by new sets of American *conquistadores*, who have helped as well as victimized the family (McCRACKEN, 1999, p. 30), meaning that they're also implicated the losses of the García/ de la Torre family.

In spite of being aware of the advantage of belonging to an upper class family, Alvarez underpins through the history of her family, the common suffering shared by Dominicans due to Trujillo's dictatorship. When telling about her childhood, for instance, she recalls that "People were disappearing in the middle of the night". Her grandfather was put in jail until he was persuaded into selling his land for a minimum price to the dictator's daughter (ALVAREZ, 1999, p. 6). What the author does in her novels, Jennifer Bess argues, is to use the emotional confusion of the García girls "as the fulcrum of decentralizing ripples of histories, voices and silences belonging not just to the privileged few"; thus through the Garcías' story, private costs "reveal public and political costs borne by both the powerful and the powerless" (BESS, 2007, p. 94). Alvarez does not ignore her position of relative privilege, but she also

acknowledges that subjectivity depends as much on identifications: gender, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc, as on our relationships to others around us. Her diasporic consciousness is fundamental in the construction of her fiction.

3.2.1 Double consciousness

Throughout the narrative, Alvarez criticizes both Dominican and American cultures, regarding gender issues, racial discrimination and language. As previously mentioned Wendy Walters suggests that “displacement creates a distance that allows writers to encode critiques of their homelands”, thus constructing new homes and envisioning new communities (WALTERS, 2005, p. VIII). Writers like Alvarez do not undermine or exalt nationalist ideologies, but see their ambivalence. Fiction, as Rosemary George argues – and I would add – autobiographical practice – “put the discourse of nationalism to uses other than that of nation building” (GEORGE, 1996, p. 16). Contesting the myth of nations and cultures as unchanging, coherent and homogeneous, Alvarez uses her personal history as a political tool.

In Alvarez’s novel, racial discrimination and cultural alienation are important themes in the narrative and the family deals with different types of racism in both countries. After the family’s migration to New York, the Garcias have to face a new reality, where they are no longer upper class, light-skinned citizens with an important last name, but are seen as common immigrants, with difficulty to learn the language and suffering racial intolerance. For Priscila Campello, upon arriving in the host country, immigrants of non-European descent, regardless of their social status or occupation are labeled as foreign (CAMPELLO, 2008, p. 70). In addition, William Luis argues, “Americans do not differentiate between economic and political exiles”, nor do they “distinguish between the different Hispanic-Caribbean groups – that is, Cubans, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans” (LUIS, 2000, 841) There is a parallel between the situation of the Garcias in New York and the Haitians living in Dominican soil, such as their “blue-black” servant Chucha, who is left behind while the rich family escapes into safety. In the chapter “Trespass” Carla García, who has darker skin than most Americans, is tormented by American white boys at school who pelt her and call her offensive names (ALVAREZ, 1992, p. 153). Luis observes that “The

reaction North Americans have when they see Carla García is similar to the one she and other members of her family exhibit toward servants in general and Haitians in particular while living in the Dominican Republic” (LUIS, 2000, p. 841).

Luis also comments that the García girls are the objects of discrimination both in and outside school. Besides Carla’s experience of humiliation mentioned above, the same boys yell that she should go back to her country, repeating the same words *La Bruja*, the downstairs neighbor of their first apartment, uses in a section narrated by Sandi (LUIS, 2000, p. 841). Later on, when they enrolled in private school, they become the exotic Other, the mysterious Latin girls. The other students assumed to be “like all third world foreign students in boarding schools [they] were filthy rich and related to some dictator” (ALVAREZ, 1992, p.108). In *Something to Declare*, Alvarez recalls that “at school, there were several incidents of name-calling and stone-throwing, which our teacher claimed would stop if my sisters and I joined in with the other kids” (ALVAREZ, 1999, p. 62), which shows how teachers were either ignoring or complying with the racism demonstrated in those actions.

Even when racism and intolerance are not explicit or intended, misunderstandings can lead to suffering for the hyphenated subject. When Yolanda marries John, he nicknames her Joe, Americanizing her name. Further, he cannot comprehend what she says, because being monolingual and monocultural, he’s myopic to her fragmentation. Campello believes Yolanda was so dominated and silenced by her WASP husband (CAMPELLO, 2008, p. 130) that she can’t even find the words to write a good-bye note.

Stereotyping is equally a form of discrimination and results in homogenization. According to Homi Bhabha, stereotypes are “at once a substitute and a shadow. By acceding to their wildest fantasies (in the popular sense) of the colonizer, the stereotyped Other reveals something of the ‘fantasy’ (as desire, defense) of that position” (BHABHA, 1994, p. 82). In “The Rudy Elmenhurst Story”, Yolanda’s first boyfriend pressures her to have sexual intercourse, but she refuses. Her Catholic upbringing clashes with the sexual revolution of the sixties that was taking place in the U.S.A. Her confusion is evident: “I was a lapsed Catholic; my sisters and I had been pretty well Americanized since our arrival [...] Why didn’t I just sleep with someone as persistent as Rudy Elmenhurst is a mystery” (ALVAREZ, 1992, p. 88). Rudy sees her through the lenses of the stereotype about Latina women, who

supposedly have “hot blood”, as they are often portrayed as the sexualized, submissive and objectified Other.

The story also tackles the issue of female sexuality – how women learn about the relationship between bodies and love, and how culture influences sexual desire. As a postmodern author, Alvarez works “‘de-doxify’ any notion of desire as simply individual fulfillment, somehow independent of the pleasures created *by* and *in* culture” (HUTCHEON, 1995, p. 144). Yolanda thought that “the guy had no sense of connotation in bed. His vocabulary turned me off even as I was beginning to acknowledge my body’s pleasure” (ALVAREZ, 1992, p. 96). Julie Barak argues that “Yolanda's naiveté and her bilingual, bicultural confusion/awareness raises the reader's consciousness about the way women learn to talk and feel about their bodies and the ways their bodies are talked and felt up/about by others” (BARAK, 1998, p. 169)

Ellen McCracken wrote that many reviews of this novel suggested that it is a tale of assimilation, but she believes that through narrativized ‘trouble’ it becomes clear that this is not a celebration of multiculturalism (McCRACKEN, 1999, p. 28). The novel often stresses the prejudice faced by Latino immigrants, for instance when the family is sometimes called ‘spic’, an offensive term for Hispanic immigrants. It’s clear that due to language and ethnicity total assimilation is an impossible. This fact may be difficult to accept, especially for insecure teenagers, who only wish to fit in, as Alvarez recalls: “Although we wanted to look like we belonged here, the four sisters, our looks didn’t seem to fit in” (ALVAREZ, 1999, p. 39). Difference is marked on the body, which is “as a sight of cultural determination first marks someone as ‘the stranger’”(FRIEDMAN, 2004, p. 198). However, times change and multiculturalism became fashionable, and then, looking “exotic” became “cool”. Alvarez writes that “Had we been able to see into the future [...] we would have been able to see the late sixties coming. Soon ethnic looks would be in [...] We felt then a gratifying sense of inclusion, but it had unfortunately come too late” (ALVAREZ, 1999, p. 43, 44). Once that sentiment of being alien was rooted, it would be hard to get rid of it.

Alvarez also problematizes the idea that the U.S.A. is the land of opportunity by using Laura’s attempts and failures at becoming rich quickly by inventing gadgets. Jennifer Bess writes that, “like many who believe in the American Dream, Laura imagines herself as an entrepreneurial millionaire, only to be disappointed when she sees her latest invention, a suitcase on wheels, already on sale at a newspaper”

(BESS, 2007, p. 87). Priscila Campello adds that Laura's intention was to become as well-known and important as she had been in the Dominican Republic, where the name de la Torre was prestigious (CAMPELLO, 2008, p. 138), but in New York, she needed recognition, and Bess argues they represented "her attempt to integrate herself, to define herself in the new country" (BESS, 2007, p. 87). But when she sees the ad of the suitcase, she is disappointed. This was the final straw, and Laura stopped trying, because she thought: "What use was it trying to compete with Americans: they would always have the head start" (ALVAREZ, 1992, p. 140), underlying that in spite of living in the U.S., the American Dream of success was not a possibility for everyone.

Nonetheless, the freedom the sisters began to enjoy and the small transgressions they made, turn the U.S. into a more hospitable home. The girls gain more freedom through small acts of rebellion, forging the mother's signature, going out alone, smoking, having dates, and eventually "by the end of a couple of years away from home, we had more than adjusted" (ALVAREZ, 1992, p. 109). In *Something to Declare* the author underscores how hers and her sisters' adaptation was materialized in language.

Our growing distance from Spanish was a way in which we were setting ourselves 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 (ALVAREZ, 1999, p. 63).

Further, even the mother seems to enjoy her new found position in the U.S.: "Better an independent nobody than a high-class house slave" (ALVAREZ, 1992, p. 144), Laura uses a subcultural tactic to try to prevent her husband from reading Dominican newspapers, because this could mean going back to the island. She did not want to return, so by fussing at Carlos's reading in bed, with the excuse that it soiled the sheets, posing as the worried housewife, and by using a strategy similar with her daughters' in "A Regular Revolution" she gets what she wants. We can contrast the girls' lives to that of Mimi, a single aunt. who was known as the 'genius in the family' "because she read books and knew Latin and had attended an American college for two years, before my grandparents pulled her out because too much education might spoil her for marriage" (ALVAREZ, 1992, p. 228). In *Something to Declare*. Alvarez writes about her aunt Titi, who has a similar fate to the fictional aunt (ALVAREZ,

1999, p. 6). Alvarez practically uses the same sentence in both books. In the chapter "The Human Body" Yolanda talks about her single aunt: "Mimi was known as 'the genius in the family' because she read books and knew Latin and had attended an American college for two years" (ALVAREZ, 1992, p. 228).

As the author reveals in her book of essays, the English language also gave the daughters leverage over their Spanish-speaking parents: "we soon figured out that conducting our filial business in English gave us an edge over our strict, Spanish-speaking parents" (ALVAREZ, 1999, p. 63). This did not mean, though, that they were able to assimilate completely. Alvarez demonstrates that in *García Girls* when Yolanda considers living in the D.R. as an adult. Both she and Sandi have mental breakdowns due to their identity fragmentation. The difficulty of feeling as if she belonged was also experienced by Julia Alvarez: "I was encouraged to assimilate by my parents and teachers, by the media and the texts I studied at school, none of which addressed the issues I was facing in my secret soul" (ALVAREZ, 1999, p. 165)

However, after spending so many years in New York, it is equally hard for the girls to identify with the culture and the language of their homeland. As teenagers, even when visiting the D.R., as they call it, the girls hardly spoke Spanish and broke the rules of the traditionalist extended family. In addition, the first chapter of the first section exemplifies the internal cultural battle they go through even as adults, when Yolanda can no longer understand the meaning of the word *antojo* (craving). In this chapter entitled "Antojos", she returns to her homeland after a long absence. She wants to eat guavas and, against her family warnings, drives alone, something that would be unacceptable for a Dominican woman, to find a guava grove, something that would be unacceptable for a Dominican woman. But after having a flat tire, she is frightened when two peasant men offer her help. She attempts to talk to them in Spanish but feels safer when speaking in English. According to McCracken, her fear shows "the difficulty of the exiled woman in conjoining the two lifestyles of the two places she has known as home" (McCRACKEN, 1999, p. 30). The sisters live on the hyphen, belonging neither to one culture, nor to the other. McCracken believes that the very word *antojo* can be a metaphor for the character's state of mind, representing her desire for "the island fruit she has been denied" (McCRACKEN, 1999, p. 30). Although in Dominican lexicon *antojo* refers to something you crave to eat, it can also be used when someone is "taken over by *un santo*" (ALVAREZ, 1992, p.

8), as one of the maids explains. Taking both referents in consideration, William Luis argues that “Yolanda embodies two referents, the Spanish and the North American ones” (LUIS, 2000, p. 843). The chapter is highly symbolic of the longing felt by Yolanda, her sisters and other migrants. Yolanda’s desire to eat the guavas represents the desire to recover her Dominican identity, her past, her nation and to find a place where all is familiar, where one can finally feel at home (CAMPELLO, 2008, p. 116, 117).

Autobiographical novels by diasporic authors such as this one depict the cultural conflicts between generations in bicultural homes, who besides facing the age gap, also face the cultural and ideological ones. Traditionalists Laura and Carlos don’t want their daughters to have boyfriends or to go to university, and even insist on sending the girls “back home” for the summer. William Luis claims that the North American culture plays an important role in the rebellion of the García girls; therefore, “the control the parents want to maintain over the daughters, an indication of Dominican culture, and the girls’ need to rebel, a mark of North American society, results in cultural and personal conflicts” (LUIS, 2000, p. 842). However, the influence of American culture is also seen on the parents, and gradually the girls are able to conquer more autonomy: they attend college and have careers. But even their rebellion only goes so far, as the girls engaged mostly in what Ellen McCracken calls protofeminist tactics (McCRACKEN, 1999, p. 159):

They grew up in the late sixties. Those were the days when wearing jeans and hoop earrings, smoking a little dope and sleeping with their classmates were considered political acts against the military-industry complex. But standing up to their father was a different matter altogether. Even as grown women, they lowered their voices in their father’s earshot when alluding to their bodies’ pleasure (ALVAREZ, 1992, p. 28).

In spite of their formal education, professional development and feminist practices, the girls are still “caught between patriarchies”, developing “a double identity with dual codes of behavior and two languages that define and defy them” (SUÁREZ, 2004, p. 127), but as Chucha had foreshadowed before they left the island: “they will invent what they need to survive” in spite of “the troublesome life ahead” (ALVAREZ, 1992, p. 223).

3.2.2 Postmodern aesthetics/ postcolonial thematic

How the García Girls Lost Their Accents is equally transgressive aesthetically. The novel shifts from first person to third person narrators, who sometimes offer conflicting versions of events. An autobiographical novel may shift from first to third person narrative, not always making clear when the narrator changed. There are different narrators for each chapter, and sometimes the narrator changes within a single story, offering multiple perspectives over the same events. In “The Blood of the Conquistadores”, for instance, we testify the tension within the family when Trujillo’s secret police goes to their house looking for Carlos. The chapter is narrated by the SIM guards, the maid, the García children, the CIA agent who helps the family escape, and Laura. This use of multiple narrators enables the writer to represent “a moment of crisis in Dominican and personal familial history” (McCRACKEN, 1999, p. 82). Julie Barak believes that the author utilizes this strategy possibly because “it is the one most suited to her own experiences and needs as a bilingual writer of autobiographical fiction, and because it approximates the sisters’ identity crises” (BARAK, 1998, p. 163), that is, by fragmenting the narrative, Alvarez also underscores the fragmentation of the subjects. The first and second sections are mostly in third person. However, the final section of the novel, in which the girls narrate their childhoods in the Dominican Republic and recall their last day on the island, is written in the first person. Barak also analyzed the reason for this:

At the center of each girl's life story are these first person narratives, from which the other stories, the rest of their lives, spin out. Everyone wants to be in control of her own version of her history, and these first person narratives in the last section become, in effect, a defense offered by each girl in her own words, an explanation of who they have become in the present (BARAK, 1998, p. 162).

Additionally, contrarily to most autobiographies which begin with childhood and move toward stable adulthood, this autobiographical novel begins with the four adult García girls, long after they have already lost the accents they had been mocked for. The novel starts with the most recent events and ends with the earliest ones; that is, it starts during the period of 1989-1972, when the sisters are grown women living in the U.S., and concludes during the 1960-1959 period, when they were young girls living in the Dominican Republic, thus “the beginning of the narration is the end and

the end is the beginning, consequently, the novel has two beginnings and two endings, physical and chronological ones" (LUIS, 2000, p. 840). Hence, the novel unhinges "the relationship of individual memory to any certain chronology of experience" (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 157).

Jennifer Bess believes that this reverse chronology strategy affects the understanding of the story because it signals "the irretrievable losses the family and all Dominicans have suffered" (BESS, 2007, p. 82). Moreover, Barak defends that the narrative spirals from the outside in, whirling backward through the Garcia's lives, "highlighting the centripetal and centrifugal forces which pull them toward and away from both from and their island home; toward and away from the U.S.; toward and away from an integrated adulthood" (BARAK, 1998, p. 160). The uncertainties and ambivalences of each sister in their disenfranchised adulthood "are brought about by the oscillation between desire for assimilation and attachment to what was left behind" (HARRIS, 2007, 127). Hence the effect of this strategy goes beyond the caprice of literary formal innovation; it also conveys the confusion of the characters' psyches.

Since European and American romantic and realist fiction tended to be linear and without gaps, the novel equally breaks away from that tradition. The linear journey which characterizes traditional Western literature must be shattered for the purposes of attacking Western hegemony, revealing losses the characters suffered and creating a new tool for communicating simultaneously "through silence and absence, on one hand and through inclusiveness on the other" (BESS, 2007, p. 82). All in all, we can conclude that the author's choices, both structural and narrative "reverberate in her thematic material as she examines the different vocabularies the girls learn in their circulation between languages and cultures, struggling to find their identities" (BARAK, 1998, p. 160).

Besides the reverse chronology, the novel makes use of a light-hearted surface that contains layers of depth and complexity underneath, dealing with ambivalent and complicated issues. It "relies on both humor and the strategic manipulation of stereotypes to relate the difficulties of being marginal in the U.S. society and foreign in the 'homeland'" (SUÁREZ, 2004, p. 126). When Yolanda mistakes snow falling for a bomb, for instance, it is funny and ironic, underscoring the connection between culture and meaning.

The novel's title also seems to echo postmodern irony. Julie Barak believes that the title of the novel is ironic because the García girls "may have lost their accents, literally, but they can never completely lose or erase the memories of their island pasts or of their first language and the world view it supports" (BARAK, 1998, p. 176). Additionally, the title is also ironic because, as Suárez notes, the name García has the orthographical accent, therefore, even if the girls assimilated completely, they couldn't "escape the Spanish name that identifies them" (SUÁREZ, 2004, p. 129). In addition, Suárez also points out that "in archaic English 'accent' means 'utterance'", hence, the accent would represent "the telling – of a dark traumatic past. Consequently, perhaps, the accent the girls want to lose is that traumatic past" (SUÁREZ, 2004, p. 135).

3.2.3 Memory in/and fiction

The act of remembering is obviously central to life narratives; however it is less simple than it used to be thought of, especially after Freud's studies of the unconscious and all developments in neuroscience and psychology that occurred during the 20th century. Additionally, postmodern theorists also contest the ways through which we are able to access past events. As we've already mentioned, Linda Hutcheon affirms that "knowing the past is a question of representing it, of constructing and interpreting, not of objective recording" (HUTCHEON; 1995, p. 74). Additionally memory depends on individual and collective feelings, it is:

The construction and reconstruction of what actually happened in the past. It is distorted by needs, desires, interests and fantasies; it is subjective and malleable rather than objective and concrete. Memory is emotional and conceptual, contextual, constantly undergoing revision selection, interpretation, distortion and reconstruction (BERTMAN, 2000, p. 27).

Henceforth, autobiographical practice has been permanently destabilized due to the realization that memories are not stable; they depend on interpretation and sentiments – they create us as we create them.

We are also to consider that, often, experiences of migration such as those of Alvarez and the fictional Garcias, can be motivated by war, extreme poverty, political

persecution, natural disasters. Further, they are often marked by physical and/or psychological violence, so recollecting can be painful, unwanted, even when deemed necessary. Blending autobiography and fiction allows the migrant writer to fill in the gaps where memory is inaccessible.

The Alvarez family first got upset when *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents* came out. In the essay entitled “A note on the loosely autobiographical”, the Dominican-American writer describes her family’s reaction to her novel. They especially discussed the last section in which the girls tell about their last day on the island. However Alvarez states that her family “found the chapter so true to their feelings of that last day that they actually “remembered” some of the things I had made up” (ALVAREZ, 2000, p. 166). Ironically, she also says that this section is the least autobiographical because she cannot remember that day (ALVAREZ, 2000, p. 166). This shows not only how fiction influences psyches but also how memory is fictive and shattered; hence, even autobiographies *per se* are fictional, even when the autobiographical pact Phillippe Lejeune alluded to is established.

Alvarez’s semi-autobiographical novel is not an attempt to recover a total and coherent past, but according to William Luis, it is “an attempt to understand memory, the past, and a time before the sisters lost their innocence and accents” (LUIS, 2000. 840). Nevertheless, this past is full of gaps, silences, contradiction, therefore, the past is irrecoverable and perhaps, un-representable, thus trying to dig deeper is not an attempt to recover an irrecoverable past, “but to acknowledge that it is irrecoverable and demand her characters’ ownership of their complicity in that loss” (BESS, 2007, p. 81).

In situations of exile and dislocation memory of the homeland is affected by ideologies and by the subject’s nostalgia. The desire for a paradisiacal place of origin often prevails over the fact that cultures and places change and are transformed by the power of Nature, social movements and political forces. When Yolanda returns to the Dominican Republic and contemplates staying there for good, she craves guavas. The trees and hills on the way are both fascinating and frightening. Besides, she is not able to identify with her extended family, with the *campesinos* who help her, or with the fair skin woman on the Palmolive outdoor. Memory of an idyllic homeland is fallacious, “In fact, Yolanda’s dream of recovering Eden with her return to the mythic guava grove of the first chapter proves that the past cannot be retrieved – either in myth or through migration” (BESS, 2007, p. 90).

The facts we remember might be as important as the ones we forget, which is made patent through the absences in the novel. For instance, two whole years are unaccounted for, no final version of how Sofia met her husband is given and Yolanda's speech for Teacher's Day is not included in the narrative. These absences in the novel make the reader feel confused and wondering about what happened, resonating what the characters feel. Jennifer Bess claims that unlike Whitman, who inspired the missing speech, "Yolanda does not know the words to the song of herself, because those words have disappeared" and when she is admitted to a psychiatric hospital, she quotes canonical writers, but uses no words of her own, "Instead, her 'head-slash-heart-slash-soul' can only convey its feelings through babble, which is much akin to silence" (BESS, 2007, p. 100). I partially disagree with Bess' position; babble is similar to silence, however, the words to Yolanda's song haven't disappeared; they needed to be reconciled with double meanings within Yolanda's shattered identity, and this reconciliation happens through writing.

Chucha, the Haitian servant who works for the clan on the island, is an immigrant herself, so she understands their situation. The maid predicts the Garcia's fate in exile: "They will be haunted by what they do and don't remember" (ALVAREZ, 1992, p. 223). Regarding this feeling of loss and confusion due to what they do and don't remember, Bess states that Alvarez's characters find themselves paralyzed by their memories or confused by their absence. She concludes that these memory gaps are reflected in the narrative form, "Thus, in order to maintain verisimilitude, Alvarez uses silence to convey political and personal paralysis, to evoke the truths which cannot be communicated verbally" (BESS, 2007, p. 80). In order to resolve the memory issue, we believe, Yolanda becomes a writer: filling the silence with words and the gaps with invention.

In the end of the novel, we are told about a memory that has haunted Yolanda since her childhood and that serves as metaphor for the enforced displacement of the family, their exile into a cold place with a different language and different value-system. She finds a kitten and steals it away from its mother, hiding it inside a drum, even though she had been told that the kitten wouldn't survive far from its mother cat, who tries to recover her kitten. William Luis states that, like the animal, Yolanda was also uprooted from her nest, her childhood in the Dominican Republic. He adds that the drum beats that were supposed to disguise the meows of the kitten would represent a natural language below an imposed one, which in time would eventually

cover her accent (LUIS, 2000, p. 847). In the last sentence of the novel we are brought back to the present and we're told that Yolanda still hears the mother cat "lurking in the corners of my life, her magenta mouth opening, wailing over some violation that lies in the center of my art" (ALVAREZ, 1992, p. 290). This "my" probably refers to both Yolanda's and Julia Alvarez's art. Luis also argues that the mother cat is "a reminder of what Yolanda did, but it is also a symbol of the psychological fear of being taken away from her surroundings at an impressionable age" (LUIS, 2000, p. 848). Lucía Suárez adds that Yolanda grew up haunted by the undeciphered violence of the past and the novel is a "literary representation of trauma, stressing its stronghold over the present" (SUÁREZ, 2004, p. 135).

How the García Girls Lost their Accents is an autobiographical novel which manages to transgress formal conventions through its shattered narrative and its lack of linearity or closure. It is also able to contest dominant discourses of national and cultural identities, underscoring how these concepts are unstable and fragmented. Further, it also shows how women in diaspora deal with demands and expectations from different, often conflictive patriarchies. Julia Alvarez's third novel, *¡Yo!*, which is too semi-autobiographical, problematizes similar issues, though it uses different narrative strategies, which we will be discussed in the next section.

3.3 Story-telling and self-representation: hand in hand in *¡Yo!*

¡Yo! was published in 1997, receiving good reviews from mainstream newspapers and magazines and becoming a best-seller. Julia Alvarez's third novel self-consciously questions representation – its meaning, construction, limitations and implications. According to Carine Mardorossian, this novel "subverts the traditional form of the *Buildungsroman*" (MARDOROSSIAN, 2005, p. 126) and of auto/biographical practices. It deals simultaneously with the portrayals of the Self, cultures and nations and how these affect the lives of the ones being represented.

Firstly, the title *¡Yo!* already deserves attention, since it is multiply encoded and it plays with the idea of the "I" who narrates. Yo means "I" in Spanish and also serves as nickname for the "main" character of Yolanda García. Yet, the novel gives voice to all characters' except Yolanda herself. It is the other characters' visions of

her that justify the very existence of the narrative. Moreover, it is even more ironic because it is partly autobiographical, but the I's in it refer to points of view of fictional characters, telling their stories of Yolanda, who is a centripetal force around whom the narrative circles. Mardorossian argues that this strategy shows how identity here is "reconfigured as an intersubjective and collective process insofar as the constitution of the self occurs in its reflection through others rather than in opposition to them" (MARDOROSSIAN, 2005, p. 126). Besides *¡Yo!*, with exclamation marks, seems to highlight the self-affirmation process they are going through, but instead of an essentialized Self, it's affected by history, ideology and relationships. It also immediately remits us to the Spanish language background of the author and the main character. Lucía Suárez argues that it is no surprise Alvarez wrote a book with that title since the question "Who am I?" is central in her literary production (SUÁREZ, 2004, p. 136).

In this novel we see a little more of Yolanda's development, both personally and as a writer. She recovers from her second divorce and gets married again, this time with an American doctor, Doug. She also gains a stepdaughter, Corey. After two years of refusing to stay with them, Corey visits for two weeks and Doug believes that "Yo is on a high. Corey is looking so pretty. Corey makes her feel better about not having children" (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 272). In Alvarez's book of essays, she informs us that her husband, Bill, has two daughters; and even though she considered having children of her own, she decided against it, because her true calling is writing instead of motherhood (ALVAREZ, 1999, p. 98, 99). Although it isn't explicit in the novel, the author's alter-ego seems to go down the same path. Regarding Yolanda's professional life, with time, she becomes more confident in her writing, and with her teacher's support and finally, her father's blessing, becomes more certain of what her *destino* is: telling stories.

The novel is divided into four sections and, as Leila Harris observes, each chapter in the first part is named after a literary genre; in the second section they refer to themes, while in the third they're named after elements of the novel (HARRIS, 2007, p. 129). The headings of the chapters are organized in a X-Y scheme in which X signals the role the person who narrates plays in Yolanda's life (e.g. the mother, the best friend, the teacher) and Y is the central theme or event of that part of the novel. We believe the structure reflects the novel's self-conscious quality. The prologue starts with "the sister – fiction", the sister being the youngest

Garcia and fiction is not only the reason for her annoyance, but it underscores the fact that the pages we are reading, the book Yolanda wrote, and, by extension Alvarez's novel, *How the García Girls Lost their Accents*, are exactly this: fiction. That fact however, does not undermine the power of fiction.

Throughout her work Julia Alvarez values storytelling whether in oral or written form as a way to claim agency. In *¡Yo!*, when the character of Yolanda García is teaching a creative writing workshop, her athlete student, Lou, writes a heartfelt story with autobiographical traits about family and abandonment, following her advice to write from experience. After being praised, he seems to find courage to express himself more accurately. He becomes more active and he learned from her suggestion that "he had to put himself up there more" (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 174). He invites on a date the girl he would eventually marry and takes a job he had been afraid and ashamed of. Later on, his former professor publishes a short story strikingly similar to one of his, but writes it in a more professional manner. Although one of the aims of this story seems to be playing with and challenging the ideas of originality and authorship – although not denying them – it equally emphasizes the importance of narrating trauma; the capacity to write about traumatic events holds the potential for empowerment.

Diasporic women writers often work through their trauma of displacement and rupture through narration of their experiences, whether in autobiographical novels, poems or fiction. Leigh Gilmore finds the narration of traumatic experiences ambivalent because "language is asserted as that which can realize trauma even that as it is theorized as that which fails in the face of trauma" (GILMORE, 2001, p. 7). However, remembering, understanding and reconciling with traumatic pasts seems to be motivations for Julia Alvarez/Yolanda García to become writers in the first place; the traumatic separation from their homeland and the lives in the host land are marks in their work, even though they aren't paralyzing ones. In *¡Yo!*, as Suárez argues, Alvarez establishes storytelling's "conciliatory powers for exile/immigrant writers" (SUÁREZ, 2004, p. 137), through storytelling diasporic writers are able to reconcile with their pasts and with their bicultural presents.

Regarding traumatic memories, David Vazquez defends that "by textually recounting limit events, storytellers help to move one beyond the shattered fragments of history" (VÁZQUEZ, 2003, p. 393). It appears that recollecting those events precisely isn't the most important part of overcoming traumatic situations. The father,

Carlos Garcia, for instance isn't able to distinguish between his daughter's stories and his own history, but Vázquez believes that instead of seeing Carlos's inability to make this distinction as craziness, we should "understand this confusion as Alvarez's attempt to make stories a valid and permissible form or representation that provides an alternative to the official historical record" (VAZQUEZ, 2003, p. 394). The heading of the chapter is "The father – Conclusion", and the "conclusion" arrived at by father seems to be this:

As this family, like so many other Dominicans in the US, feels the loss of continuity with the homeland, someone must find a way to reintegrate their experience with the one of their fellows. By telling the story of their dislocation, as well as their journey through life in the United States, Yo has the ability to reintegrate something that was lost (VÁZQUEZ, 2003, p. 395).

The difficulty in articulating traumatic experiences and the persistent fear that remains even when danger has passed is felt by Laura García. In order to discipline her daughters, Laura would wear a long fur coat and pretending to be a monster, or close the girls inside the apartment's closets. When a social worker pays her a visit and says her that Yolanda has been telling stories about children locked in closets and having their mouths burned with lye, Laura feels "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" (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 34), that is, the mother is jealous of the daughter's capacity to express herself, to articulate what she has suffered.

Still, sometimes story-telling and life narrations also backfire and they can put one in a complicated legal situation or even in danger. They might expose one to public scrutiny or they might involve a violation of the privacy of those depicted in them. The latter happens on more than one occasion in the novel. As someone's autobiographical text is always, to a certain extent, someone else's biography, the employment of the personal in fiction might lead to misinterpretations and misrepresentations of others. In *¡Yo!*'s starting point, Yolanda's family is displeased with her use of the family's experience in her novel, and her mother even threatens to sue her daughter, The Garcías' reactions resemble those of the Alvarez family after the publication of Julia Alvarez's first novel:

When *How the Garcia a Girls Lost Their Accents* was published, many members of my family were upset with me. They felt betrayed, not because I had written specifically about them, but because there were shadowy resemblances, resonances, characters who reminded them of themselves but who said things or did

things that they had never exactly said and done. I think what upset them was the shadowy and shifting territories of lies, lives, and fiction, which they had wanted me to keep separate (ALVAREZ, 2000, p. 166).

In the prologue of *¡Yo!*, entitled “The sisters – fiction”, Sofia Garcia shows her irritation with the novel her sister Yolanda has written using their experiences as immigrants in the USA and their maturation into women. Fifi calls up one of the sisters and rejects Yolanda’s attempt to justify herself: “She had this whole spiel about art and life mirroring each other, and how you’ve got to write about what you know. I couldn’t listen to it. It was making me sick” (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 3). Priscila Campello suggests that Yolanda is exiled within her family for choosing a profession that is not typical for women, one that is challenging and revealing: to be a writer (CAMPELLO, 2008, p. 92). I would add that the Dominican-American writer seems very aware of the impact an autobiographical novel can cause on those who are represented in it. While she ironizes the justifications writers give for their autobiographical novels, this self-criticism does not mean she intends to quit her art. Like her character, Julia Alvarez won’t apologize for that exposure: the very existence of the novel underscores that.

3.3.1 Contesting dominant discourses

Patriarchal oppression is a central focus in the novel. Since narration is a source of power, silencing is by extent, a way to oppress. In the chapter “The cousin – poetry”, narrated by Lucinda, not only do we see patriarchal oppression on the so called “underdeveloped” island, but we also see how narrating one’s life can have permanent and irreversible consequences on others’ lives. Lucinda goes to the U.S.A. to study at the same school as her cousins and a familial rivalry begins. Lucinda’s poem wins a prize coveted by Yolanda; besides, her charm also gets her a boy her cousin had a crush on. Nonetheless, it is Yolanda’s diary which ends up sealing Lucinda’s destiny – when the family finds out Lucinda has a boyfriend, she’s forced to return to the Dominican Republic instead of going to college in the U.S. Although she even threatens to kill herself, the control over women’s bodies and sexual desire is asserted even at a distance.

Moreover, Alvarez also acknowledges that to be heard is as important as to speak; and someone who does not want to hear, might eventually be forced to do so. One of the last chapters, “The Stalker - tone”, a person has been stalking Yolanda for years. He is likely to have had a complicated and violent past. The narrator follows her into a hotel room and threatens Yolanda and her sister with a knife. The man says he won’t hurt them if she’s finally able to “truly hearing for once what I tried to tell you for years but you would not let me” (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 291). The readers are never told what he so desperately wanted to say, or if she is hurt. All he wishes for is recognition, to be heard – and violence is the way he finds to do it: instead of using pen and paper, he uses a blade. Further, the chapter stands out due to its aesthetics. Through the transgression of prosody rules the chapter becomes even more disturbing; there are few capital letters to initiate paragraphs and it isn’t very cohesive, often fragmented.

Storytelling and narration of the self may also be used to raise readers’ awareness and serve as a tool to problematize the homeland’s and host’s cultures. In Lucinda’s narrative she says: “Wife, mother, career girl – I’ve managed them all – and that’s not easy in our third world country. Meanwhile the Garcia girls struggle with their either-or’s in the land of milk and money” (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 52), challenging the idea that in “Third world” countries, women are all submissive and oppressed. The cousin, who used to be nicknamed one of the “hair-and-nail” cousins, ironically exposes the paternalism of her cousins with the question: “How could I live in a country where everybody wasn’t guaranteed life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness?” a quotation that, as Mardorossian argues, highlights the conflict of nations and ideologies which affect interpersonal relationships (MARDOROSSIAN, 2005, p. 124). The García sisters show similar paternalism toward the maid’s daughter, Sarita, who felt that: “From the first, those girls treated me as a combination of favorite doll, baby sister and goodwill project [...] all of them spent special time teaching me things” (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 57). When Sarita goes to Yolanda’s wedding, years later, she dreads seeing the extended family, who would continue to see her as beneath them. Even though it’s been revealed that her father was a member of de la Torre clan and now she is a prestigious medical doctor with a private practice, they would not see her as an equal. Sarita’s story underpins the elitism of the Dominican upper class. By focusing on how the Garcías are seen,

Alvarez creates space for the criticism of the classist system and even of her family's attitudes.

Even more than doubting totalizing narratives of cultures and nations, Ellen McCracken argues that the novel rejects monolithic representations of women and immigrants, without eliding historical specificity, ethnic and racial differences, sexual preferences and various class perspectives, what McCracken considers an important task for these new Latina writers. (McCRACKEN, 1999, p. 5). Alvarez plays with the essentialist ideas of who can speak for or represent whom, since in *¡Yo!* the I's of the first persons narratives vary. They are white, black, Caribbean, men, women, straight and homosexual. Leigh Gilmore states that literary and cultural studies in postmodernism have focused on the analytical and experiential category of "the self" and the limits of its representation (GILMORE, 1994, p. 4), that is, a Self, just like "I", is just a function of language, the referent is always different, never a given, but always changing according to context. In an essay, the Dominican-American writer wonders:

Has the imagination become so bogus that anything it constructs is somehow suspect? The only constructed realities we can trust are those that match the "real" reality of the writer. So that only a black woman can write about a black woman, only a Latino can write about Latinos, only a victim can write the victim's story (ALVAREZ, 2000, p. 165).

The issue of who has the power or the right to represent another is also present and further explored in the chapter of "The maid's daughter – report". Yolanda writes a report for her college course about the maid's daughter, Sarita, and her experience as an immigrant in the New York, a type of biography. Having the voice to tell one's own history is what is in question. When Sarita reads the report she feels "as if something has been stolen from [her]" (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 66). Silencing is also a problem when Sarita is at school; she does not set straight the rumors about herself, so an identity is bestowed upon her: a rich child who was either Italian or Greek. Later she rejects that misrepresentation because she perceives it as "a way you could get further and further away from yourself" (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 63). Alvarez here seems to assert how vital it is to tell our own histories, but she also asks for caution from academics who use, assess, discuss and sometimes rewrite the histories of the marginalized for their own purposes.

National identities and experience of cultural alienation are also central themes in some of the vignettes. The questions “where is home?” and “where do I belong?” are constantly latent throughout the narrative. One of Yolanda’s boyfriends, Dexter, doesn’t understand why she calls the Dominican Republic “home”. He believes that since she lives, works, writes, loves and will probably die in the U.S.A., there is no reason for that. However, he observes that “when she talks about the D.R., she gets all dewy-eyed as if she were crocheting a little sweater and booties for that island, as if she had given birth to it herself out of the womb of her memory” (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 193). Finally, he recognizes her hybridity, when he says she’s “as American as a Taco Bell taco” (ALVAREZ, 1997, p.194). But the metaphor itself demonstrates why Yolanda feels that she fits perfectly neither on the island nor in the U.S. Even though she calls the island her “home”, she always returns to the U.S.A. to write her texts in English. Doug, the third husband also finds it hard to understand this connection “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” (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 260). Carine Mardorossian argues that it is clear that “the protagonist Yolanda García’s relation to both the Dominican Republic (her “homeland”) and the host country (the States) is characterized by ambivalence” (MARDOROSSIAN, 2005, p. 122).

Homi K. Bhabha suggests that “the representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of *pre-given* ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition” (BHABHA, 1994, p. 2, author’s italics). Cultures are unstable; they transform themselves and one other. According to Mardorossian, in the novel, both countries are “represented as dynamic entities, while the traditional notion of home as belonging and community is exposed as a myth” (MARDOROSSIAN, 2005, p. 123).

In the States, a country of supposedly liberal morals, economic prosperity and equal rights for women and men, there are those who are victims of domestic violence and poverty. Those are the cases of both Yolanda’s African-American landlady and the immigrant daughter of a Dominican peasant woman who Yolanda meets in one of her trips to the island. On the other hand, sexuality is not necessarily repressed in the patriarchal and catholic Dominican Republican culture, as we perceive when Yolanda’s attempt to hide her sexual relationship goes to bust. One of

her uncles sees Dexter leaving her room and his reaction is only a sympathetic chuckle (MARDOROSSIAN, 2005, p. 124). Yolanda herself comments that people like her cousin Lucinda were cooking up a feminist revolution of their own, denouncing as fallacious the concept of culture as unchanging. The migrant identity Alvarez claims in the novel reflects the feeling of belonging neither here nor there; it also contests the unified and stable notion of national identity and the supposed stability of cultural affiliations. All in all, this hybridity serves “to ‘translate’ and therefore reinscribe the social imaginary of both metropolis and modernity” (BHABHA, 1994, p. 6).

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson bring up the issue of relationality and point out that “one’s story is bound up with that of another, suggests that the boundaries of an ‘I’ are often shifting and flexible”; besides, they also believe that “Relational narratives incorporate extensive stories of related others that are embodied within the context of an autobiographical narrative” (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 86). *¡Yo!* can also be read as literary representation of what Avtar Brah calls the diasporic space, that is, diasporic displacement also results in the contact between ideas, ideals and cultures that mutually transform one another. Yolanda is a hyphenated subject who affects others around her with her ambiguity. We are able to realize that in the chapter “The landlady” in which she helps the African American woman to get rid of her abusive husband. When Yolanda and her friend put some powder on the garden to protect the house, Marie feels “I don’t know if it’s the magic powders or just having those girls around two weeks now, but I find I have a mouth” (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 158).

The aspect of relationality is embodied in the family. We see more of the García/de la Torre extended family back in the Dominican Republic in this novel, as one of them also becomes a narrator. Stuart Hall has affirmed that “as it is common to most transnational communities, the extended family – as a network and site of memory – is the critical conduit between the two locations” (HALL, 1999, p. 2), and in *¡Yo!*, the family is essential. But family has different meaning in different cultures. When Yolanda and Dexter discuss their relationship, he tells her that his family is the both of them, but she answers: “I couldn’t live that way. I couldn’t understand myself without the rest of the clan to tell me who I am” (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 209). This quotation echoes what Alvarez’s family had told her. The extended family in the island said that what had gone wrong in hers and her sisters’ lives was that they

settled in the U.S.A. where “people got lost because they didn’t have their family around to tell them who they were” (ALVAREZ, 1999, p. 114).

It’s been argued that postmodernism is more useful in the study of self-representation “when an ensemble of cultural, historical and textual practices are viewed in their specific performances” (GILMORE, 1994, p. 4). According to David Vázquez, Julia Alvarez writes her autobiographical novel considering historical and multicultural context. The author treats history and identity as separate tropes, she combines them in order to show how they are mutually constitutive (VÁZQUEZ, 2003, p. 384). In the chapter “The mother - nonfiction” where Yolanda tells stories about finding a gun in her parents’ closet could have cost her family’s safety, since the SIM, Trujillo’s secret police, could have used that as an excuse to take the family into custody. It is Yolanda’s father involvement with politics that provokes their exile to the States and results in the fragmentation the character is trying to work through.

We can underpin several differences between traditional and postmodern life writing and self-representation, as we have already affirmed, and many of them are exemplified in *¡Yo!*. Firstly, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson point out, the “I”s in the classical autobiographies, in spite of coming from different cultural backgrounds and historical contexts, are always rational, unified and cohesive, “all possessed agency” (SMITH; WATSON, 1998, p. xvii). But the entry of women, lower class, non-white writers into mainstream literature can cause long-term effects. This can result in social and political transformation, as it’s been affirmed: “life writing changes – as it reflects such historical developments but also as it imagines new possibilities for further changes” (EGAN; HELMS, 2004, p. 218). The characters in the novel come from different backgrounds and each gets his/her turn to control the narration.

Besides, the novel transgresses traditional aesthetics of biographical practice. As it’s been argued, “the definitions of autobiography derive from the reference between the person who says ‘I’ and the ‘I’ is not a person but a function of language, these definitions can always be destabilized through reference to this dissonance” (GILMORE, 1994, p. 6). The “I” as a function of language appears to be a central matter in *¡Yo!*, since the novel is constituted of chapters which can be read as independent first person short stories, vignettes, or as if we were reading a chapter of different autobiographies, as most characters tell their own story, without the mediation of an omniscient narrator. On the other hand, it is Yolanda’s self-development told by others, as we’ve already noted, because she never tells her

story in her own voice. The character is, according to Claire Messud, “summoned, conjured, but not present, Yolanda the creator of characters is, here, the created character of those around her” (MESSUD, 1997). This way the novels makes “a portrait of the self as constructed within a countless number of interlocking identities. It challenges the possibility of any totalizing picture as the self is continually situated in relation to the histories and perspectives of others” (MARDOROSSIAN, 2005, p. 126).

Leigh Gilmore affirms that “the discursive signature of the subject and signifies agency is self-representation” (GILMORE, 1994, p. 14). This view of “discursive signature”, that is, the “I” of self-representation is useful when we discuss life writing by women because having the control over narratives means empowerment. Agency is crucial for “women to constitute themselves as subjects if they are to escape being never-endingly determined as objects” (ANDERSON, 2004, p. 90). Women have often been silenced and excluded from public sphere, hence, through speaking and telling women’s own versions of facts, they are empowered. As David Vasquez concludes, narrating is vital for individuals and groups “since stories can also construct an alternative form of historical narrative” (VÁZQUEZ, 2003, p. 393). Exclusion, displacement and discrimination are articulated through both fiction and autobiographical practices, but also help envision new possibilities for the future and new subjectivities, in which “difference” is not the same as “inferiority” or “victimization”.

¡Yo!’s merit is in how it manages to blur different genres and breakaway from traditional life narrative aesthetics and assumptions. There are differences between self-thematization in the past and in the present, but if we can pin down something they share, I would agree with Leonor Arfuch, who states, as we have already quoted, that telling the history of a life is giving life to its history (ARFUCH, 2010, p. 42). In this novel, several histories are brought to life, and lives become stories. What Alvarez does, and by the same token, Yolanda’s fiction, is to create “a space for possible histories. What is unknown can be very upsetting; inventing narratives to explain the unknown helps survivors (of exile, migration, the violence of silencing dictatorships) believe in the possibility of a future with answers and solutions” (SUÁREZ, 2004, p. 139).

It’s also been affirmed that by analyzing these fragmented perspectives permeated by cultural and social differences, we arrive at a Yolanda who is often

superficial, arrogant, insecure, selfish and condescending (CAMPELLO, 2008, p. 92). The character is multidimensional and multifaceted, constantly being re-presented, Yolanda “is one and many, depending on the context in which she is represented” (HARRIS, 2007, p. 129)

3.4 Both novels as part of a bigger picture

There’s a clear intertextuality linking *¡Yo!* and *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* and they deal with a lot of the same questions. I share the belief with Jessica Cantiello that even though one can read Alvarez’s individual texts in isolation, it’s more enriching to discuss her autobiographical writings, specially these two novels, “as a textual cluster and analyzing the allusions, connections, and gaps between the two provides a deeper understanding of the significance of certain scenes” (CANTIELLO, 2011, p. 87). In addition, the titles from both novels are playfully ironic, as Catherine Wall observes, they play “with linguistic concepts - foreign accents and the first-person singular yo subject pronoun [...] to emphasize the identity of the characters” (WALL, 2003, p. 127). However, calling the first a sequel to the latter would not be appropriate, in spite of the clear connections between the two texts. In spite of the García family’s presence in both, *¡Yo!* expands and defies *García Girls*.

There are some points in the two novels that we can quickly perceive as contradictory, or at least, strange, as if we, readers, had not been informed of all facts. The Dominican maid, Primitiva, and her daughter, Sarita, for instance, are never mentioned in the 1992 book. The fact that Lucinda goes to school in New York with her cousins is not mentioned either. On the other hand, the 1997 novel does not mention Fifi’s stay in the island, or Múndin studying in the U.S. However, other aspects require more attentive reading in order to perceive their gaps. Cantiello argues that “The entire text of *¡Yo!* is a conglomeration of pseudo-memories, as the characters’ memories and stories from the first book intermingle and contradict each other” (CANTIELLO, 2011, p. 92), especially in those chapters narrated by the parents about their last days on the island.

There’s an important scene that appears in both novels, when Yolanda, still a child, would have told someone about a gun her father had in the closet. The story

about the gun appears in both novels but in different versions and from different perspectives. In the version found in *How the García Girls Lost their Accents*, Yolanda did not know her father really had a gun when she told about the hidden weapon to the neighbor. However, in *¡Yo!* Yolanda's mother suspects her daughter had discovered the gun inside the parents' closet – as readers, we are not sure if Yolanda found the gun or not. Cantiello believes that “The fact that the two stories do not corroborate each other insists on the multiplicity of representations as the two are forced to coexist” (CANTIELLO, 2011, p. 94). Cantiello also argues about Alvarez that:

Yoyo's “story which turned out to be true” is Yoyo's pseudo-memory, because it blurs the lines between fact and fiction and it is a memory that [Alvarez] wants so much that she almost makes it true (...) Ostensibly it never happened to her, but she makes it happen to her alter ego; she wants the memory in order to crystallize the trauma of the dictatorship, particularly as it impacts a writer (CANTELLO, 2011, p. 84).

The subsequent beating in the shower is also recollected differently by the parties involved. In *¡Yo!*, Carlos García recalls when he gave his daughter that severe beating when she was a child, after she said gun. In the same novel, the mother does not mention the beating at all – Laura only tells that she suspected Yolanda had found the gun in the closet and had never confessed having seen it. This makes the mother afraid that her daughter would reveal their secret, since Yo had a “big mouth”. Laura ponders “If [Yolanda] had seen that hidden gun, it was just a matter of time before she'd tell someone about it. Already I could see the SIM coming to the door to drag us away” (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 26). In *How the García Girls Lost their Accents*, the beating also occurs, as Yolanda recalls: “her parents hit her very hard with a belt in the bathroom, with the shower on so no one could hear her screams” (ALVAREZ, 1992, p. 198). The father was simultaneously oppressor and oppressed. Such violence because of a story a child told, may be partially responsible for his daughter's “fractured identity and tortured relationship to writing” although, as it's been argued, “the character seems unaware of this connection” (MARDOROSSIAN, 2005, p. 125). In addition, in the 1997 novel, in the chapter narrated by Carlos, besides telling the neighbor about the gun, Yolanda says that her father was going to kill all the bad guys, including *El Jefe* (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 305, 306), a potentially dangerous comment that is not present in any of the other

versions. The father also says Yolanda didn't like the general because he "had too many rings on his fingers that scratched her, that he tickled her too much and trotted her too hard on his knee" (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 306). For Jessica Cantiello this version would suggest something more "than a childish lie or an innocent mistake; it is a story crafted with intention by a young girl who grows up to be a writer, a child who understands the power of her words" (CANTIELLO, 2011, p. 99).

The father's atonement is realized year later. In the end of the novel, Carlos is finally able to show his support when his daughter is in need of reassurance regarding her calling to tell stories:

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 their 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).

To a certain extent, the Yolanda's father blessing confirmed the one the author had received from her grandfather when she was still a child. When she was little, her grandfather was a voracious poetry reader. In *Something to Declare* she recalls he had a habit of lining up his grandchildren and asking what they wanted to be when they grew up. Julia first answered she wanted to become a bullfighter, then a cowboy and then a poet. To the latter he responded "A poet, yes. Now you're talking" (ALVAREZ, 1999, p. 11).

Regarding the trauma of dislocation and exile present in both novels, Lúcia Suárez suggests that "If in *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* we note that Yo is haunted by the politics of a police state, in *¡Yo!*, Yolanda is still working through the trauma of that circumstance" (SUÁREZ, 2004, p. 138). However, in the first novel the character ponders returning to her home country, but in the second one this is not an issue. It is writing that constitutes a problem. She goes to the Dominican Republic in order to write her book, because "she wants inspiration and solitude" (ALVAREZ, 1997, p. 114). Priscila Campello argues that on one hand, her wish can be seen as part of her superiority complex, since she chooses the highest room of Mundin's house; on the other, it can also be seen as a continuation of her search for a home and her need to feel closer to her Dominican roots (CAMPELLO, 2008, p. 144, 145). It is the complexity of the character that permeates the book.

Some scenes though, instead of contradictory, seem to repeat themselves with slight changes. The girls' privacy, for instance, is not always respected by the conservative parents who are always concerned with restricting and controlling their sexuality. Fifi's love letters are violated and her father discovers she is having a romantic relationship. Similarly, by reading Yolanda's journal in *¡Yo!* the mother discovers about Lucinda's having a boyfriend. Carole Boyce Davies argues that in the "Caribbean household, any thought of individual space is eschewed" (DAVIES, 2001, p. 120). In both cases, the family fears the young girls' sexuality. At another instance, transgressing the codes of what is considered proper behavior generates conflict between parents and daughters. After Carlos discovers Fifi's love affair and suspects she is no longer a virgin, Fifi leaves the house and marries the German boyfriend. Carlos does not talk to her for months. In *¡Yo!*, when Yolanda publishes her semi-autobiographical novel, it is the mother who refuses to talk to her and threatens to sue her daughter.

Naming is also an issue both novels tackle. In *¡Yo!* the García's maid real name is Maria Trinidad, but she had worked for Laura's family her whole life and they'd nicknamed her Primitiva. The family who descended from the *conquistadores* nicknamed their servant echoing the manner in which the colonizers saw the original inhabitants of the Caribbean islands: primitive and uncivilized. Furthermore, Yolanda's name, Lucía Suárez comments, goes from Yolanda, to Yoyo to Joe, appearing to change from "the interpellator that connected her to her Dominican roots to a nickname that erased both gender and her ethnic background" (SUÁREZ, 2004, p. 128).

We agree with Priscila Campello when she argues that in both autobiographical novels the sisters attempt to find who they are and where they can belong; however, it is Yolanda that most strongly represents the migrant subject, located in the in-between (CAMPELLO, 2008, p. 113). Although both novels deal with a lot of the same issues, what I want to underscore is the dialog between some key scenes and aspects of the Garcia family history that are used to contest the intended veracity of traditional autobiographies. They highlight the fragmentation of memory and identity, but above all they underscore how storytelling can help dealing with and work through "the violation that lies in the center of [Julia Alvarez's/Yolanda García's] art" (ALVAREZ, 1992, p. 290).

4. CONCLUSION

Weaving one's own history with fictional threads cannot be taken as a simple or obvious choice for a migrant woman writer: it's an arduous act of navigating through the dark waters of traumatic experience, the turbulent tides of the politics of home, and the uncharted seas of memory. Julia Alvarez is able to accomplish this journey in the two novels selected, subverting formal structures. The novels problematize the interconnectedness of private and public, the personal and the political. Dislocation and fraught identities, which are experienced both at the individual and at the collective levels, are part of a rich territory to be explored through writing, as Susan Friedman believes;

Travel, migration, exile – these are itineraries of being as becoming, identity forming in the movements through space, identity in motion. Fragments of each place remain as locations to which memories are attached, out of which identities are formed. In each, the body as marked and read is catalyst for reflection. The body in motion is the muse. identity forming in the movements through space, identity in motion (FRIEDMAN, 2004, p. 205-206).

Discussing issues of immigration and cultural hybridity is imperative for the reading and wider understanding of Alvarez's works, since dislocation became her inspiration, her muse. I believe her novels not only move toward a critical view of the process of assimilation, but they also embrace the position of insider/outsider. Friedman argues that the new migrations have brought about more contact and integration of worlds (FRIEDMAN, 2009, p. 8), but how this comes to pass and how individuals deal with these issues, can be explored in the negotiation of fiction and autobiographical practice. Thus, as Lucía Suárez claims, Alvarez's writing exposes her plight of identity, caught between "assimilation into U.S. mainstream culture and contestation of the very mechanism of assimilation into mainstream culture" (SUÁREZ, 2004, p. 117)

Additionally, personal and public histories are clearly indissociable throughout Julia Alvarez's works. In her novels, Alvarez re-imagines "history in a matter that allows her to both resolve the trauma of dislocation and exile, and to clear a space for feminine agency in the Dominican Republic" (VÁZQUEZ, 2003, p. 401). The consequences of Rafael Trujillo's long dictatorship over the Dominican Republic are felt throughout both autobiographical novels, however, we can also perceive the

impact of social movements such as American feminism. History is not merely a backdrop for the story: it's an integral part of the characters' journeys that affect their identity's formation.

Formally, the blurring of genres in *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents* and *Yo!* undermines the hierarchy between facts, historical accounts and fiction; subverts traditional Western autobiographical and novelistic practices. It also inscribes in the literary market and in academic literary studies the voice of women in diasporic contexts. At the same time, this strategy allows authors to distance themselves from their own pasts and homelands and to be more critical and perhaps less self-indulgent or narcissistic. Julia Alvarez uses personal history as a *strategy*; very much like Jeanette Winterson and Jamaica Kincaid, when they take: "autobiographical means to other ends" (GILMORE, 2001, p. 9). As Ellen McCracken argues, Alvarez's works invoke "questions about the individual and subject's link to history" (McCRACKEN, 1999, p. 74).

Alvarez's first and third novels question the nostalgic desires for a mythic childhood and homeland, both through its structure and through the plot itself, since the characters went through the trauma of dislocation and the pressures of gendered expectation. As Jennifer Bess notes: "For Yolanda and her sisters, there is no idyllic past to which to retreat" (BESS, 2007, p. 91). Moreover, Alvarez highlights the role of historical events in personal lives and how no autobiography can disregard historicity or their specific position:

Through Yolanda, Alvarez conveyed sensitivity to the fact that her history is one of many, that her powerlessness and her privilege, her voicelessness and her voice, contain a truth that has the potential to transform silence and alienation into revolution and a new subjectivity (BESS, 2007, p. 101).

Jessica Cantiello points out that writing using one's life as primary source of material has another side as well. She argues that throughout the two texts and in other autobiographical writings, Alvarez "struggles with the opposition between the generative and the destructive aspects of these writings; her stories inspire her and her readers, but they also expose her family's secrets" (CANTIELLO, 2011, p. 85). And as Alvarez herself remarks, fiction might bring litigious consequences or heartache, wounding the ones you love (ALVAREZ, 1999, p. 274).

I obviously don't intend to present any closure to the discussion on migrant woman's autobiographical practices in postcolonial and diasporic contexts. As a

matter of fact, several questions came to mind while I was writing this dissertation, mostly related to the readers: how do they react to, interpret and criticize these novels? And concerning authors, how do they resist commodification of their texts and their own images? Research is never ending, but it is asking questions that moves the world.

Necessity is the mother of invention and remembering an essential step in the construction of the Self and community; hence the combination of both results in powerful narratives, able to transmit emotion with poetical language and cause reflection with political underpinnings. Life narratives may have different characteristics and be written for many reasons, but self-representation is always a way for people to connect with one another, as if stating “do you understand where I come from and I am this way? This is my history, it’s who I am”. But in the end, isn’t this the same reason to write anything and everything, to establish a connection? Nobody writes only for himself or herself: even diaries have an imagined reader. Memories, facts, stories, history - all of them are interwoven in *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* and *Yo!* in order to create Julia Alvarez’s “emotional autobiography”.

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