

“AT THE CENTER OF HER ART”: EX/ISLE, TRAUMA, AND STORY-TELLING
IN JULIA ALVAREZ’S FIRST THREE NOVELS

By

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Abstract

Julia Alvarez's first three novels, which can be read as a story cycle, are highly autobiographical, and, if studied together, reveal how she progresses as an author. Drawing from theories concerning life writing, language, and madness, I read *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* as a dual *kunstlerroman*, demonstrating the growth of both Alvarez's and Yolanda's agency. In her second novel, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Alvarez wrestles with what "lies at the center of [her] art" — the Dominican Republic and the trauma associated with living on and away from the island. Using cryptonymy and trauma theory, I investigate the effect of silence on both the Dominicans and Alvarez. Finally, in *Yo!* Alvarez suggests that the responsible storyteller listens to those she represents. When considered together, these three novels reveal Alvarez's quest to articulate her development as a writer who can represent the voices of the collective.

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Introduction:

Ex/isle, Experience, and the Struggle for Identity

For the past ten years, scholars have focused on the idea of a “hybrid” self created by postcolonial, ethnic, and exiled authors. Different scholars have presented Julia Alvarez as a member of each of these categories; and, though I do not argue with these previous positions, I believe the designation of “hybrid” is too limiting when applied to Alvarez, an author who embraces the multiplicity of the self: she resists notions of hybridity and borders, which are seen as closed spaces, and struggles to create herself as a whole and complex person. For Kelli Lyon Johnson, Alvarez does this by creating a “narrative space through language that is itself transitional, focusing on the interstices between the speaker and the listener, the writer and the reader.”¹ In this study, I argue that Alvarez’s first three novels can be read as a story cycle in which Alvarez first reconceptualizes the writing of the exiled self to include notions of multiplicity, then works to write that self within a national history, and finally a collective. In doing so, Alvarez works to break the constricting boundaries usually attributed to postcolonial, ethnic, or exiled writers.

Julia Alvarez is a writer separated from both her place of birth, New York, and her place of ancestry, the Dominican Republic; she struggles with both cultures’ perspectives of female identity. As a writer, she works out the complications of her

¹ Kelli Lyon Johnson, *Julia Alvarez: Writing a New Place on the Map* (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 2005): 60.

dual identity with her characters. Yolanda, often argued to be a fictionalized Alvarez², also struggles with establishing an identity as she travels between the Dominican Republic and the United States and confronts those countries' gender stereotypes and expectations. Alvarez's family was forced to leave the Dominican Republic because her father was involved in a plot to overthrow the dictator, Rafael Trujillo. Alvarez is most often considered an ethnic author; however, her forced departure from the Dominican Republic and the fact that she was born in the United States complicates the matter.³ Exile writers are so-called because they are separated from their place of birth; Alvarez's father's exile returns her to her place of birth. In Alvarez's case it is helpful to consider Elaine Savory's distinction between exile and what she terms "ex/isle":

Exile is the condition of separation from the country of birth. In my latter Caribbean-centered meaning ex/isle, isle is not only the literal island but original cultural identity and connection, an identity which is based complexly in first self-definitions in terms of ethnicity, class, gender, nationality, generation. Ex/Isle is the condition of separation

² Scholars such as Jacqueline Stefanko, Julie Barak, Karen Castellucci Cox, William Luis and Lucía M. Suárez, have all articulated that Alvarez's novels are loosely autobiographical.

³ In her article, "Contesting the Boundaries of Exile Latino/a Literature," Marta Caminero-Santangelo looks at the confusion between labeling certain writers "exile" and others "ethnic." By definition Alvarez should fall into ethnic literature; however, she explores themes that have been carved out for those writing exile literature. (*World Literature Today* 74.3 [2000].)

from that identity, a separation in which, however, a new identity is reconstituted.⁴

Alvarez, who spent her first ten years in the Dominican Republic,⁵ was divided from the locale of her childhood memories.⁶ In retrospect, Alvarez admits that she “lost everything: a homeland, an extended family, a culture, and [. . .] the language [she] felt at home in.”⁷ In *Something to Declare* she explains how she was encouraged by her parents, teachers, and the world around her to assimilate into the American culture; however, she felt like so much of who she was had no place in the American culture and therefore she was forced to create a secret life.⁸ Even though while in the Dominican Republic she attended an American school because her parents believed it would make her transition into the United States easier, Alvarez could not understand what Dick and Jane had to do with her life. These texts emphasized the childhood exploits of Anglo-European children in the United States. Instead, Alvarez, reading alone under her bed, found kinship with Scheherazade from *The Thousand and One Nights* who lived in a kingdom that didn’t “think females [were] very important.”⁹ Scheherazade’s tale resonated in Alvarez’s own life where only the boy cousins were

⁴ Elaine Savory, “Ex/Isle: Separation, Memory, and Desire in Caribbean Women’s Writing,” *Winds of Change: The Transforming Voices of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars*, ed. Adele S. Newson and Linda Strong-Leek (New York: Peter Lang, 1998) 170.

⁵ Her family returned to the Dominican Republic when she was three months old.

⁶ For this reason, I will be referring to Alvarez as both an exile and an ex/isle because the separation from her first homeland of consciousness is a significant moment for Alvarez.

⁷ Julia Alvarez, *Something to Declare* (New York: Plume, 1999) 139.

⁸ Alvarez, *Declare* 165.

⁹ Alvarez, *Declare* 135.

“asked what they want[ed] to do with their lives and the “[g]irls [were] told [they] [were] going to be wives and mothers.”¹⁰ In the Dominican Republic, Alvarez’s choices as a woman were limited by the social constraints of a patriarchal binary. Women had limited choices; they either obeyed the system, becoming wives and mothers, or they defied the system, becoming whores. As a child, Alvarez already found exception to this limiting constraint. She identified with Scheherazade who concedes “but even though I am a girl. [. . .] I am ambitious and clever and I’ve found ways of getting around the restraints put upon me.”¹¹ Unlike Jane, who, like her mother, accepts her assigned gender role, Scheherazade rejects these roles. Scheherazade’s tale resonates with Alvarez despite the differences in geographical location, culture, and time period, for Alvarez is mostly concerned with the manner in which Scheherazade defies gender norms. Scheherazade’s cunning tactics to avoid trouble – she will tell a story – also suggest a connection not tied to birthplace or geographical landscape but to language and art: Alvarez admits that she, too, had “learned that stories could save you.”¹² This realization eventually helped Alvarez in her transition from the Dominican Republic to the United States, for she was able to reconfigure her experience into “fiction” as a means of understanding the experience.

In their study of autobiographical subjects and acts, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson explain that when an individual is or has been considered outside of the

¹⁰ Alvarez, *Declare* 135.

¹¹ Alvarez, *Declare* 135-6.

¹² Alvarez, *Declare* 138.

dominant culture they often make overt appeals to their authority of experience.¹³

Smith and Watson assert:

Such appeals may be made on the basis of sexual, or ethnic, or racial, or religious, or national identity claims. [. . .] identity confers political and communal credibility. In such cases, a previously ‘voiceless’ narrator from a community not culturally authorized to speak [...] finds in identification the means and the impetus to speak publicly.¹⁴

Alvarez, an ex/iled woman and author, draws upon her experiences to tell stories in order to save herself — the stories help place her somewhere and give her an authority to speak. While growing up Alvarez learned that the ability to wield language enabled her to control her environment. A child in ex/isle, she missed the Dominican Republic and learned to find solace in language. By simply writing the words she could recall the “sights, sounds, smells, the people and places of the homeland [she] had lost. [She] realized something [she] had always known lying on [her] stomach under the bed: language was power.”¹⁵ Although Alvarez was a child at the time of her exile, it is clear that her writing bears the sign of someone who has learned that the only way to control the construction of the self is through words, for

¹³ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: U of Minn P, 2001) 28.

¹⁴ Smith and Watson, *Reading* 28.

¹⁵ Alvarez, *Declare* 140.

exiled writers often write because they are not allowed to write or live in their country. They write to exist.¹⁶

For a Spanish-speaking exile the displacement is existentially problematic because of the Spanish language. In her study, Sophia McClennen explains:

Spanish expresses “to be” with two distinct verbs: “ser” and “estar.” The dichotomy, which the exile faces of, for instance, being Chilean (ser Chileno / to be Chilean), and not being in Chile (no estar en Chile / to not be in Chile), seems to be exacerbated by these two verbal forms (soy de donde no estoy / I am from where I am not). [. . .] In the case of the Spanish-speaking exile, to be is not to be, and that is the problem.¹⁷

In Julia Alvarez’s case, the problem was compounded because upon arrival in New York she was enrolled in an English speaking school. She had arrived in the United States during a time when “speaking a language other than English was considered ‘Un-American.’ Because of this, Alvarez quickly learned English, and in the process lost much of her native language.”¹⁸ This loss results in Alvarez’s separation from the ability to construct herself with the language of her childhood homeland. Her narratives of the Dominican Republic are spoken/written in English, the language she adopted as a result of her exile. Questions of language and homeland contribute to an

¹⁶ Sophia A. McClennen, *The Dialectics of Exile: Nation, Time, Language, and Space in Hispanic Literatures* (West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 2004) 161.

¹⁷ McClennen 151.

¹⁸ Silvio Sirias, *Julia Alvarez: A Critical Companion* (Critical Companions to Popular Contemporary Writers). (Westport: Greenwood P, 2001) 2.

individual's sense of self-identification. Alvarez's relationship to language is further complicated by the fact that as an exiled woman in the United States, she gains the freedom to choose her career to write about her homeland where she would not necessarily have had the same freedoms. As a Spanish-speaking immigrant, however, Alvarez has restrictions placed on her lingual freedom in the United States. Alvarez gets trapped between the cultures and languages of the Dominican Republic and the United States.

At first, language was the greatest barrier for Alvarez in her acculturation to the States; however, in time, it became her shelter. In her essay "My English," Alvarez discusses her insecurities at school while learning a new language: "My native tongue was not quite as good as English, as if words like *columpio* were illegal immigrants trying to cross a border into another language. But Teacher's discerning grammar-and-vocabulary-patrol ears could tell and send them back."¹⁹ The Spanish words, described as "illegal immigrants," represent Alvarez's interpretation of her teacher's stern corrections as insults directed toward Julia.²⁰ She, not her words, becomes illegal in a society that accepts perfect English as the only language; therefore, Alvarez would have to give up speaking Spanish to be American. This is an exchange she accepts, as a child, as she falls in love with English. Alvarez describes the scene:

¹⁹ Alvarez, *Declare* 24.

²⁰ At this point in her education, Alvarez's "native tongue" would, in fact, be grammatically better than her English; her distinction that it was "not quite as good" as her English points to the idea that her Spanish was not as valued as the English language.

Sister Marie filled the chalkboard with snowy print, on and on, handling and shaping and moving language, scribbling all over the board until English, those verbal gadgets, those tricks and turns of phrases, those little fixed units and counters became a charged, fluid mass that carried me in its great fluent waves, rolling and moving onward, to deposit me on the shores of my new homeland. I was no longer a foreigner with no ground to stand on. I had landed in the English language.²¹

This passage reveals Alvarez's delight in playing with the language as she describes her homecoming. This homecoming is, of course, complicated by the fact that it is neither the home she left nor a tangible place. Language becomes a "site of contestation over issues of identity and community" and it is "transformed by exile into a transitional space."²² Alvarez, caught between two languages and two countries, creates a third by describing herself "as a Dominican American writer. That's not just a term," she says. Instead, she is "mapping a country that's not on the map, and that's why [she's] trying to put it down on paper."²³

In an increasingly mobile world with shifting and permeable borders, it is necessary that individuals such as Alvarez have the capacity to create their own self-definition. In this study, I will be analyzing Alvarez's first three novels (*How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, and *¡Yo!*), for in each

²¹ Alvarez, *Declare* 28-9.

²² Johnson 60.

²³ Alvarez, *Declare* 173.

of these novels Alvarez complicates the manner in which the reader comes to understand the main characters and by extension the need for individuals to self-construct an identity free of restricting boundaries such as “exile,” “ethnic,” or “hybrid.” Alvarez achieves this primarily by mixing genres and by dividing the narration of each of the stories; for example, all three of the books have multiple narrators who help the reader construct different perspectives of the events; by doing this, Alvarez works to “escape the limits of a single story, even in her own work. She seeks through diverse stories, spaces, and genres to undermine the official story that has dominated her Dominican history and collective memory.”²⁴ Although the three works that I focus on are all considered fiction, they display Alvarez’s unwillingness to confine herself to singular ways of telling; in fact, by conflating her life and the lives of her characters, Alvarez enables the reader to draw close parallels between author and character and reveals how she writes a different type of autobiography in reaction to the ultimate single story by combining genres in an attempt to more fully represent the oral and the collective.²⁵

Although only *García Girls* and *¡Yo!* are considered autobiographical, all three of the works I am discussing combine genres, and, interestingly, while each text employs a different combination of genres, all three, to some extent, use the short story cycle.²⁶ In her essay, Rocio G. Davis investigates how the short story cycle

²⁴ Johnson 112-3.

²⁵ Smith and Watson, *Reading* 46.

²⁶ This technique is also called the composite novel as it is composed of various stories that can be read independently but are interdependent in regards to the overall narrative. I will be using the term short-story cycle throughout this paper. In her

resembles oral narrative; specifically focusing on ethnic short story cycles, Davis shows how “on different levels, ethnic short story cycles may project a desire to come to terms with a past that is both personal and collective: this type of fiction often explores the ethnic character and history of a community as a reflection of a personal odyssey of displacement, and search for self and community.”²⁷ In the three texts included in this study, Alvarez investigates her personal history and Dominican history in her quest to come to terms with her ex/isled identity and to write herself into both the national history and a collective. While ethnic fiction historically enhances an awareness of immigrant issues, “the ethnic short story cycle may [...] be considered the formal materialization of the trope of doubleness as the between-world condition is presented via a form that itself vacillates between two genres.”²⁸ Alvarez further complicates the use of the cycle by combining it with even more genres, including autobiography, historical fiction, fiction, diary, newspaper clippings, et cetera. As stated earlier, this weaving of genres into a singular text embodies the complexity of the individual subjects and narrators by rejecting a single way of telling. Davis argues that the short story cycle draws upon the oral traditions of narrative, with its most significant feature being “its attempt to emulate the act of

article, “‘Daughter of Invention’: Alvarez’s Or(igin)ality and the Composite Novel,” Margot Anne Kelley uses the term composite novel and focuses upon how Alvarez uses this form in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* in order to challenge the configuration of the subject, for the composite novel is neither short story nor novel, instead it lives in the interstices just as Alvarez’s characters live in the interstices between the Dominican Republic and the United States.

²⁷ Rocio G. Davis, “Oral Narrative as Short Story Cycle: Forging Community in Edwidge Danticat’s *Krik? Krak!*,” *MELUS* 26.2 (2001): 73.

²⁸ Davis 72.

storytelling; the effort of a speaker to establish solidarity with an implied audience by recounting a series of tales linked by their content or by the conditions in which they are related.”²⁹ Alvarez employs this technique in all three novels, first in *García Girls* by centering generally around the acculturation of all four girls to the United States and specifically around Yolanda’s quest for identity and the development of her agency; in *Butterflies* all of the individual narrations link the story of the Mirabal sisters, and although not every chapter can be extricated from the novel and used on its own, Minerva’s chapters can be read as individual short stories; and, finally, in *¡Yo!* each chapter is the account of a different narrator, but the subject of each chapter is Yo, revealing the complexity of her character as told from multiple angles. In fact, “the narrative structure of short story cycles mirrors the episodic and unchronological method of oral narration. Most cycles do not have a linear plot, emerging rather as portraits of persons or communities pieced together from the diverse elements offered in the individual stories.”³⁰ All three novels work in this manner to offer a weaving of story lines that provide moments of the characters’ lives that need to be connected by the reader.

The manner in which the reader is required to be involved by providing outside information and connections is similar to the listeners’ involvement in an oral narrative. In her study, Sarah Hardy displays a connection between oral and written narrative. Although she recognizes the difficulty in equating the two and she notes the

²⁹ Davis 66.

³⁰ Davis 70.

reservations to be made concerning such a comparison, she argues that much can be learned about the short story by pairing it with the oral epic. For example, “the organization of such [oral] narratives is naturally episodic since oral themes tend to group themselves into the portrayal of discrete events rather than to develop a single lengthy unwinding,” and these themes use what would be called when discussing written narrative, flashbacks, parallels, and digressions.³¹ Similarly a short story cycle works from episodes that diverge and converge as the central theme, character, community is displayed in a complicated, often nonlinear, manner. Hardy further connects the oral narrative and the short story in the following lengthy excerpt:

If we think of the short story as a genre linked to the single oral episode, a kind of well-developed theme, then the quality of openness in both forms makes sense. A single theme or episode sends out energies in several directions at once: it pulls in the direction of its own self-contained narrative line, towards other similar and parallel stories, and towards certain patterns in language or a particular set of symbols. The short story unites a group of ideas in much the same way with the difference of being twice ‘fixed,’ once by virtue of being written and once because short stories, unlike episodes, have end closure. This closure nonetheless often sends us back into the story to consider different thematic arrangements. Within the short story, the

³¹ Sarah Hardy, “A Poetics of Immediacy: Oral Narrative and the Short Story (The Short Story: Theory and Practice),” *Style* 27.3 (1993) pp. 9.

reverberations of these energies are not fully developed; instead they exist outside the text at the level of the reader. In other words, the presence of an audience is vital to the completion and validity of the short-story form just as it is in an oral setting.”³²

The reader/audience is a necessary element for both the oral narrative and the short story, for the reader/audience must work to complete and connect the themes present in both forms. Each form requires the reader to bring her own understanding and outside contextual information in order to fill in and connect loose ends. With the short story, like the oral epic, our involvement with the story is intensified because the short story is both dense and short so we must contain all of its elements “in our minds at once because the short narrative resists organizing them definitively under a single dominant mode. In addition, the ending of the short story frequently asks us to reinterpret all that has come before it, an act of listening (or re-listening) that in its most radical interpretation approaches the process of authoring an utterance.”³³ The necessary involvement of the reader simulates the involvement of an oral narrative audience member who must work to hold all of the pieces of the story together while simultaneously making connections. (Of course, the reader has the option to return to any section of the text that he/she wants, while the listener must intensely follow along.) When an author uses a short story cycle the episodic connections among the stories intensifies the reader’s role in making connections across seemingly disparate narratives. The importance of this form in relation to Alvarez is evident in the manner

³² Hardy pp 9.

³³ Hardy pp 41.

in which the listener/reader and the story-teller (orator or author) must work together to construct the narrative. Each listener/reader brings his/her own experience to the story; therefore, the individual's completion of the story results in a multiple narrative, one that resists a "single dominant mode."

Alvarez's choice to utilize the short story cycle reflects her thematic emphasis of articulating the exile's multiplicity as she investigates the fragmented identities of her characters, who are developed in a nonlinear fashion representing the cyclical development of individuals. What is perhaps most intriguing is the manner in which Alvarez's first three novels can be read as a cycle. In regards to her first novel, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, I will be investigating the resemblance between Yolanda and Alvarez and how the text can be read as a dual *kunstlerroman* as both Yolanda and Alvarez develop as writers with agency. Central to this argument remains the manner in which Alvarez seeks to reconceptualize the identity of the exile, for she works against the confines of the hybrid binary by emphasizing the multiplicity of the exiled. In this first investigation I will draw from theories concerning life writing, language, and madness. In her second novel, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, I will argue that Alvarez needs to come to terms with what "lies at the center of [her] art," which is the Dominican Republic and the trauma associated both with living on and away from the island.³⁴ This historical novel is important for Alvarez because she is not only testifying against a tragedy that happened under Trujillo's regime, but she is also advocating the necessity of speaking in order to

³⁴ Julia Alvarez, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (New York: Plume, 1992) 290.

provide alternatives to the Truth we so often are offered as final fact. To fully analyze the trauma and its relation to the fabrication of an absolute Truth, I will turn to cryptonymy and trauma theory as I investigate the effects of silencing. Finally, in her third novel, *Yo!*, Alvarez returns to the main character of her first novel while complicating the manner in which the reader understands Yolanda. Understanding both the importance of listening to others from her research for and writing of *Butterflies* and the complicated nature of understanding the fragmented individual, Alvarez, through the multiple narration of Yolanda, reveals the responsibility of the story-teller to those she represents and the importance of understanding our multiplicity. When considered together, these three novels reveal Alvarez's quest to articulate her development as a writer who can represent the voices of the collective. Alvarez closely analyzes the role of one's memory in the construction of one's individual truth, for we all see and remember events differently, and by exposing how memory works to create our understanding, Alvarez points to the ways in which we construct ourselves.

Chapter One:

“An Act of Saving My Life”: Autobiographical Fiction as an Act of Agency in Julia

Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*

*“All novels are loosely autobiographical,
but some novels are more
loosely autobiographical than others.”³⁵*

When Julia Alvarez’s family read *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* they were upset, not because she had “written specifically about them, but because they were shadowy resemblances, resonances, characters who reminded them of themselves but who said things or did things that they had never exactly said or done.”³⁶ Her family wanted a distinction between the lies and the truth. Readers, like Alvarez’s family, often desire to place texts within neat categories. Just as Alvarez’s mother asked, “Why couldn’t [you] write a novel in which [you] made everything up? Or else go ahead and write a memoir and tell the real truth,” readers ask for clear distinctions to help them navigate the line between autobiography and fiction.³⁷ What happens when the lines are blurred? What happens when there is no line to reference?

Alvarez specifies that “all novels are loosely autobiographical,” and she concedes that “[t]he fiction in some novels is more transparent than in others,” in that “[w]e can see through it to the life of the writer.”³⁸ If all novels are to some degree

³⁵ Julia Alvarez, “A Note on the Loosely Autobiographical,” *New England Review* 21.4 (2000): 165.

³⁶ Alvarez, “Note” 165.

³⁷ Alvarez, “Note” 166.

autobiographical, then fiction is not absolute imagination, for it draws on the self to varying degrees. Fiction is a construction of a perceived world, which begins from the author's point of reference and thereby often includes allusions to the author's life. Autobiography is the author's attempt to construct the self; however, all constructions are based upon memories, which are fictional in that remembrances are not absolute fact.³⁹ If fiction is always autobiographical and autobiography is always fictional, can a distinction be made between them?

Autobiography

Modern autobiography emerges out of an Enlightenment philosophy in which the "Self" tells *his* story and is set apart from everyone else. These autobiographies, though different in terms of "place, time, histories, economics, [and] cultural identifications" all have "I's" that are "rational, agentive, [and] unitary."⁴⁰ Autobiography became the story of the individual man who overcame or accomplished great things because of self-determination and hard work. They became the representational texts for the great men like Benjamin Franklin and Henry Adams. Even though Adams writes his life-story using a third-person construction, Phillippe Lejeune's autobiographical pact is not violated for the protagonist (Henry Adams) has

³⁸ Alvarez, "Note" 165.

³⁹ Julia Alvarez describes this saying "[...] even the black woman writing her black woman story is not writing a factually true story. The minute she composes those quantified, observable, recorded facts into language and narrative, she is constructing, emphasizing things, leaving things out, selecting this word and not another." "Note," 165.

⁴⁰ Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith, introduction, *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*, eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Minneapolis: U of Minn P, 1992) xvii.

the same name as the author on the title page.⁴¹ These autobiographies were not contested because the “narrator was thought to speak self-evident truths of his life, and the autobiography critic acted as a moralist, evaluating the quality of the life lived and the narrator’s ability to tell the truth.”⁴² Later, during the second-half of the twentieth century, the concept of selfhood came under attack as critics started questioning both the idea of a “coherent ‘self’ and the ‘truth’ of self-narrating.”⁴³ Authors began to play with the idea of creating narrators and constructing “factual” lives, thereby writing autobiographically from the standpoint of a fictionalized character. Roland Barthes was one of the first to break the “time honoured autobiographical contract — that the self writing and the self written about should be one and the same. This has led many to see *Roland Barthes* as ‘psuedo-autobiographical’ or as announcing the end of autobiography.”⁴⁴ For these critics, autobiography in its purest form is only fact. Autobiography’s end, then, for some, resides in the recognition of the limits of the constructed self.

Autobiography criticism was drastically reconfigured when social scientists and theorists as early as the 1970s began questioning the validity of a stable self who is able to tell a factual story about her own life. In their book *Reading Autobiography*:

⁴¹ Philippe Lejeune, *On Auobiography*, trans. Katherine Leary, *Theory and History of Literature*, Vol. 52 (Minneapolis: U of Minn P, 1989).

⁴² Smith and Watson, *Reading* 123.

⁴³ Smith and Watson, *Reading* 123.

⁴⁴ Seán Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1998) 54.

A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson discuss this second wave of criticism:

Derridean deconstruction, Barthesic semiotics, and Foucaultian analysis of the discursive regimes of power energized the dismantling of metaphysical conceptions of self-presence, authority, authenticity, and truth. As for Lacan, for Derrida the self is a fiction, an illusion constituted in discourse, a hypothetical place or space of story-telling.⁴⁵

The idea of autobiography as factual becomes problematic for the reader when the truthfulness of the text or the narrator's ability to be autonomous is questioned. Autobiography becomes performative as identities are constructed. For example, Sidonie Smith "reads autobiographical telling as performative because it enacts the 'self' it claims has given rise to the 'I.'"⁴⁶ This performative act of creation echoes the growing emphasis on the *graphia*.⁴⁷ By looking at the text itself, critics are able to "ask whether there are practices of graphing the *autos* and framing its *bios* that are particular to texts that perform self-reference, be they written, imaged, spoken, and/or figured."⁴⁸ With this as a frame, the study of life narrative opens up to other mediums and genres including photography, film, and fiction.

⁴⁵ Smith and Watson, *Reading* 132.

⁴⁶ Smith and Watson, *Reading* 143.

⁴⁷ This is what Smith and Watson consider the third wave of autobiography criticism. The first wave was concerned with the *bios*, and the second wave was concerned with the *autos*.

Historically, autobiography has been a genre of the Western male; however in the 1980s there was an increased interest in “women’s autobiographical practices as both an articulation of women’s life experiences and a source of articulating feminist theory.”⁴⁹ Women began to realize that the theory of autobiography applied mostly to male authors and, for the most part, excluded women’s autobiographical practices. Critics began to study how women and men constructed life narratives differently, and they began to look for ways of interpreting women’s autobiography. While men’s autobiographies are often public and linear, women’s autobiographies are private, usually about home, and they are irregular in form because they reflect the fragmented and multiple lives the women lead.⁵⁰ In her article, Susan Stanford Friedman asserts that

the fundamental inapplicability of individualistic models of the self to women and minorities is twofold. First, the emphasis on individualism does not take into account the importance of group identity for women and minorities. Second, the emphasis on separateness ignores the differences in socialization in the construction of male and female gender identity.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Smith and Watson, *Reading* 137.

⁴⁹ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, “Introduction: Situating Subjectivity in Women’s Autobiographical Practices,” *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Madison: U of Wisc. P, 1998) 5.

⁵⁰ Smith and Watson, *Women* 9.

⁵¹ Susan Stanford Friedman, “Women’s Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice,” *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Madison: U of Wisc. P, 1998) 72.

Women authors and critics argued that women's autobiography needed to be studied apart from the male tradition, for women produce their own positioning through their autobiographical writing; however, the positioning remains "marginal or even untranslatable when they are placed in a context in which individuation is defined as the separation of the self from all others."⁵² Furthermore, their writings are marginalized when they aren't accepted as autobiography because they don't fit into the Western, male model of the Enlightened autobiography. Through a more communal tradition, women have set out to establish a counter-canon of texts that give voice to the previously silenced.⁵³

Susan Stanford Friedman argues that women's self-creation through autobiography is not "an empty play of words on the page disconnected from the realm of referentiality." Instead, the female author works to separate herself from her "historically imposed image." For Friedman, "[w]riting the self shatters the cultural hall of mirrors and breaks the silence imposed by male speech."⁵⁴ Women construct their own identities through their own manipulations of language and form, creating a very different autobiography from their male counterparts.

Bildungsroman/Kunstslerroman

The problem some critics have with women's autobiography is that it does not strictly adhere to the structure of the genre. As far back as 1854, George Sand sought an alternate manner in which to tell her story; she used a novelistic structure and

⁵² Friedman 79.

⁵³ Smith and Watson, *Women* 24-5.

⁵⁴ Friedman 76.

serialized her narrative. Sand carved out a place for her life story using the popular fictional form of the time period. Today, recent autobiographies by women continue to break the masculine structure of the genre. Women authors, in order to break from the representational “great man” narratives, construct hybrid texts, which explore the fragmented nature of their lives. Using autobiographical fiction, women are able to reject the idea of a single identity that is factually represented; instead they are able to show how memory is communal and social through which identities are constructed. In *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women’s Self-Representation*, Leigh Gilmore discusses how, “for men, the mythology of the signature involves either the empowerment or the anxiety of influence: tradition, genealogy, and the legacy of naming [which] constitute[s] a mutual heritage.”⁵⁵ However, for women, the title page is a site of necessary evasion, as women have long needed to use pseudonyms in order for their voices to be heard. The title page for women is “an extension of the fiction of identity.” From the first page, women negotiate their own space, necessarily breaking Lejeune’s autobiographical pact in order to articulate the complex nature of the self.

Autobiographies by women of color mix genres, creating a text that breaks with and subverts the traditional genres of autobiography, fiction, poetry, et cetera. As she works to understand herself, she combines the parts into a whole, but the whole remains fragmented, multiple. While hybrid texts are abundant and the possibilities of

⁵⁵ Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women’s Self-Representation* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994) 81. *qtd. in* Barbara Rodríguez, *Autobiographical Inscriptions* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999) 9.

differentiation of type of hybridization are nearly endless, I have chosen to focus in this chapter on Alvarez's use of autobiographical fiction. I would argue that Alvarez's text could even be narrowed down to autobiographical *kunstslerroman*, for the narrators are in search of their position in the world, an artist's (the author's) self-discovery. Autobiography, as a literary tradition, "came into prominence in the eighteenth century," and the *bildungsroman* influenced literary tradition in the nineteenth century.⁵⁶ The two forms both emphasize the development of the individual and his relationship to society as a whole; "however, despite the remarkable similarity of theoretical intent, the autobiography has for a long time maintained a generic separation from the *Bildungsroman*."⁵⁷ When critics separate the two genres, they overlook the manner in which women writers, and especially women writers of color, are combining the two genres in complicated ways. Women writers combine these forms in order to "'affirm and assert' the complex subjectivity of their characters and, by extension, themselves."⁵⁸ These authors use a typically fictional form to tell an autobiographical narrative because it offers them a way to distance themselves from an often traumatic subject matter.⁵⁹ While the fictionalization distances the author from subject, it also frees the author from the autobiographical

⁵⁶ Antonia MacDonald-Smythe, *Making Homes in the West/Indies: Constructions of Subjectivity in the Writings of Michelle Cliff and Jamaica Kincaid* (New York: Garland, 2001) 33.; Smith and Watson, *Reading* 101.

⁵⁷ MacDonald-Smythe 33.

⁵⁸ Maria Karafilis, "Crossing the Borders of Genre: Revisions of the *Bildungsroman* in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* and Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 31.2 (1998) 63.

⁵⁹ For more on the subject of trauma in memoir, see Leigh Gilmore's book *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001).

contract of telling her life story, which would be evaluated based on its factual representation. She is thereby allowed to tell a more representational story, one that represents her community. In Alvarez's case, she is allowed to reconceptualize the identity of the exile. What is intriguing about this endeavor is that it not only breaks the autobiographical pact, but it also subverts the *bildungsroman*'s narrative of self-development. Alvarez writes an autobiographical novel of development "as a means of writing the silenced community into history."⁶⁰ In this manner, she writes a representational text that gives voice not only to the individual, as the "great man" autobiographies did, but to a community.

In her study on Michelle Cliff and Jamaica Kincaid, Antonia MacDonald-Smythe engages this connection between the author, the autobiography, the community, and the *bildungsroman*. She argues that Kincaid and Cliff use the form to articulate their own forms of selfhood and not to communicate the experience of their respective communities. Furthermore, MacDonald-Smythe sees *Annie John* and *Abeng* as Kincaid's and Cliff's *kunsterromans*, arguing that "[e]ach woman embarks on a journey toward artistic selfhood and uses autobiographical fiction to mark out her own *bildung*."⁶¹ I find MacDonald-Smythe's identification of these works as *kunsterromans* compelling, and I agree that as autobiography these texts tell the story of the author's artistic-discovery; however, I would like to expand her argument and apply it to Alvarez. Alvarez fictionalizes her *kunsterromans* in order to demonstrate

⁶⁰ MacDonald-Smythe 30.

⁶¹ MacDonald-Smythe 32.

the anxiety of authorship ex/iled women authors experience as they struggle for the agency to construct their own identities. She code-switches, inverts traditional storylines, and creates fragmented genres in order to carve out a place from where she can speak, highlighting her identification as an exile without a geographical location to call home.

Using three of the five “constitutive processes of autobiographical subjectivity” that Smith and Watson define in their instructive text *Reading Autobiography*, I will work to show how memory, identity, and agency are linked to language in Julia Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. I will further argue Alvarez reveals her own authorial anxiety through her character’s “anxiety of authorship,” which is an integral part of the *kunstslerroman* of not only her character, but of herself.

Memory

Autobiography, by nature of the form, is an act of remembering; it is an act of an individual’s (re-)construction of memory. For that reason, as Alvarez has noted, the memory may only be factual for the individual who constructed it. Smith and Watson discuss memory as a personal process of meaning-making that, when shared, becomes a collective process of writing oneself into the social collective. Therefore, acts of remembrance are collective in nature, in that they draw upon “social sites of memory, historical documents, and oral traditions.”⁶² It is the manner in which people choose to (re-)construct these sites of memory that articulates their claims about their

⁶² Smith and Watson, *Reading* 20.

personal position within the collective past. Many writers use fiction as a medium to express their version of the past in order to show the complex nature of the present self.

One such author, Julia Alvarez, writes a narrative, which begins with an adult Yolanda who visits the Dominican Republic and ends with Yolanda as a child living in the Dominican Republic. Alvarez's narrative is constructed of chapters, which alternate focus among the four sisters. This disjointed and fragmented storyline displays Alvarez's emphasis on the communal, emphasizing how women's stories and development are relational. The story of Yolanda, the main character and Alvarez's double, is told within the stories of the García girls. Alvarez's choice of surnames reflects a conscious decision to connect her narrative to a larger communal consciousness, for García is one of the most common Spanish surnames.⁶³ Furthermore, in Alvarez's text, the fragmented structure of the novel reflects the content where "the question of identity and the presentation of the self" is "complicated by the problematic of the fragmented, multiple identity."⁶⁴

Alvarez points to the problems of absolute, factual memory in the text by having different characters recount the same event. Each character's account of the events reveals her self-constructed identity, for she remembers only, in essence, what she wants. If others remember differently, the story becomes a multiple narrative

⁶³ García is the number one most common Spanish surname in the United States, and it is one of the most common Spanish surnames in Spanish speaking countries. Information found during a cursory internet search of various popular surname sites.

⁶⁴ Lourdes Torres, "The Construction of the Self in U.S. Latina Autobiographies," *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Madison: U of Wisc. P, 1998) 277.

woven together by individual self-constructions. In an essay, Alvarez asserts that “memory is a composite of what we remember and what we are reminded to remember,” which is exactly what she demonstrates in *García Girls*.⁶⁵ She introduces a story early in the novel about how Sofia (Fifi) met her husband, Otto, on the streets of Columbia. Then the reader hears the story again the way the mother has reconstructed it. Instead of Sofia running off with a boyfriend to have sex with him in Columbia far from her parents’ watchful eyes, she is on a chaperoned church trip to Perú. Instead of just meeting a guy in the marketplace after breaking up with her boyfriend, she readily assists a man who cannot speak a word of Spanish. Instead of being pregnant when she returns from Columbia, she corresponds with her new friend, marries, and then becomes pregnant. The mother’s motives for changing the story are clear in that they preserve her daughter’s pre-marital purity. The mother, needing to hold on to this image of her daughter, constructs her own story of how her daughter met her husband.

Alvarez plays with the notion that memory is constructed by meta-narrating this convention later in the novel when the sisters gather and discuss their mother’s story. She writes:

⁶⁵ Perhaps ironically she did this with her own family after they complained that she had not told the truth in *García Girls*. Her family was bothered by the fact that she told “shadowy resemblances” of the truth, so she had each family member write down a story of their last day on the island as they remembered it. When she got all of their stories, all of them were different, some “remembered” what Alvarez had constructed, while others remembered events that could not have taken place on that day. Alvarez shows that memories are constructed and not absolute. (From “Note” 166).

“In Mami’s version of the story, you met in Perú,” Sandi says. “And you fell in love at first sight.”

“And made love the first night,” Carla teases. The four girls laugh. “Except that part isn’t in Mami’s version.”

“I’ve heard so many versions of that story,” Sandi says, “I don’t know which one is true anymore.”

“Neither do I,” Fifi says, laughing. “Otto says we probably met in a New Jersey Greyhound Station, but we’ve heard all these exciting stories about how we met in Brazil or Columbia or Perú that we got to believing them.”⁶⁶

The sisters question the veracity of the story they personally remember when they hear another version of the story. Stories are tools that assist the memory, for they are constructed so the person who wants to remember can pass the story on to others. What happens, however, is that the story-teller may be constructing the story so that it will make sense to them, thereby altering pieces of the story. For example, in a strict Catholic household, the mother most likely could not or did not want to think about her daughter engaging in premarital sex; therefore, her story overlooks the fact of the full-sized premature birth of her grandchild. Furthermore, the story-teller often shapes her story in order to appeal to her audience. It is highly likely that Fifi’s story about meeting her husband, when told to her mother, did not contain the same details she would have used when telling her sisters what happened. The stories that are

⁶⁶ Alvarez, *García Girls* 62-3.

constructed and remembered are not necessarily factual representations of the events. Alvarez problematizes the belief that memory can be absolute and she does so within a communal setting, emphasizing the importance of a shared memory.

Identity and Language

Women who immigrate often have trouble reconstituting a new identity for themselves, especially if they immigrate into a country that has a history of marginalization. Smith and Watson recognize that “autobiographical acts have always taken place at conflicted cultural sites where discourses intersect, contradict, and displace one another, where narrators are pulled and tugged into complex and contradictory self-positionings through a performative dialogism.”⁶⁷ The act of autobiography is the act of constructing an identity. For women of color that act requires two (re-)constructions — they must reconcile their positioning in the world in terms of race and gender.

Identity is inextricably tied to language, which complicates the narratives of writers who must learn a new language in order to communicate.⁶⁸ If identity is linked with language, what happens when speech is denied? What happens when a person must translate her identity into a new language? Julia Alvarez negotiates these questions through Yolanda’s self-development.

⁶⁷ Smith and Watson, *Reading* 109.

⁶⁸ In discussing how identities are constructed, Smith and Watson state, “They are in language. They are discursive. They are not essential — born, inherited, or natural — though much in social organization leads us to regard identity as given and fixed.” Smith and Watson, *Reading* 33.

García Girls is written retrogressively, so the reader moves forward through the text while the story moves backwards in time. Therefore, the reader is introduced to Yolanda as an adult and we see her struggles with language and identity in reverse order; however Alvarez builds from what the reader learns in the beginning of the novel and develops the agency of Yolanda's character as if Yolanda were developing in a progressive manner though she is getting younger as the novel's timeline regresses. The most immediate example of this is evident in the type of narration Alvarez chooses for the disparate chapters. At the beginning of the novel the first four chapters of the novel are heterodiegetic. The fourth chapter articulates Yolanda's struggle with language and identity and when she completes this chapter, each subsequent chapter that is about Yolanda is homodiegetic. Yolanda narrates her own story. This change in narrator reveals, as I will show, Yolanda's development in her ability to self-construct. Yolanda's development is representative of Alvarez's development, revealing both character's and author's ability to write their own lives. Without the freedom to construct one's own identity, as Alvarez shows, the individual is driven to madness.

In their influential book *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar analyze female authors and characters of the nineteenth century. Their study reveals that much of the literature written by women is "in some sense a story of the woman writer's quest for her own story; it is the story, in other words, of the

woman's quest for self-definition."⁶⁹ Furthermore, in a patriarchal society women writers have been "concerned with assaulting and revising, deconstructing and reconstructing those images of women inherited from male literature."⁷⁰ These binary images reveal women to be either angelic or monstrous. Female authors, in an attempt to position themselves within the male literary tradition, have had to wrestle with this binary. Gilbert and Gubar point to the significant number of madwomen that appear in nineteenth century women's novels, and they argue that by projecting this madness onto their heroines,

female authors dramatize their own self-division, their desire both to accept the strictures of patriarchal society and to reject them. What this means, however, is that the madwoman in literature by women is not merely, as she might be in male literature, an antagonist or foil to the heroine. Rather, she is usually, in some sense the *author's* double, an image of her own anxiety and rage.⁷¹

As mentioned earlier, Yolanda is Alvarez's double in *García Girls*; through Yolanda's struggle with language the reader is invited to see Alvarez's struggle. The fictionalized breakdowns of both Sandi and Yolanda are symbolic of the dual pressures Alvarez experiences being a woman writer in exile.

⁶⁹ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000) 76.

⁷⁰ Gilbert and Gubar 76.

⁷¹ Gilbert and Gubar 78, original emphasis.

Both Sandi and Yolanda must acculturate themselves to life in the United States, a task that requires the ability to identify oneself in terms of the surrounding culture. As adolescent, foreign girls their task is daunting on many levels including age, race, class, and gender. In the Dominican Republic they were considered white and were wealthy, enjoying all of the privileges of the powerful class; however, as women, they were confronted with explicit social constraints. In the United States the García girls are Latina and middle class. As American women they should be able to enjoy freedoms not accessible to them in the Dominican Republic; however, they are looked down upon because of their skin color and their lack of fluid English. This dual sense of self, free and restrained, privileged and persecuted, creates anxiety in Sandi. Feeling that she does not belong, she questions her existence. Gilbert and Gubar explain that as women define themselves as “prisoners of their own gender” they “create characters who attempt to escape, if only into nothingness through the suicidal self-starvation of anorexia.”⁷² Gilbert and Gubar argue that anorexia is a disease of maladjustment to one’s environment, and it is a disease that strikes a disproportionate number of women.⁷³ Sandi suffers from this disease as she tries to reconcile herself to the cultural image imposed upon her by the patriarchal society of the United States.

At a young age Sandi learns that for girls beauty is a sort of currency that keeps her from being returned or rejected. She figures that “being pretty, she would not have to go back to where she came from. Pretty spoke both languages. Pretty

⁷² Gilbert and Gubar 85-6.

⁷³ Gilbert and Gubar 53.

belonged in this country.”⁷⁴ Blue-eyed, fair skinned Sandi realizes she “could pass as American.”⁷⁵ This realization, however, does not ease her transition into American society. Sandi believes inclusion is based on appearance; therefore, when Sandi enters adolescence her identity crisis manifests itself in self-starvation. Sandi’s anorexia is distinct because of the implicit racial and explicit gender constructs that factor into her disease. Although Gilbert and Gubar only specify the dis-ease of gender constructs, Sandi’s illness is directly related to and complicated by her racial and cultural heritage. Sandi’s diet may have begun in the typical anorexic attempt to look “like those twiggy models,” but Sandi supplants her caloric intake with a diet of literature. Sandi believes “that she was being turned out of the human race;” she thought “[s]he was becoming a monkey.”⁷⁶ She thinks that if she “read all the great books, maybe she’d remember something important from having been human. So she read and read. But she was afraid she’d go before she got to some of the big thinkers.”⁷⁷ Sandi’s fears are based on two insecurities: she isn’t American, and she isn’t male. These insecurities are clear in her madness; her fear that she will turn into a monkey is rooted in her difference from the other white, American kids. Her sister Carla had been called “monkey legs” on the playground. Sandi may or may not have experienced the same humiliating taunts considering her lighter skin color, but she would certainly have heard her sister’s haunting stories. The term monkey would have been a derogatory name associated, for Sandi, with her Latina heritage: a

⁷⁴ Alvarez, *García Girls* 182.

⁷⁵ Alvarez, *García Girls* 181.

⁷⁶ Alvarez, *García Girls* 54.

⁷⁷ Alvarez, *García Girls* 54.

heritage which was costing her an acceptance into the United States' society. It seems that Alvarez is revealing the damage a dual identity can have on a girl growing up in the United States, especially a girl who appears to have all of the physical markers of the accepted — blue eyes and fair skin. Instead of allowing Sandi an easy assimilation into the United States, Alvarez drives the “looker,” the girl with “everything going for her” into madness.⁷⁸ Sandi claims that, “evolution had reached its peak and was going backwards.”⁷⁹ Sandi's statement about evolution could be taken scientifically, meaning humans are the highest life form and now they are reverting back to monkeys; however, Alvarez implicitly connects monkeys with Latino/as. This racial connection drives Sandi, ironically the least Latina-looking García girl, crazy. Sandi is pressured by a world that holds white, twiggy models as the sign of perfection. Even when she is close to fitting that ideal, she is faced with the knowledge that she cannot and will never be able to fit an ideal that solely bases itself upon a racial construct. Genetically she may have a combination of Swedish and Latina blood, which may be seen outwardly by some as evolution, but she will always be considered “other;” therefore, she believes her inevitable return to monkey form is imminent.

Sandi's madness is also based upon the fact that she lives in a society that values males. During Sandi's breakdown she insists that she “couldn't stop reading” because “she didn't have much time left. She had to read all the great works of man

⁷⁸ Alvarez, *García Girls* 52.

⁷⁹ Alvarez, *García Girls* 55.

because soon [. . .] she wouldn't be human."⁸⁰ Sandi believes that if she read those books perhaps she would "remember something important from having been human. [. . .] But she was afraid she'd go before she got to some of the big thinkers."⁸¹ Whether or not Sandi believes the big thinkers were all male and only men wrote the important books is never stated; however, at this point in the mother's story both Sandi's doctor and her father recite only male, European thinkers: "Freud. [. . .] Darwin, Nietzsche, Erickson" the doctor lists, and "Dante [. . .] Homer, Cervantes, Calderón de la Barca" the father muses.⁸² The doctor's and the father's automatic response reveals the society in which Sandi lives, a society that values male thought. Sandi is a victim of both race and gender in her new homeland; through Sandi's madness Alvarez describes the toll the dominant society's view can take on (exiled) immigrants trying to assimilate.

The desire to assimilate adversely affects Yolanda who also tries to integrate herself into the new landscape of the United States. She is described as having been a poor student in the Dominican Republic, [b]ut in New York, she needed to settle somewhere, and since the natives were unfriendly, and the country inhospitable, she took root in the language."⁸³ Yolanda's transition, like Alvarez's, is one dependent upon language. Yolanda is Alvarez's double in Alvarez's quest to define herself within a white, male canon. Yolanda works to create her own language through which

⁸⁰ Alvarez, *García Girls* 54.

⁸¹ Alvarez, *García Girls* 54.

⁸² Alvarez, *García Girls* 55.

⁸³ Alvarez, *García Girls* 141.

she can define herself in her own terms, and it is this quest for self-identification that ends in temporary madness.

Yolanda's descent into madness begins with a male character denying the opportunity for female self-definition. Yolanda, like Alvarez, claims the English language as her homeland and a place she could take root. As she works to define herself, it is necessary to note that "language represents one of the most significant barriers" in the "ability to discover a space from which to speak and be understood."⁸⁴ As a Dominican immigrant, however, Yolanda maintains a dual-identity as a bilingual speaker who can easily move between Spanish and English. As a child, Yolanda had readily accepted the English language as a replacement for her native Spanish; however, as an adult, Yolanda rejects a simplistic lingual system and sets out to create her own system of signification.

In a mainly monolingual society, Yolanda meets opposition to her fluid self-definition that embraces her multiple nature. In a language game she devised, Yolanda rhymes her husband John's name with "pond," "hon," and "fun;" and then she expectantly waits for his reply to her whimsical lovers' repartee. Instead of joining her game, John simply calls her a squirrel. When Yolanda explains the rules: "the point's to rhyme with my name," he butchers her name saying, "Joe-lan-dah? [. . .] What rhymes with Joe-lan-dah?" She instructs him in the art of language allowing substitution and invention; "[s]o use Joe. *Doe, roe, buffalo,*" she rhymed. [. . .] She

⁸⁴ David T. Mitchell, "The Accent of 'Loss': Cultural Crossings as Context in Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*," *Beyond the Binary: Reconstructing Cultural Identity in a Multicultural Context*, ed. Timothy B. Powell (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1999) 173.

spoke in the voice she had learned from her mother when she wanted a second helping of the good things in life.”⁸⁵ For Yolanda “the good things in life” consist of playing with words and language; however, she soon learns it is a singular enjoyment. John is unable to keep up with her adroit use of the words and becomes frustrated, lashing out in anger saying, “Not everyone can be as goddam poetic as you!”⁸⁶ John’s frustration with his lack of mastery over language and Yolanda’s frustration with John’s unacceptable definition of her converge in the climactic moment of the scene.

In an attempt to reject John’s definition of her as a squirrel while re-engaging John in the game, Yolanda asks for another signifier. John’s generosity abounds as he sweeps “his hand across the earth as if he owned it all.”⁸⁷ John offers her any earthly thing and when Yolanda asks for something that is not confined to the earth she is rejected. Yolanda asks, “‘sky, I want to be the sky.’ To which she is told, “‘That’s not allowed. [. . .] Your own rules: you’ve got to rhyme with your name.’” When John turns Yolanda around to face him she is confronted with a hard truth: “his eyes [. . .] were the same shade of blue as the sky.”⁸⁸ Yolanda comes face to face with a physical representation of the European language that is trying to constrict her, for John’s blue eyes not only resemble the sky they also represent his European heritage. John is willing to give Yolanda anything as long as it is earthly; thereby connecting her to the things of the earth. However, John, a male, implicitly is connected with the

⁸⁵ Alvarez, *García Girls* 71, original emphasis.

⁸⁶ Alvarez, *García Girls* 72.

⁸⁷ Alvarez, *García Girls* 72.

⁸⁸ Alvarez, *García Girls* 72.

sky and therefore has the freedom the sky offers, and as a male, has the power to name. Yolanda's battle, like the female writer's battle, "is not against her (male) precursors' reading of the world but against his reading of *her*. In order to define herself as an author she must redefine the terms of her socialization."⁸⁹ Yolanda, like Alvarez, must develop her own system of signification in order to escape the confines of the patriarchal system.

John attempts to contain Yolanda's self-identification, first to earthly things, and then to a monolingual system of classification. He tries to trap her with the rhyming rules of her game; however, she deftly plays with both of her languages to create a bilingual self-identity. She argues "'*I*'—she pointed to herself—'rhymes with the *sky!*'"⁹⁰ She rises to the challenge of John's opposition and dogged belief that she must adhere to her own rules. John, of course, finds fault in her solution, arguing that although "sky" may rhyme with "I," it does not rhyme with Joe; therefore, she cannot find identification with the sky. In a final attempt to claim her identity, Yolanda explains:

"*Yo* rhymes with *cielo* in Spanish." Yo's words fell into the dark, mute cavern of John's mouth. *Cielo, cielo*, the word echoed. And Yo was running, like the mad, into the safety of her first tongue, where the proudly monolingual John could not catch her, even if he tried.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Gilbert and Gubar 49, original emphasis.

⁹⁰ Alvarez, *García Girls* 72, original emphasis.

⁹¹ Alvarez, *García Girls* 72.

Yolanda's final attempt bridges her multiple identity; she, like Julia Alvarez, is both Dominican and American. Yolanda's self-proclaimed homeland is language and it is this language that she uses to identify who she is as a multicultural individual. John attempts to limit her both in space, to the earth, and in language, to English. Smith and Watson argue that because

social groups have their languages, each member of the group becomes conscious in and through that language. Thus autobiographical narrators come to consciousness of who they are, of what identifications and differences they are assigned or what identities they might adopt through the discourses that surround them.⁹²

Yo's need to define herself in a multiplicity of languages and discourses ultimately reveals her desire to find acceptance in a society that has seen her as 'the Other.' "If she is able to define herself, then she is able to free herself of the linguistic power of the adults [or dominant culture]. If she is able to decide what a word refers to and convince others, then she can threaten the entire signifying system."⁹³ If Yolanda can break down the monolingual system of language and signifying by introducing a different system of naming, then she will be able to create a space where she and others like her will not be objects but rather subjects in their own system of communication. Yolanda's madness, however, is a result of the censure of her

⁹² Smith and Watson, *Reading* 34.

⁹³ McClennen 183.

bilingualism in a monolingual society. Alvarez says that Yolanda “was running, like the mad,” to a place where the “proudly monolingual John could not catch her.”⁹⁴ It is evident that Yolanda flees a monolingual society that has no way of communicating with the fragmented self.

Yolanda’s madness can be compared to another story of a female writer whose attempts to define herself apart from her husband’s confines lead her to madness, which is depicted in “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. The main character in “The Yellow Wallpaper,” like Yolanda, is a fictionalized version of the author who is forced by her physician husband to adhere to the rest cure. The rest cure consists of sleeping and idly passing the time in an airy room covered in yellow wallpaper with a pattern “dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough constantly to irritate and provide study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide—plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard-of contradictions.”⁹⁵ The description the woman provides foreshadows the internal battle she has with the paper, which ultimately ends in her plunge into madness. As part of her cure her husband forbids her to write; the story “The Yellow Wallpaper” itself is a forbidden documentation of her mental decline simulating her private diary. The reader, therefore, is given access to the thoughts she is willing and able to write down; this compilation, in a sense, gives voice to the growing madness she

⁹⁴ Alvarez, *García Girls* 72.

⁹⁵ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” *Literature: Reading Fiction, Poetry, Drama, and the Essay*, ed. Robert DiYanni, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994) 154.

experiences in her cloistered environment where she is denied the ability to define both her illness and her cure. All four women, heroines and authors, struggle within a male dominated society in which language is power.

When Yolanda and John are beginning their relationship, Yolanda is reticent to begin communication. In her description of the relationship there are no words passed between the lovers until John breaks the silence by telling Yo that he loves her. He repeats the phrase hoping that she “would follow suit” for “[h]e wanted” the “words back,” but Yolanda is afraid that “[o]nce they got started on words, there was no telling what they could say.”⁹⁶ Her fears, it turns out, are not unfounded, for as soon as she tries to define herself, John rejects her bilingual terms. In fact, John’s first statement following the rhyming scene solidifies the argument that Yolanda’s fragmented self is leading to madness. He yells, “‘What you need is a goddam shrink!’ John’s words threw themselves off the tip of his tongue like suicides.”⁹⁷ Through John’s words Alvarez not only equates Yolanda’s bilingualness with an illness, but she suggests the end result of this illness could be suicide. Alvarez’s imagery is reminiscent of Gilman’s description of the yellow wallpaper’s “uncertain curves” that “suddenly commit suicide.”⁹⁸ Both authors convey the seriousness of their character’s situations by suggesting the possibility of suicide in their rhetoric.

In Gilman’s story the main character, forbidden to write, is also denied the ability to have control over herself. When she asks to be removed from the room with

⁹⁶ Alvarez, *García Girls* 70.

⁹⁷ Alvarez, *García Girls* 73.

⁹⁸ Gilman 154.

the yellow wallpaper, her husband, John, denies her, saying, “There is nothing so dangerous, so fascinating, to a temperament of yours. It is a false and foolish fancy. Can you not trust me as a physician when I tell you so?”⁹⁹ This act of dominance is the turning point in the story from which the main character irrevocably descends into madness. Likewise, for Yolanda the final blow comes when John asserts his male dominance in an attempt to stop her mouth with a kiss, a form of rape, the consequence of which is the sheer devastation of Yolanda’s ability to communicate. The scene is as follows:

He drew her towards him, in play, and pressed his lips on her lips.

He pulled her forward. She opened her mouth to yell, *No, no!* He pried his tongue between her lips, pushing her words back in her throat.

She swallowed them: *No, no.*

They beat against her stomach: *No, no.* They pecked at her ribs: *No, no.*

“No!” she cried.

“It’s just a kiss, Joe. A kiss, for Christ’s sake!” John shook her.

“Control yourself!”

“Nooooooooo!” she screamed, pushing him off everything she knew.

He let her go.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Gilman 158.

¹⁰⁰ Alvarez, *García Girls* 75, original emphasis.

Yolanda's words get pushed "back in her throat" and she must swallow them. Her words, once swallowed, take the form of a bird that "beat[s] against her stomach" and "peck[s] at her ribs." Yolanda metaphorically swallows her real self in the form of a bird. This personification will appear later in Yo's story as she reclaims her voice.

Following this symbolic rape scene, Yolanda loses all capacity to use and understand language. In an attempt to apologize, John brings Yo flowers, "[b]ut as he handed them to her, she could not make out his words. [. . .] He spoke kindly, but in a language she had never heard before. [. . .] in sounds she could not ascribe meanings to."¹⁰¹ Yolanda's efforts to communicate with John are futile; all she hears from him is "babble babble," and all she can speak in return is "babble."¹⁰² Yolanda can no longer understand John; to her, his language is incoherent. She attempts to speak his language which only furthers the realization that she has lost all lingual capability. By forcing his monolingual system of signification on her and not accepting her bilingual, fragmented signification, John rejects the very system through which Yolanda found identification.

Unable to verbally communicate with John, Yolanda attempts to explain her reasons for leaving him in a note; however, Yo finds that even written communication reveals her fragmented self. She writes, "*I'm needing some space, some time, until my head-slash-heart-slash-soul*—No, no, no, she didn't want to divide herself anymore, three persons in one Yo."¹⁰³ Her short note goes through six revisions before it

¹⁰¹ Alvarez, *García Girls* 77.

¹⁰² Alvarez, *García Girls* 78.

reaches its final state: “*Gone [. . .] to my folks[. . .] Joe.*”¹⁰⁴ Yolanda chooses not to sign the note with her “real name” because it “no longer sounded like her own” instead she claims “his name for her” as she leaves damaged by John’s system of signification.

Once Yolanda is free of John’s rigid linguistic system she talks incessantly. At home, with her parents, who are also bilingual members of an exile community, Yolanda is able to speak English, Spanish, or Spanglish. In fact, her parents are concerned that “[s]he talked too much.”¹⁰⁵ What Yolanda chooses to talk about, however, provides insight into her continual decline to madness. Yolanda quotes famous poets such as Frost, Stevens, Rilke, and Rumi; however different in nationality these poets may be, the fact remains that they are all men. Yolanda perpetuates the same ideas her father and Sandi’s doctor do: all the great writers/thinkers are male. It is as though John’s repudiation of Yolanda’s identity, his rape of her lingual system, and her consequent lingual amnesia leads Yolanda to an “anxiety of authorship.” This anxiety is seen in Yolanda’s “internalization of patriarchal strictures” and her need to fight “for even a faint trace memory of what [she] might have become.”¹⁰⁶ Instead of looking for female models or attempting to reclaim her bilingual self-definition, she quotes male authors thereby perpetuating the patriarchal literary culture.

¹⁰³ Alvarez, *García Girls* 78, original emphasis.

¹⁰⁴ Alvarez, *García Girls* 79.

¹⁰⁵ Alvarez, *García Girls* 79.

¹⁰⁶ Gilbert and Gubar 59.

Yolanda must overcome this patriarchal tradition that has been ingrained in her mind since childhood. As a young girl, when asked to give a speech at her school, she finds her voice by mimicking the voice of Walt Whitman. When Yolanda finishes writing her speech, “she read over her words, and her eyes filled. She finally sounded like herself in English.”¹⁰⁷ Gilbert and Gubar, however, question a system through which women writers create essentially male texts through mimesis. They ask:

What does it mean to be a woman writer in a culture whose fundamental definitions of literary authority, are, as we have seen, both overtly and covertly patriarchal? If the vexed and vexing polarities of angel and monster, sweet dumb Snow White and fierce Mad Queen are major images literary tradition offers women, how does such imagery influence the ways in which women attempt the pen? If the Queen’s looking glass speaks with the King’s voice, how do its perpetual Kingly admonitions affect the Queen’s own voice? Since his is the chief voice she hears, does the Queen try to sound like the King, imitating his tone, his inflections, his phrasing, his point of view. Or does she “talk back” to him in her own vocabulary, her own timbre, insisting on her own viewpoint?¹⁰⁸

Yolanda’s speech, although self-proclaimed to be her own voice, is plagiarized. She finds in Whitman the words and means to “celebrate [herself]” but she does so by

¹⁰⁷ Alvarez, *García Girls*, 143.

¹⁰⁸ Gilbert and Gubar 45-6.

“imitating his tone, his inflections, his phrasing, [and] his point of view.” Regardless, when Yolanda’s father destroys her speech he destroys her sense of self, for “[a]ll hope was lost.”¹⁰⁹ Yolanda’s father “broke it,” but the breaking is fortuitous in that he breaks the self only in relation to a male patriarchal canon.¹¹⁰ Yo constructs another speech with her mother. The second speech is seen as the mother’s “last invention [. . .] as if, after that, [Yo’s] mother had passed on to Yoyo her pencil and pad.”¹¹¹ Young Yolanda receives the gift of female authorship; however, as discussed earlier, this exchange only adds to Yolanda’s “anxiety of authorship” as she tries to reconcile her identity in a monolingual patriarchal society.

When John forces Yolanda to swallow her words, they beat around inside her stomach. Yolanda’s language becomes a bird trapped inside of her body; while she is in the mental hospital Yolanda learns how to free the bird. In her sessions with her doctor she talked “about growth and fear and the self in transition and women’s spiritual quest.”¹¹² This spiritual quest materializes when her inner voice takes on the form of a bird, for

[i]n the legends and fairy tales of many cultures, the bird represents the possibility of a spiritual pilgrimage. [. . .] The bird is seen as a mediator between earth and heaven because of its ability to fly.[. . .] Freeing the bird in ourselves means that we open emotionally to

¹⁰⁹ Alvarez, *García Girls* 146.

¹¹⁰ Alvarez, *García Girls* 146.

¹¹¹ Alvarez, *García Girls* 149.

¹¹² Alvarez, *García Girls* 80.

spiritual experience, to begin an inner journey to self- knowledge
and integration.¹¹³

Yolanda's bird stirs when she begins to play with language again. From her hospital room window she looks down at her doctor and thinks that "[m]aybe she will try writing again" although it will not be "too ambitious."¹¹⁴ Yolanda's self-cure is then the same as the woman's in "The Yellow Wallpaper" who also found solace from her "illness" in writing. When Yolanda begins to play with "the double meaning of the word *racket* as well as [. . .] Payne" something "[d]eep within her [. . .] stirs, an itch she can't get to."¹¹⁵ She vacillates between the possibility of indigestion and "a personality phenomenon" rising within her.¹¹⁶ As the bird gains strength, "the beating inside her is more desperate than hunger," and "[i]t rises, a thrashing of wings, up through her trachea" where "she feels ticklish wings unfolding like a fan at the base of her throat."¹¹⁷ Confronted with her voice, Yolanda must remind herself to "have a little faith" in what she is able to do as an artist. Karen Castellucci Cox suggests that "Yo's personal muse and secret phoenix rises up, seeking out a representative of the force that has silenced its fancy."¹¹⁸ The bird attacks the doctor, and "after the murder

¹¹³ Linda Schierse Leonard, *Meeting the Madwoman: Empowering the Feminine Spirit* (New York: Bantam, 1993) 76-7.

¹¹⁴ Alvarez, *García Girls* 82.

¹¹⁵ Alvarez, *García Girls* 82, original emphasis.

¹¹⁶ Alvarez, *García Girls* 83.

¹¹⁷ Alvarez, *García Girls* 83.

¹¹⁸ Karen Castellucci Cox, "A Particular Blessing: Storytelling as healing in the Novels of Julia Alvarez," *Healing Culture: Art and Religion as curative Practices in the Caribbean and Its Diaspora*, eds. Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert (New York: Palgrave, 2001) 143.

of Western science, Yo is set free to begin her mental healing.”¹¹⁹ She begins to play with language by rhyming words together, and soon “[t]he words tumble out, making a sound like the rumble of distant thunder, taking shape, depth, and substance.”¹²⁰ Yolanda proceeds as she realizes “[t]here is no end to what can be said about the world.”¹²¹ Yolanda’s descent into and ascent from madness depended upon her ability to construct language on her terms.

Agency

A subject’s agency is negotiated through her ability to act independently. Although, as stated earlier, Yolanda, after the symbolic rape scene, narrates her own stories, at the end of the novel she realizes she must come to terms with her childhood homeland. The story of the drum is the story of Yolanda’s, and by extension Alvarez’s, exile from the Dominican Republic and the haunting way in which the mother country influenced their art. Yolanda (and Alvarez) must come to terms with her cultural past.

Yolanda’s mamita gives her a drum from F.A.O. Schwarz in New York, and Yolanda spends endless days drumming in her yard until she loses both drumsticks. The adults tell her to use dowels or other substitutions, but Yolanda contests that “the sound was not the same, and the joy went out of drumming.”¹²² Full of despair, Yolanda seeks other means to entertain herself. When she comes across kittens in the

¹¹⁹ Cox 143.

¹²⁰ Alvarez, *García Girls* 85.

¹²¹ Alvarez, *García Girls* 85.

¹²² Alvarez, *García Girls* 278.

coal shed she decides to claim one for her own. Placing one in her drum, Yolanda marches across the lawn drowning out the kitten's cries with her drumbeats. "Like the kitten, Yolanda was also uprooted from her nest, her childhood (perhaps seven years too early) in the Dominican Republic. And the drum beats meant to disguise the meows of the kitten represent a natural language [meows] and an imposed one [drumbeats]." ¹²³ Yolanda must construct her bilingual identity removed from her mother country, but hints of the conflict exist even while she is present in that geographical landscape.

The closing paragraphs of the novel divulge through the symbolic use of the cat how traumatic the reconciliation of a dual identity can be. The novel closes with Yolanda saying, "I hear her, a black furred thing lurking in the corners of my life, her [the cat's] magenta mouth opening, wailing over some violation that lies at the center of my art." ¹²⁴ As a representation of the land from which she is ex/iled, the cat literally articulates Yolanda's violation of lifting the kitten from its home and metaphorically articulates how Yo's removal from the homeland and subsequent adoption of the English language violates her Dominican heritage. The cat represents the mother country, and it serves as a reminder to both Yolanda and Alvarez that instead of drowning out the kitten's meows with the imposed drumbeats, and instead of throwing "the meowing ball out the window," they need to learn how to reconcile

¹²³ William Luis, "A Search for Identity in Juila Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*," *Callaloo* 23.3 (2000): 847.

¹²⁴ Alvarez, *García Girls* 290.

their languages and their cultures.¹²⁵ Yolanda and Alvarez must continue to develop their own systems of signification that will be faithful to their identities as Dominican American women.

As a dual *kuntslerroman*, *García Girls* depicts the author's and the protagonist's self-discovery as artists. The text reveals to the readers the story, however loosely autobiographical, of how Alvarez found her own voice; this is shown not only through the story of Yolanda, but also in the very fact of the text itself. Alvarez writes this fictionalized version of her life early in her writing career, an act which perhaps reveals her "anxiety of authorship" and her need to construct her identity. Just as it is necessary for Yolanda to define her own system of signification in the white, patriarchal society of the United States, it is imperative that Alvarez define her own narrative through the creation of her novels. As a Dominican American author, Alvarez must account for the "black furred thing lurking in the corners of her life" as she beats out the rhythm of her self-defining narratives.

¹²⁵ Alvarez, *García Girls* 288.

Chapter Two:

Uncovering the Silent Crypts: Memory, Trauma, and Testimony in Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies*

“Once the goat was a bad memory in our past, that would be the real revolution we would have to fight: forgiving each other for what we had all let come to pass.”¹²⁶

“Once upon a holocaust, there were three butterflies.”¹²⁷

Reading the end of *García Girls* as a metaphor for Yolanda's and Alvarez's struggle to construct an identity reveals the manner in which childhood trauma can be silenced, for Yolanda covers up the kitten's cries with the drumbeats: the drumbeats both cover up and point to the kitten's trauma. The kitten represents an exile pulled from her homeland, and it is the homeland that returns to haunt Yolanda (and thereby Alvarez) at the center of her art. It is the need to reconcile this haunting that prompts Alvarez to write a historical novel about the Mirabal sisters and the trauma of the Trujillo regime.

When a nation has a traumatic history involving events such as a war, a repressive dictator, or a holocaust, it affects all of its citizens, albeit in disparate ways, and becomes a past that haunts the victims. They are haunted by what is known but also by what is not fully known concerning the violence. Those who physically lived through the violence are revisited by it and must work to understand what was taken

¹²⁶ Julia Alvarez, *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994; New York: Plume, 1995) 222.

¹²⁷ Alvarez, *Declare* 202.

from them; they need to grieve for what was lost through the traumatic events.¹²⁸ If this trauma is not worked through, the relatives who hear the stories of the original violence psychically re-live the trauma, for they too are troubled by the violence and want to understand it. Both sets of victims long to understand “not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known.”¹²⁹ Whether the person experiences the violence first hand or second hand, it is the psychic haunting nature of trauma that affects the individuals and leads to psychic victimization.

Although trauma of this nature can be passed down on an individual basis, collective or national trauma affects multiple generations across a broader geographical area. For example, the most prolific studies of national, collective, or cultural trauma concern World War II and the Holocaust. Within these studies, a recent focus has been on literature produced by children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors. Interestingly, these studies seem to focus on the transference of trauma; consequently, the literary works often reveal silences, shame, and/or guilt. When a survivor chooses not to speak about his experiences, his children are often troubled by the silence, for “the shameful and therefore concealed secret always does

¹²⁸ Nicholas T. Rand, introduction, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, trans. Nicholas Rand (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994) 13; Gabriele Schwab, “Writing Against Memory and Forgetting,” *Literature and Medicine* 25:1 (2006): 99.

¹²⁹ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996) 6.

return to haunt. To exorcise it one must *express it in words*.¹³⁰ The absence of expression, then, leads to haunting; however, the presence of words does not necessarily equate a reconciled trauma. In her study, “Writing Against Memory and Forgetting,” Gabriele Schwab recalls her own parents’ war stories: “It took me almost half of a century to understand that the purpose of those stories was not to remember but to forget. They were supposed to cover up, to mute the pain and guilt of shame, to fill the void of terror.”¹³¹ Why do survivors or victims tend to cover up the violence either with stories meant to distract or with silence? Schwab suggests that while “[h]uman beings have always silenced violent histories. Some histories, collective and personal, are so violent we would not be able to live our daily lives if we did not at least temporarily silence them. [...] Too much silence, however, becomes haunting,”¹³² which affects both the victim of the violence and the victim of the silence.

It is productive to use the concepts of the Holocaust literature critics and apply them to other violent and repressive situations, such as the Trujillo regime in the Dominican Republic. Although I am not equating the two, it will be useful to use the frameworks concerning collective trauma in this analysis, for, like the victims of the Holocaust, the victims of Trujillo’s repressive regime passed down their collective/national trauma to their descendents. Looking specifically at Julia Alvarez’s *In the Time of the Butterflies*, I will investigate how the national trauma

¹³⁰ Abraham and Torok 188, original emphasis.

¹³¹ Schwab 97.

¹³² Schwab 100.

caused by Trujillo's despotism affected Alvarez's parents and subsequently Alvarez herself and how she fictionally depicts the manner in which it affected the later generations in the Dominican Republic. Although the Trujillo regime is a part of the Dominican Republic history, Alvarez's depiction of the regime and the lives of the Mirabal sisters is fictional. Through this fiction, however, Alvarez is able to point to how historical events whether experienced first or second hand can have a traumatic effect on an individual.

A traumatic national history, when silenced through repression, may "haunt and inscribe [itself] in cryptic forms into the stories that are told."¹³³ Beginning with Freud's case studies, Abraham and Torok, in their collection *The Shell and the Kernel*, explore cryptic language created by patients when they are hiding a part of their traumatic past. Abraham's and Torok's study, known as cryptonymy, looks at how words that seem cryptic are codes which can lead the analyst to an understanding of what the patient is simultaneously hiding and pointing to with his cryptic language. For example, Abraham and Torok, in *The Wolf-Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*, investigate the manner in which the Wolf-Man uses certain words to both cover up and point to a particular childhood trauma. For the Wolf-Man, one of Freud's cases, and many other cases analyzed by either Abraham or Torok, the underlying secret trauma they have "buried" (or encrypted) relates to a sexual abuse, which is the "gaping wound" that has not been reconciled.¹³⁴ The wound/trauma is disguised by

¹³³ Schwab 105.

¹³⁴ Abraham and Torok 142.

the “secret construction” or cryptic language, the goal of which “is to disguise the wound because it is unspeakable, because to state it openly would prove fatal to the entire topography” of the patient’s ego.¹³⁵ Abraham and Torok argue that though cases may vary, they only differ in the type of wound and the manner in which the patient works to hide the trauma. The act of burying or encrypting the wound, in turn, results in creating a “sealed-off psychic place” or in other words “a crypt in the ego.”¹³⁶ Inside the crypt lies the trauma that is “untellable and therefore inaccessible” to the process of mourning and healing.¹³⁷ The analyst works to unlock the patient’s code so that she can begin to understand what has been buried, hidden, and silenced.

Beginning with Abraham and Torok’s framework, Schwab works to investigate how texts by descendants of Holocaust survivors use cryptic language to cover up or point to the trauma that has been psychically passed on to them. Abraham, Torok, and Schwab look to the codes that become markers for what was covered up, what was silenced because of the trauma. They look to crypto-narratives, narratives that encrypt either intentionally or not, to find evidence of the violence and the suffering. For example, in Schwab’s study she discusses Georges Perec’s book *A Void*. In this book, “Perec works with the formal constraint of including only words without the letter *e*. Using the absence of the letter *e* and composing his novel around lacunae and ellipses, Perec translates an existential void into an alphabetical and

¹³⁵ Abraham and Torok 142.

¹³⁶ Abraham and Torok 141.

¹³⁷ Abraham and Torok 141.

formal gap.”¹³⁸ In this manner, Percec creates his own crypto-narrative that encrypts his secret mourning within the formal structure of the novel.

Alvarez’s project differs from this cryptic-narrative paradigm, for instead of encrypting her own secret mourning, Alvarez explores the experience of creating a national crypt.¹³⁹ The writing of the book is an attempt to understand and decipher her parents’ silence as she investigates how the “concealed shame, covered-up crimes [and] violent histories” continue to haunt Dominicans. Crypts work in two ways: there is the silenced, the buried, what we will call the truth; and then there is the national crypt, the monolithic, flat story that covers up the truth, what we will call Trujillo’s “Truth.” This national crypt encapsulates the actual trauma the country is experiencing; therefore, the nation is not allowed to fully work through their trauma because the national crypt enforces silence through its totalizing control. The citizens are affected both by the way the national “Truth” encrypts the actual truths, and by the inability to recover or later speak about what had been silenced.

Whether individual or national, the covering up of trauma results in a burial, or in a crypt, for the “crypt contains the secrets and silences formed in trauma.”¹⁴⁰ Although crypts contain and create silence, the cryptic language, which points to what is silenced or buried, doesn’t allow for the crypts to remain closed. Instead the

¹³⁸ Schwab 111

¹³⁹ I am indebted to Schwab for the distinction between the two kinds of narratives. Although Schwab does not discuss Alvarez, the distinction allows me to analyze Alvarez’s project. *Butterflies* is not a cryptic narrative, but the psychological study of the patient and the crypts are clearly connected to the crypt of a specific national trauma.

¹⁴⁰ Schwab 99.

“untold or unspeakable secrets, unfelt or denied pain, concealed shame, covered-up crimes or violent histories continue to affect and disrupt the lives of those involved in them and often their descendents as well.”¹⁴¹ Alvarez investigates how those who lived through the events are unable to reconcile their trauma because it is silenced.¹⁴² She is thereby able to reveal how her parents’ trauma was passed down to her through their silent encryptions.

Because Alvarez’s family fled the Dominican Republic because of her father’s involvement with the underground movement working to assassinate Trujillo, her family lived in fear in the United States. Alvarez recalls that her “parents still lived as if the SIM might show up at [their] door any minute and haul [them] away.”¹⁴³ Living under this haunting, her parents attempted to protect their children from the trauma of the past; however, in attempting to silence the trauma by not speaking about it, they only engendered a different kind of trauma in their children. Alvarez remembers how she and her sisters longed to return to the Dominican Republic. She recounts:

Every evening my sisters and I nagged our parents. We wanted to go home. They answered us with meaningful looks we couldn’t quite

¹⁴¹ Schwab 102.

¹⁴² Because Alvarez is working as an analyst when she writes the other parts of the book, we as her readers need to analyze her own crypts, for she is ultimately blind to the things she covers up in her own narrative. For example, in her story of the regime, Alvarez does not fully discuss the Haitian Massacre. In fact she only mentions it in passing when she has Patria say, “My family has not been personally hurt by Trujillo, just as before losing my baby, Jesus had not taken anything away from me. But others had been suffering great losses [. . .] and thousands of Haitians massacred at the border, making the river, they say, still run red”(53). In a way, this solitary mention of the massacre points to and covers up the trauma, but this isn’t a cryptic feature Alvarez is working to uncover, this is Alvarez’s own silencing.

¹⁴³ Alvarez, *Declare* 197.

decipher. “We’re lucky to be here,” my mother always replied.

“Why?” we kept asking, but she never said.¹⁴⁴

Meaningful looks and unanswered questions meant to protect the listener/observer, in fact, present her with unresolved trauma. Haunted by her parents’ silences, Alvarez constructs a novel about one of the stories that was hidden from her as a child. As a child, when her father brought home a *Time* article about the Mirabal sisters’ death, Alvarez and her sisters were forbidden from reading it, for her parents were trying to protect them from Trujillo’s horrors. However, this protection through silencing is its own form of cryptic language, which Alvarez had to live through. Instead of continuing the silence, years later, she found the magazine and recounts: “As I read the article, I recovered a memory of myself as I sat in the dark living room of our New York apartment, secretly paging through the magazine I was forbidden to look at.”¹⁴⁵ Her parents created their own crypt, from which Alvarez had to recover the lost stories of herself, her identity. Alvarez returns to the question of identity, for in *García Girls* she struggles with the need to define herself in multiple ways, and she finds a new homeland for herself in language. In *Butterflies* Alvarez must use written language to recover her childhood homeland which lies at the center of her art. In this way, through language, she works to reconcile not only a traumatic national history but also her own traumatic history.

Alvarez’s choice to tell the story of the Mirabals, of course, is inextricably tied up with her own parents’ revolutionary past. The revolutionary past that they

¹⁴⁴ Alvarez, *Declare* 198.

¹⁴⁵ Alvarez, *Declare* 197.

escaped — the same past that haunted them. Alvarez remarks, “These three brave sisters and their husbands stood in stark contrast to the self-saving actions of my own family and of other Dominican exiles. Because of this, the Mirabal sisters haunted me. Indeed, they haunted the whole country.”¹⁴⁶ Alvarez’s family history, coupled with her parents’ act of silencing within the home, conflates and emphasizes the haunting nature of the Mirabal tragedy for Alvarez. Furthermore, Alvarez has three sisters, which magnifies her personal identification with the Mirabal sisters. By researching and working through their story, Alvarez is able to re/construct her own story. Alvarez’s project to write the story of the Mirabal sisters becomes a testimony against silence; she brings the sisters to life in a novel that reveals and opens the national crypt. In this way, Alvarez works to reconstruct the national memory while simultaneously connecting herself to the nation.

Alvarez writes a character resembling herself into the novel as the *gringa dominicana* who is writing a book about the Mirabals. Alvarez uses the character Dedé’s inner monologue to point to the manner in which the *gringa dominicana* is separated from the island’s trauma. Dedé thinks: “But really, this woman [*gringa dominicana*] should shut car doors with less violence. Spare an aging woman’s nerves. And I’m not the only one, Dedé thinks. Any Dominican of a certain generation would have jumped at the gunshot sound.”¹⁴⁷ Alvarez explicitly makes this dichotomy between those who grew up away from the terror and those who lived it in order to acknowledge her separation. The *gringa dominicana* (like Alvarez) did not

¹⁴⁶ Alvarez, *Declare* 198.

¹⁴⁷ Alvarez, *Butterflies* 5.

experience the trauma of the Trujillo regime in the same manner as those who lived on the island.

It should be noted, however, that it takes a certain type of freedom to write of shadowy pasts; if we leave it up to only those who lived it we aren't necessarily guaranteed a more accurate account because they have lived in a repressed society where "facts" have been constructed and stories have been silenced. Alvarez acknowledges that she is "not controlled by the forces that might silence [her] there [in the Dominican Republic]. Being outside the country allows [her] the freedom to reject the typical stance that [she] would have to adopt towards [her] history."¹⁴⁸ Alvarez is able to construct a story about the national crypt, for if she had lived within the national silence, she may not have had the ability to speak about the effects of the silence.

Alvarez has her characters use typical cryptic markers such as ellipses, codes, and indirection to show how a crypt is formed. Although she is working through her own repressed generational trauma, she works to open the crypt, not to construct one. As Michael Hardin explains:

When an individual is confronted with a history of continuous subjugation and repression, he/she can accept the history and thus continue being subjected by the dominant culture, or he/she can move beyond the restraints of conventional history. To escape the

¹⁴⁸ Marta Caminero-Santangelo, "'The Territory of the Storyteller': An Interview with Julia Alvarez." *Antipodas: Journal of Hispanic and Galician Studies* 10 (1998): 21.

consequences of the colonizer or conqueror's history, one must forget the history or must challenge the basic assumption that history is a true representation.¹⁴⁹

Alvarez points to the ways in which Trujillo manipulated and monopolized the country through the dissemination of his "Truth." His flat story of the Dominican Republic could be seen through the reissuing of the school history books. Minerva reports:

When we got to school that fall, we were issued new history textbooks with a picture of you-know-who embossed on the cover so even a blind person could tell who the lies were all about. Our history now followed the plot of the Bible. We Dominicans had been waiting for centuries for the arrival of our Lord Trujillo on the scene.¹⁵⁰

Trujillo's revisionist history is self-constructed and taught through the national educational system. He construes facts in order to interweave himself into the fabric of the nation. Trujillo's "Truth" is taught as fact, and actual facts such as imprisonments, tortures, and murders are silenced.

¹⁴⁹ Michael Hardin, "The Trickster of History: The Heirs of Columbus and the Dehistoricization of Narrative," *MELUS* 23.4 (1998): 26.

¹⁵⁰ Alvarez, *Butterflies* 24.

Trujillo's "Truth" was also constructed through the newspapers, yet the stories hid the real truth of the reported events.¹⁵¹ For example, Alvarez points to the way the newspaper depicted the Mirabal sisters' deaths, in which Dedé remarks about the Dominicans: "They had already heard the story we were to pretend to believe. The Jeep had gone off the cliff on a bad turn. But their faces knew the truth."¹⁵² Significantly, the truth is not lost; it is just repressed. The Dominicans who live through the traumatic events know what is being covered up; Alvarez is pointing to how the silencing occurs. The textual "Truth" points to what it hides, but the act of hiding and repression are part of the trauma.

When there is a repressive regime that openly controls what is said in the country through the media, a silencing of the truth is exchanged for a façade. Trujillo's "Truth" covers up the real truth and the Dominicans cannot openly mourn their losses. Instead, they must bury their expressions of grief and live in the silences. Alvarez works to show the readers what it is like to live where one must always align with Trujillo, for any comment can get misconstrued and is subject to Trujillo's "Truth." Alvarez points to the idea of speaking too much, of the self-monitoring that happens when words can be used against you. She returns to this theme throughout the novel: "'Patria Mercedes, you should be the first one to know. . . .' We kept our sentences incomplete whenever we were criticizing the government inside the

¹⁵¹ In her article "Talking Back to El Jefe: Genre, Polyphony, and Dialogic Resistance in Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of Butterflies*," Charlotte Rich argues that Alvarez's text speaks back to the "official language" of Trujillo's regime.

¹⁵² Alvarez, *Butterflies* 308.

house.”¹⁵³ The need to self-censor results from the fear of having their conversations misconstrued. The interruptions and use of ellipses are examples of the traces of silence. In a related passage, Alvarez again utilizes the ellipses to point to what is being repressed: “‘The truth is. . .’ Mamá began, but stopped herself. Why give out the valuable truth to a hidden microphone?”¹⁵⁴ The ellipses are a marker that something has been left out, covered up; the ellipses in both cases simultaneously cover up and point to the truth and symbolize the traumatic repercussions of living in silence. All ellipses throughout the novel do not have the same purpose of eluding the spies; however, Alvarez’s explanations post-ellipses in both instances work to show the reader how the silences are made and what they are indicative of. For example, in the latter example, Alvarez points to the disparity between the truth and Trujillo’s “Truth,” for as the text has pointed out, the truth will be distorted by the spies and manipulated into Trujillo’s “Truth” so that it can be used against the speaker. Therefore, there is no reason to speak the truth, for the truth will be subsumed by its reconstruction. What actually happened or what was said is silenced and the ellipses point to its buried condition — the truth is embedded within a crypt. Of course, as has been pointed out in the introduction, memory and truth are relative. For the purposes of this argument, the truth that is buried is multiple and varied and is covered by a dominant, single, official story that stands for the Truth.

Another way Alvarez works to show how Dominicans had to work within the crypt is through her repetitive use of hiding, withholding, and burying the truth. Don

¹⁵³ Alvarez, *Butterflies* 210.

¹⁵⁴ Alvarez, *Butterflies* 214.

Enrique hides Lío's letters to Minerva in his closet because he doesn't want Minerva to be connected to the underground revolutionary movement. Dedé hides information about Lío's escape plans by both refusing to tell Minerva that Lío was hiding in the car in the backyard, and by burning the letter he wrote to Minerva. Both Don Enrique and Dedé protect Minerva from a potentially dangerous liaison. In a similar manner, Maria Teresa writes down the truth in her diary but then must bury it with the rest of the subversive materials because if it were found out that individuals in the family were connected with subversives, then the family would be in danger. In prison, Maria Teresa blacks out the name of her husband in her journal in order to protect him. The need for blacking out, hiding, and burying the truth is for protection; what is repressed, what is silenced, is the horror of Trujillo's regime. His monologic, flat stories of car accidents and disappearances only point to the secret nobody can repeat, and this act of silencing does not allow for one to openly mourn.¹⁵⁵

In order to speak within the national crypt, the Dominicans need to formulate their own code. While Trujillo covers up the truth with his censorship, the citizens cover up their actions with a coded language that points to revolution. The revolutionaries develop a coded, cryptic language, "it sounded like treasure hunt clues or something. *The Indian from the hill has his cave up that road. The Eagle has*

¹⁵⁵ Sinita tries to explain to Minerva "the secret of Trujillo," but Minerva, who lives in an upper-class world where she is protected from the outside and thereby accepts the newspaper stories as truth, doesn't "get it." Sinita, who has experienced "Trujillo's secret" first-hand must spell it out: "Trujillo is having everyone killed." Alvarez, *Butterflies* 17-19.

nested in the hollow on the other side of that mountain.”¹⁵⁶ The codes reveal the “national underground” where “everyone and everything had a code name.” Maria Teresa explains in her diary, “If I were to say *tennis shoes*, you’d know we were talking about ammunition. The *pineapples* for the picnic are the grenades. *The goat must die for us to eat at the picnic.* (Get it? It’s like a trick language).”¹⁵⁷ This code is used throughout the book as a way to circumvent the silence imposed by the regime.¹⁵⁸ Although the code is a way of speaking from within the national crypt, it continues to point to why coded language is needed in the first place.

The traumatic effects of the crypt haunt individuals and, in this case, the nation long after the violence has occurred. Dedé, the sister who survives, is seen through the novel in both the present (1994) and the past. Alvarez constructs her as a woman who has difficulty comprehending the violence. Dedé thinks to herself: “Before she knows it, she is setting up her life as if it were an exhibit labeled neatly for those who can read: THE SISTER WHO SURVIVED.”¹⁵⁹ She constructs versions of her sisters, which, in turn, creates a monolithic story. When walking the *gringa dominicana* through the museum exhibit she *says*:

“Sweet Patria, always her religion was so important.”

“Always?” the woman says, just the slightest challenge in her voice.

¹⁵⁶ Alvarez, *Butterflies* 138, original emphasis.

¹⁵⁷ Alvarez, *Butterflies* 142, original emphasis.

¹⁵⁸ Rich focuses on the dialogic aspects of the coded language and the manner in which they speak back to the regime; although we both read the code as an act of subversion, Rich’s argument centers around the rebelliousness of the sisters and their resistance to the regime.

¹⁵⁹ Alvarez, *Butterflies* 5.

“Always,” Dedé affirms, used to the fixed, monolithic language around interviewers and mythologizers of her sisters. “Well, almost always.”¹⁶⁰

The flat language hides/silences the truths which Dedé withholds from the mythologizers. Dedé’s second hesitation, “well, almost always,” opens up Alvarez’s narrative avenue because Dedé breaks the façade, thereby affirming that Alvarez is not a mythologizer and the story that follows will not be a flat one.

Dedé’s first attempt to retell a story of a happy family scene, a demonstration to the *gringa dominicana* of her ability to recall anything from her memory, reveals the complications of telling a dynamic story. As Cathy Caruth explains, trauma

is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in an attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available.

This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language.¹⁶¹

Even as Dedé attempts to simply recall a story from her past, the wound of what has happened to her calls out and presents itself within the narrative. For, although Dedé’s memory at first focuses on a happy family scene before “the future [began]” where nobody was “added and no one taken away,” as the memory progresses it

¹⁶⁰ Alvarez, *Butterflies* 6.

¹⁶¹ Caruth 4.

reveals the extent to which Trujillo affected people's lives.¹⁶² For even in this happy memory, Dedé is confronted with silencing:

“It’s about time we women had a voice in running our country.”
“You and Trujillo,” Papá says a little loudly and in this clear peaceful night they all fall silent. Suddenly, the dark fills with spies who are paid to hear things and report them down at Security. *Don Enrique claims Trujillo needs help in running this country. Don Enrique’s daughter says it’s about time women took over the government.* Words repeated, distorted, words recreated by those who might bear them a grudge, words stitched to words until they are the winding sheet the family will be buried in when their bodies are found dumped in a ditch, their tongues cut off for speaking too much.¹⁶³

Dedé’s memory is haunted by the national trauma, for within her reminiscence we see the silence; furthermore, we see how the recreation and distortion of words by fellow Dominicans is problematic. Alvarez points to this schism in the country when she mentions those who “might bear them a grudge,” but also later when she writes of Dedé’s appearances at the memorials or receptions in honor of the girls. Here Dedé comments:

People will be asking things, well meaning but nevertheless poking their fingers where it still hurts. People who kept their mouths shut when a little peep from everyone would have been a chorus the world

¹⁶² Alvarez, *Butterflies* 9.

¹⁶³ Alvarez, *Butterflies* 10, original emphasis.

couldn't have ignored. People who once were friends of the devil. Everyone got amnesty by telling on everyone else until we were all one big rotten family of cowards.¹⁶⁴

The nation, which Dedé refers to as a family, is still addressing the national wound: the wound of family betrayal. Her referral of the nation as family assists in her construction of history because the trauma that directly happened to her family is mirrored in the trauma that happened to many other Dominicans. Her personal family trauma is representative of the national trauma. Furthermore, the family shares a shameful past in which each member had a part and Dedé remarks that “the real revolution we would have to fight” would be “forgiving each other for what we had all let come to pass.”¹⁶⁵ Dedé’s role in the novel addresses the trauma the survivor of a tragedy experiences, for she articulates that interviewers usually leave “satisfied, without asking the prickly questions that have left Dedé lost in her memories for weeks at a time, searching for the answer. Why, they inevitably ask in one form or another, why are you the one who survived?”¹⁶⁶ This shame, represented through Dedé’s character, is also meant to point to the larger national shame of both the victims and the perpetrators.

Alvarez’s inclusion of Dedé’s survivor guilt and Dedé’s symbolic representation of a larger national trauma connects to Alvarez’s overall project. In their collection, *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, Paul Antze and

¹⁶⁴ Alvarez, *Butterflies* 317.

¹⁶⁵ Alvarez, *Butterflies* 222.

¹⁶⁶ Alvarez, *Butterflies* 5.

Michael Lambek investigate how memory can work to help understand trauma: “Memories are acts of commemoration, of testimony, of confession, of accusation. Memories do not merely describe the speaker’s relation to the past but place her quite specifically in reference to it.”¹⁶⁷ Memory, as stated earlier, is constructed from individual stories which work like a tool that helps each person construct her past; because each individual remembers differently, memory provides a personal connection to the past. Alvarez transcribes herself into the Mirabal story because she must unearth her own, the story of the life she lost when her family fled from the Dominican Republic.

Alvarez’s novel records the spirit of the Mirabals, and though it is, of course, a fictional story, Alvarez chose this form because she “wanted to immerse [her] readers in an epoch in the life of the Dominican Republic that [she] believe[s] can only finally be understood by fiction, only finally be redeemed by the imagination. A novel is not, after all, a historical document, but a way to travel through the human heart.”¹⁶⁸ Alvarez’s narrative creates a national crypt in order to show how they can and have been formed in history. Through fiction she is able to “describe the process of traumatic encryption and its impact on psychic and social life, thus bringing a different social recognition to histories of violence, not by revealing the silenced violent act but by giving testimony to its lingering toxic effects and its transmission to

¹⁶⁷ Paul Antze and Michael Lambek, *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory* (New York: Routledge, 1996) xxv.

¹⁶⁸ Alvarez, *Butterflies* 324.

those forced to suffer the silence.¹⁶⁹ Although Alvarez does, in a way, reveal the silenced violent act — for she declares that she is writing the book for the North American audience who doesn't know about the Dominican heroines — her greater project seems to lie in the manner that she exposes the “lingering toxic effects” of those who are “forced to suffer the silence.”

Alvarez wants to testify for the Mirabals, and thereby for the Dominican history which has been silenced; it is this desire to communicate, to testify, which bonds listener and speaker in a pact similar to the autobiographical pact, for “testimony attempts to bridge the gap between suffering individuals and ultimately communities of listeners, whose empathic response can be palliative, if not curative.”¹⁷⁰ In this manner, Alvarez sets up a layering of testimony, for she uses the framework of the Dominicans' testimonies to Dedé, Dedé's testimony to those who come to listen, Dedé's testimony to the *gringa dominicana*, and Alvarez's testimony to her readers. This layering of testimony emphasizes the curative effects and the power of speaking, of witnessing. Alvarez writes:

“After the fighting was over and we were a broken people” — she [Dedé] shakes her head sadly at this portrait of our recent times — “that's when I opened my doors, and instead of listening, I started

¹⁶⁹ Schwab 109.

¹⁷⁰ Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw, introduction, *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community*, eds. Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw (Chicago: U of Illinois P, 2002) 11.

talking. We had lost hope, and we needed a story to understand what had happened to us.”¹⁷¹

The silence is broken and the people are able to speak their truths. They no longer need to speak in codes; instead, they must testify against what happened, what was covered up.

In their collection, *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*, Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone explore the process of remembering suffering. They discuss this process in relation to constructions of history. They argue:

The relation between silence and speech is figured as one of liberation, both politically and personally: to reveal truths which have been denied and to remind the world of its responsibilities to those who have suffered, on the one hand; to heal the self by the very act of speaking and being heard, on the other. The injunction to remember, and the corresponding language of forgetting and denial, are directed equally at individuals and at groups.”¹⁷²

The healing begins with testifying, for individuals need to be allowed to speak.

This act of testifying against past wrongs, however, does more than just heal the individual; it “reminds the world of its responsibilities.” The genre of *testimonio* requires that the work in question be non-fictional and that it have urgency, for

¹⁷¹ Alvarez, *Butterflies* 313.

¹⁷² Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, “Remember Suffering: Trauma and History,” *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*, eds. Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (New York: Routledge, 2003) 99.

testimonios give voice to the oppressed — they allow, if even for a brief moment, the subaltern to speak. These texts point to repression, violence, and torture, and in testifying to these injustices, they are a call to action. In his book, *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth*, John Beverley explains that when we are presented with information this way we must listen whether we want to or not; “we are placed under an obligation to respond;” whether or not we act, “we cannot ignore the obligation. Something is asked of us by testimonio.”¹⁷³ Novels about similar injustices are said to employ a testimonial function, but they are seen as not having the same urgency as the *testimonio* because they are testifying about the past.¹⁷⁴ If we consider the testimonial function of a novel to only be representing the past injustice, then the urgency of the novel is, of course, less than that of the *testimonio*; however, if we connect the novelized past injustice to a present injustice we will be able to see the urgency embedded within the portrayal of the past.¹⁷⁵ For, although, it may be “far easier, even seductive, to memorialize past injustice, to weep over human crimes of another era, than to take responsibility for what’s before our eyes,” we need to,

¹⁷³ John Beverley *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2004) 1.

¹⁷⁴ For further explanation and discussion on *testimonio* and testimonial function, see: Linda J. Craft, *Novels of Testimony and Resistance from Central America* (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1997) 188; and Beverley 29-44.

¹⁷⁵ Yice Irizarry in her article, “The Ethics of Writing the Caribbean: Latina Narrative as Testimonio,” addresses this concept; she criticizes current readings of US Latina narratives for “elid[ing] the possibility of reading them as ethical interventions against false official ‘history,’” which, she argues “is the primary function of these novels” (264). (*Literature Interpretation Theory* 16 (2005).

instead, use past injustices to help us see the injustices of the present.¹⁷⁶ Beginning from the haunting presence of her parents' silenced trauma, Alvarez constructs a novel that opens the national crypt while simultaneously showing her readers how a crypt is formed. Alvarez points to our obligation to listen to those who have been silenced and to work so that others are not silenced — something is asked of us by Alvarez's text. In fact, her postscript connects the Mirabals and the present-day International Day Against Violence Towards Women, which is observed on November 25th, the day the Mirabals were killed. The inclusion of this information connects a past tragedy to a present ongoing situation: Alvarez's text raises awareness for both the past and the present. Her book is both a novel about the Mirabal sisters and a narrative about the effects of silencing, for this reason, her novel *should* remind its readers of the violence that is silenced daily around the world.

¹⁷⁶ Miller and Tougaw 5.

Chapter Three:

“I am Listening”: The Story-Teller’s Role

In her third novel, *¡Yo!*, Alvarez returns to her heroine from *García Girls*, Yolanda; however, unlike in *García Girls* where Yolanda breaks from the third person narration in order to tell her own story, in *¡Yo!* Yolanda doesn’t narrate at all. In this novel, the short story cycle is more fully pronounced as Alvarez writes each chapter from the perspective of a different narrator. Each narration gives the reader a snapshot of Yolanda’s life, for each person knows Yolanda in a different context. Instead of allowing Yo to tell her own story, Alvarez has the community piece together her character; in this manner, Yo is revealed as a complex, multi-dimensional character who is working to establish her position as an ex/isled woman. By allowing the people to speak after they had been previously silenced in her (Yolanda’s) fictional counterpart to *García Girls*, Alvarez reveals what she learned in researching and writing *Butterflies*: it is important to listen if you want to understand the community and translate people’s lives into a story.

¡Yo!, then, completes Alvarez’s larger story cycle, for it draws from lessons that Alvarez projects in the first two novels. If *García Girls* is to be read as a *kunstlerroman*, as I have suggested earlier, then Yolanda (like Alvarez) develops her own voice after claiming language as her homeland, for she claims neither the geopolitical nation of the United States nor that of the Dominican Republic. Yolanda works to negotiate her identity through language and through her writing; therefore,

she takes over the narration of her life, telling her story in first person. Subsequently, in *Butterflies*, Alvarez works to understand a personal trauma by writing about a national trauma. Alvarez's textual negotiations begin to construct her views of the multiplicity of truth and identity. *¡Yo!*, Alvarez's third fictional novel can only be fully understood by considering both previous works. Although *¡Yo!* continues Yolanda's story, the construction of the novel as vignettes *about* not *by* Yolanda must be considered in relation to Alvarez's construction of the story of the Mirabals. In *Butterflies*, Alvarez emphasizes the role of a story-teller: she must listen to others and not only speak herself into existence. Alvarez frames the narrative of *Butterflies* with Dedé, who narrates the stories of her sisters to the *gringa dominicana*. In doing this, Alvarez demonstrates how stories get passed along: Dedé represents the voice of the people because she first *listened* to everyone's testimony and then shared the collective story with anyone, like the *gringa dominicana*, who wanted to hear it. By focusing on Dedé's development as a story-teller, Alvarez emphasizes the importance of listening to the people you want to represent.

In *Butterflies*, Alvarez works to uncover the multiple truths that are silenced by Trujillo's Truth. The writing of *Butterflies* allows her to understand that by previously having Yolanda construct her own narrative, author and character silence other people's perspectives of Yolanda. *¡Yo!*, then, becomes a way for Alvarez (through the narration of Yo's character) to uncover the voices of those she silenced by simultaneously providing them a chance to speak their own story and to reveal how Yolanda silenced them. In this novel, Alvarez creates a communal story: one that

celebrates the multiplicity of discourse. After writing about how the multiplicity of truth was covered by Trujillo's monologic discourse, Alvarez allows all voices — even the voices she may not want to hear.

Although *García Girls* has received a lot of critical attention, there is a lack of scholarship concerning *¡Yo!*. If *¡Yo!* is discussed in an article it is always considered only as the continuation of Yolanda García's life. Furthermore, the most analyzed section of the novel is the final chapter in which the father offers Yolanda his blessing, that she should tell her stories.¹⁷⁷ Focusing solely on the authorization of the male patriarch, although important to the story, deters critics and readers from Alvarez's intent. Instead, I argue that because Yolanda's development as an ex/iled Dominican, woman writer is representative of Alvarez's life as a writer, it is necessary to examine the manner in which Alvarez allows for the communal writing of Yolanda.¹⁷⁸

The title of the novel signifies not only Yolanda's nickname but also the subject pronoun for "I," however, in this text Yolanda is not the "I," for she does not tell her own story.¹⁷⁹ Instead, her story is constructed from the collected vignettes of

¹⁷⁷ One such discussion of *¡Yo!* is found in Lucía M. Suárez's article, "Julia Alvarez and the Anxiety of Latina Representation." The majority of the article is spent discussing *García Girls*; however, Suárez spends some time analyzing the father's role in *¡Yo!* and the manner in which he grants Yo the power and responsibility to tell the stories of the family's traumatic past. The discussion is brief and excludes the majority of the text.

¹⁷⁸ Although I study the two novels as autobiographical fiction, I acknowledge that there is not necessarily a direct correlation between Yolanda García's and Julia Alvarez's lives. By looking at the novels in this manner, however, the struggles Alvarez and other exiled women writers go through becomes evident.

various people in her life. She is no longer the subject who can control the story through her subjective telling about the lives of those around her. She, instead, becomes the object and the “I” becomes the voice of each of those for whom she has previously spoken. As they declare subject status and write their own existence, they simultaneously write Yo(landa) into existence. Through their stories, however, they write the multiplicity of Yolanda, for each person (student, teacher, third husband, father mother, caretaker, and stalker) provides his/her own truth. They all know her in a different capacity and from a different place and time. By not having Yolanda represent herself in *¡Yo!*, Alvarez shows us the lessons Yolanda learns in regards to how writers can misrepresent people, and, therefore, why it is important for storytellers to listen.

Speaking for Others

Yo (like Alvarez) believes in the healing nature of stories; even at a young age Yo would flip through her father’s medical books with “her lips moving, an endless mumble going on as she turned the pages.” When asked what she was doing she exclaimed, “I am telling the sick people stories to make them feel better.”¹⁸⁰ The adult Yolanda continues to believe in the power of stories and mentions in a radio interview that “after food and clothing and shelter stories is [sic] how we take care of each other.”¹⁸¹ Stories healed Yolanda, for they allowed her to find her voice. She wants to

¹⁷⁹ I am indebted to Lucía M. Suárez for pointing out that “Yo” is a subject pronoun, and I am similarly indebted to Ann Martinez for her help with my Spanish language questions concerning subject and object pronouns.

¹⁸⁰ Alvarez, *¡Yo!* 300.

speak for those who have been silenced because she was temporarily silenced in *García Girls*. The problem with Yolanda's initial representations in *García Girls* is that she attempts to speak *for* not *with* the people; her constructions of herself ultimately reveal her constructions of other people. She attempts to claim their histories as her own without listening or understanding how her representations may harm those she writes about. Her father notes that "[w]hen she writes a book, the worst she worries about is that it will get a bad review. We [her father and mother] hear beatings and screams, we see the SIM driving up in a black Volkswagen and rounding up the family."¹⁸² Here Yo's concern is purely individual, for she only thinks of her own review. Conversely, her parents are concerned about the danger her stories present to the collective.

Yolanda doesn't seem to understand how her stories can affect the lives of those around her, and because of this, many people in her life try to silence her storytelling. Her mother explains Yo's penchant for storytelling, saying, "[f]or Yo, talking was like an exercise in what you could make up."¹⁸³ Her love of story-telling gets her into trouble because one day she tells a secret that could have gotten the family killed by the SIM. Afterwards, her father beats her saying, "[t]his should teach you a lesson [...] You must never ever tell stories."¹⁸⁴ Because Yolanda's stories put the family in danger, her mother recounts, "in that house we were all at the mercy of [Yo's]

¹⁸¹ Alvarez, *¡Yo!* 290.

¹⁸² Alvarez, *¡Yo!* 307.

¹⁸³ Alvarez, *¡Yo!* 24.

¹⁸⁴ Alvarez, *¡Yo!* 307.

silence.”¹⁸⁵ At an early age, Yolanda learns the power of story-telling, for her stories are both captivating and dangerous.

Perhaps because of her early admonishment, Yolanda struggles with verbal story-telling and later on opts for writing. Unfortunately, Yolanda learns that written stories can also be double-edged. For example, when the boy she used to date starts dating her cousin Lucinda, she writes in her journal “so [she] wouldn’t hold [the anger] in [her] heart.”¹⁸⁶ Yo’s mother finds the journal and because of the improper items recorded there, Lucinda is not allowed to return to the States and continue her college education; Yolanda’s journal limits Lucinda’s choices, and for this Yolanda feels responsible. Lucinda notes that Yolanda

felt guilty all right. She knew if it hadn’t been for her, I wouldn’t be trapped in this world. I’d be finishing my college [...] Over the years she knew that if it hadn’t been for what she’d done, I would be living a different life. And that’s why she never said a thing to me about the state of *my* soul. She knew that if I *was* a hair-and-nails cousin, it was she who had made me one.¹⁸⁷

Yolanda’s writing damages somebody else’s chances for freedom from the island patriarchy. From this incident, Yolanda again learns how her writing can adversely affect others.

¹⁸⁵ Alvarez, *¡Yo!* 28.

¹⁸⁶ Alvarez, *¡Yo!* 232.

¹⁸⁷ Alvarez, *¡Yo!* 37, original emphasis.

These stories reveal how Yolanda's family wants to silence her because her narratives don't consider those she represents. Perhaps in response to these admonishments, Yo attempts to give voice to those without voice; however, as we see through the eyes of the previously "spoken for," instead of listening to their desires, she once again, imposes her perspective on them. One such instance occurs when Yolanda is home from college and working on a report for school. She decides to write about Sarita, the daughter of her family's maid, and her acculturation into the United States. Yolanda's choice of subjects for her report reveals her own social and racial exploitation, for she chooses to write about Sarita who is lower class and darker-skinned. This choice implies that Sarita would have trouble acculturating to the United States, whereas Yolanda would or did not.¹⁸⁸ When Sarita reads the report, she notes that "[e]verything was set down more or less straight, for once," but she still "felt as if something had been stolen from [her]."¹⁸⁹ After reading the report she decides to steal it so that it wouldn't be read by anyone else, but she realizes that the loss of the report would be reflected upon her mother who lived at the Garcías' mercy. Sarita has to accept the report and what it took from her because she has no power to speak for herself. In writing her report, Yolanda is unable to see how she is, perhaps, misrepresenting Sarita.

¹⁸⁸ However, as evidenced in *García Girls*, Yolanda does have trouble acculturating in the United States.

¹⁸⁹ Alvarez, *¡Yo!* 66. When Sarita says that "everything was set down more or less straight for once," it implies that she has read at least some of the report. Later, on page 69, she says, "I can't say I ever read it." This inconsistency seems strange, and yet it could be another instance in which Alvarez is pointing to the way memory works.

Likewise, when Yolanda visits the Dominican Republic working on some writing, she is asked to assist a woman, Consuelo, to write a letter of advice to her daughter who lives in the United States. Yo accepts, yet instead of being a scribe, writing what Consuelo says, she continuously interjects what she thinks; at first she rejects the woman's narrative because it doesn't fit conventional sentence structure, then she begins to reject Consuelo's ideas. "The lady lay the pen on top of the paper and folded her arms. She looked over at Consuelo and shook her head. [...] 'I'm sorry. I can't write that.'"¹⁹⁰ Yo refuses to write Consuelo's advice to her daughter about submitting to and honoring the husband so he'll stop beating her. Yo replaces Consuelo's ideology with her own. She writes the letter:

*You entered upon a clear agreement with this man, and now he refuses to honor it. How can you trust him if he so badly abuses your trust?
[...] A man who strikes a woman does not deserve to be with her [...] Do not let yourself get trapped in a situation where you are not free to speak your own mind.*¹⁹¹

Yolanda replaces Consuelo's letter of advice with her own. This act of silencing, like Yolanda's earlier construction of the school report, resembles the monologism of Trujillo's Truth, for Yolanda replaces the multiple and complicated truth of Consuelo and Sarita with her own singular truth. Consuelo, emotionally moved by Yo's letter, finds herself believing that "these were the very words she had spoken," though they

¹⁹⁰ Alvarez, *¡Yo!* 107.

¹⁹¹ Alvarez, *¡Yo!* 108-9, original emphasis.

were not.¹⁹² And, although the words attempt to break a cycle of abuse, which is important, it is achieved through the silencing of another. Yo's words become ironic for she traps Consuelo in a situation where Consuelo isn't allowed to speak her mind.

Listening to Others

Although Yo attempts to use her writing to help people, she still speaks for others without listening. Alvarez's larger project seems to suggest that the main responsibility of the story-teller is to listen. Yolanda, previously silenced, works to give voice to others, but she does so without listening. This, perhaps, is one of the problems her family and the representative community has with her stories: Yolanda must learn to listen.

Late in the collection of vignettes, the stalker forces Yo to listen to him. The stalker seems an unlikely candidate for wisdom, for he has tried to cut off Yo's hair and burn her house down. It may be understandable that Yo doesn't want to listen to him, but the stalker becomes a metaphor for the past as he tells her: "I want you to do something for me which is to sit there quietly yes like that yes without crying just calmly truly hearing for once what I tried to tell you for years but you would not let me."¹⁹³ In his plea he asks to be listened to, for he has followed her for years just as the past has haunted her for years. Yolanda "look[s] at [him] with a look that sees all

¹⁹² Alvarez, *¡Yo!* 109.

¹⁹³ Alvarez, *¡Yo!* 291.

the way back to the beginning” and says “okay, I’m listening.”¹⁹⁴ Yolanda begins to listen to the past and to the voices around her.

Right after the stalker’s narrative, Yolanda’s father shares his story; through his narration it is evident that Yolanda has learned the importance of listening. In the chapter, her father explains that Yo writes to him “one, two letters a week” always asking questions in an attempt to better understand his past. She asks questions in letter after letter, and “[b]efore [he] know[s] it, [he’s] told her the whole story [he] did not want her and the others to know.”¹⁹⁵ Yo has learned to listen and asks to hear the story from those she works to represent. The father later realizes her intent and comes to understand that stories are the way to relate the past to the future, and he longs for her to ask “the impossible questions [he] love[s].”¹⁹⁶ As a writer, Yolanda now knows that she must record the story while considering and understanding the perspective of those she represents.

It is after she learns to listen that her father gives her the blessing to tell the family’s stories. He tells his grown daughter:

“the future has come and we were in such a rush to get here! We left everything behind and forgot so much. Ours is now an orphan family.

My grandchildren and great grandchildren will not know the way back

¹⁹⁴ Alvarez, *¡Yo!* 291.

¹⁹⁵ Alvarez, *¡Yo!* 293.

¹⁹⁶ Alvarez, *¡Yo!* 294.

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.”¹⁹⁷

This blessing is an act of returning the pen to Yolanda so that she can continue to write the stories of her community. In this manner, Alvarez sets up the importance of listening to the past and to the voices around you when constructing a collective narrative. Stories come out of personal and collective trauma, but only once a storyteller understands the importance of listening to the represented can she ever truly give voice to the people.

Conclusion:

Alvarez’s first three novels show her progression as a writer who works to define herself, but they also reveal how in this quest for self-definition, Alvarez points to the multiplicity of self and truth. She employs the short story cycle because it provides a “structural scheme for the working out of an idea, characters, or themes, even a circular disposition in which the constituent narratives simultaneously are independent and interdependent.”¹⁹⁸ The cycle allows her to investigate an ex/isle’s place apart from physical “homelands,” for in *García Girls* both heroine and author struggle to define themselves apart from the confining hybridity of the traditional concepts of Dominican and American (or Dominican American); instead, Alvarez embraces the multiplicity of the ex/isle. Furthermore, in *Butterflies* the cycle allows Alvarez to demonstrate how truth is not singular by interweaving the stories of the

¹⁹⁷ Alvarez, *¡Yo!* 309.

¹⁹⁸ Davis 65.

sisters while pointing to the manner in which the monologic master narrative covers up the voices, experiences, and perspectives of those who are not allowed to speak. Alvarez simultaneously uncovers the manner in which national crypts are formed and investigates her family's crypt, which contributed to Alvarez's trauma — the trauma that lies at the center of her art. After working to reconcile her past trauma — both personal and national — Alvarez returns to her heroine, Yolanda. Knowing the importance of listening to others' truths, Alvarez is able to complicate the character of Yo through a collection of vignettes by Yo's acquaintances. Alvarez hands the narration of Yo's life over to the protagonist's former narrative subjects, thereby emphasizing Yo's role as a listener, for an author must listen to those she hopes to represent. Alvarez's first three novels work as a story cycle through which the reader is able to see the development of the author. In these novels, Alvarez reconceptualizes her position as an ex/isle in relation to her past trauma. By loosely writing herself into her fictional novels, Alvarez complicates the ways in which we understand memory, truth, identity, and story-telling.

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