

TOWARD A FEMINIST LATINA MODE OF LITERARY ANALYSIS ON JULIA  
ALVAREZ'S *HOW THE GARCIA GIRLS LOST THEIR ACCENTS*

*Melissa Birkhofer*

*Appalachian State University*

**Introduction**

Gloria Anzaldúa's foundational work, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, outlines what it means to be caught between cultures and languages, and how these in-between spaces can be oppressive spaces for women. According to Anzaldúa, language is inextricably linked to identity and self-formation, and she explains that she is not able to express herself in her own multilingual and multiethnic way. She is oppressed linguistically by constantly having to choose English or Spanish or another language instead of being able to use a mixture of the many languages she speaks. She calls this choosing or privileging of one language over another "linguistic terrorism" in *Borderlands* and links her linguistic oppression directly to her complex ethnic identity: "Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language" (81). Within the term linguistic terrorism, she includes another oppression, the oppression of women caused by male-centered discourse. Anzaldúa explains that male-centered discourse effaces the female signifier thus erasing woman from the linguistic landscape. For example, Anzaldúa notes that she was shocked the first time she heard someone say the word 'nosotras.' "I had not known the word existed. Chicanas use *nosotros* whether we're male or female. We are robbed of our female being by the male plural. Language is a male discourse" (76). These two oppressions, linguistic terrorism and male-centered discourse that Anzaldúa describes in *Borderlands* also act as barriers to Yolanda, the

protagonist in Julia Alvarez's novel *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. However, through Yolanda's double oppression in *García Girls*, Alvarez uses linguistic plays and narrative strategies in the text in order to show the reader how to fight and combat the very barriers Yolanda seeks to overcome. That is, by turning Yolanda's linguistic oppressions on their head using meta-linguistic aspects of the text, such as linguistic tropes, double entendre, and rhyme, Alvarez reveals ways to empower the reader, making the text both revolutionary and didactic.

Both Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* and Alvarez's *García Girls* balance between languages and between cultures. In *Borderlands*, the quintessential example of a border text, invoking at least eight languages, many genres, and multiple counter-narratives, Anzaldúa describes herself as a border woman, one whose life includes "the coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference" (100). These two "incompatible frames of reference" cause "*un choque*, a cultural collision" (100). This cultural collision is the site for many Latina authors who convey the double collision of straddling two languages and cultures and doing so as a woman.

Yolanda García and her family in Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* experience Anzaldúa's *choque* when the family is forced to leave the Dominican Republic for the U.S. Yolanda and her three sisters live in the borderlands between their economically privileged Dominican childhood and middle-to-lower-middle class upbringing in New York. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* maps the struggles of four sisters living between their Dominican heritage and growing up in New York. Although the novel follows all four of the García sisters, 10 of the 15 stories include or are devoted to the third sister, Yolanda, who is the protagonist of the work. Yolanda

experiences linguistic terrorism growing up by constantly having to negotiate between languages. While Alvarez's novel is a prime example of a border text and Yolanda a border woman, I argue further that Alvarez's formal techniques and Yolanda's use of language mark this work as not only a border text, but also as a didactic primer through which the reader is equipped with tools in order to mirror Yolanda's decisions to act against these systems of oppression. This implication of the reader in the text can be read as Alvarez's response to Anzaldúa's assertion that "the possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react" (101). The active quality of Alvarez's *García Girls* that is present in both the form and the content of the novel is an example of what I am calling "bordering." Bordering is not only a transgressive act in that it identifies possible alternatives outside of pre-established patterns, but bordering also includes an active agent injecting an ethical component into the literary debate such that one perceives a text not merely as a literary artifact, but as a weapon for cultural combat. As such, this article includes an examination of Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and this text's use of bordering techniques or examples in literature that transcend the deep structures of the center-periphery dichotomy to open up possibilities beyond patriarchal and sexist patterns of thought and language.

Further, this article focuses on examples of bordering in literature that are associated with linguistic oppression with regard to women. Therefore, bordering is framed as an aspect of Alvarez's text that provokes the reader to re-think paradigms of patriarchy be it through Alvarez's formal techniques or through Yolanda's and her family's struggles between two cultures, two languages. In myriad ways *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* talks back to, complicates, and dismantles the notion of male-

centered discourse. Through Yolanda's experiences with linguistic terrorism via her relationships with men and Alvarez's use of reverse-chronological narrative, *García Girls* embodies these "bordering" qualities in order to both underscore linguistic oppressions in the novel and to encourage readers to subvert these paradigms in daily life.

This examination is thus anchored by Anzaldúa's term "linguistic terrorism." Anzaldúa explains that she did not speak Chicano Spanish at first because it was considered a bastard language, neither Spanish nor English. In the section entitled "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," she explains that her use of a mixture of at least eight different languages in this text defines her as a "border woman," a mosaic of a marginal person. She *is* her mixed language. "Language is a homeland closer than the Southwest" (77). Anzaldúa succinctly explains an intricate oppression: Women's effacement by the male signifier. The man stands in as a sign for the entire group, of the family unit, of the whole Chicano community, *nosotros*. Anzaldúa not only visualizes a *nosotras*, but she also puts this vision into action in *Borderlands/La Frontera* when she calls for women to unite in order to provide a more open, heterogeneous space of identity and expression for Chicana women. Yolanda also falls victim to linguistic terrorism in *García Girls*, which is explored in the text through reverse-chronological narrative practices that make the work difficult to classify. In this way, Alvarez includes an active quality in her work. This active quality does not merely point out gender inequality, but calls to action and proposes a plan on how to begin to dismantle oppressive paradigms of thought. For Alvarez, this plan begins with a critical assessment of patriarchy and how literature can be a part of a movement to rethink gender inequity.

### **Yolanda's Relationships with Men: Male Authority and Power Deem Yolanda "Crazy"**

In the opening story of the novel, Yolanda is visiting family in the Dominican Republic. Her Spanish is rusty after a couple of years in the U.S.; she has trouble conversing comfortably in her native tongue,

In halting Spanish, Yolanda reports on her sisters. When she reverts to English, she is scolded, '¡En español!' The more she practices, the sooner she'll be back to her native tongue, the aunt insists. Yes, and when she returns to the States, she'll find herself suddenly going blank over some word in English. (7)

Here Yolanda is urged to stay in one language, in Spanish, and not revert back to English while in the Dominican Republic. However, some phrases and expressions are easier for her to explain in one language than the other, and having to always speak in Spanish or always in English becomes oppressive to her as she thinks and wants to articulate herself in a mixture of both languages. She feels she cannot fully express herself if she cannot mix Spanish and English together and feels stultified speaking completely in one language or the other. Anzaldúa calls this act linguistic terrorism, that is, Yolanda is unable to fully express herself if she is not able to code-switch between languages. Yolanda also experiences oppression through male-centered discourse in the novel in which her agency is effaced when men speak for or as her.

Alvarez's *García Girls* invokes what I am calling bordering via Yolanda's loss of language, which signifies her refusal to participate in a society that attempts to efface her. Yolanda struggles to have a voice and agency as she negotiates her life both in the U.S.

and in the Dominican Republic. From a young age, males repeatedly silence Yolanda, sometimes forcibly. Yolanda falls victim to linguistic terrorism and learns that “language is a man’s discourse” by her father, a boyfriend in college, and her husband John (Anzaldúa 76). In each of these moments in her life, Yolanda is silenced by male figures around her, or her voice is re-appropriated through their words. Nevertheless, Yolanda fights against these linguistic oppressions and in a meta-linguistic aspect of the text, Alvarez speaks through the text to inform her readers of these inequities. These meta-linguistic aspects are the active qualities of the text and examples of bordering in *García Girls*.

When Yolanda is in the ninth grade, she is asked to give the Teacher’s Day Address at her school even though, “in the Dominican Republic growing up, Yoyo had been a terrible student. No one could ever get her to sit down to a book. But in New York, she needed to settle somewhere, and since the natives were unfriendly, and the country inhospitable, she took root in the language” (141). She tries to write her speech for the Teacher’s Day Address, but because of her anxiety over having to give the speech in public, she is unable to write anything. She becomes inspired by the words of Walt Whitman and writes her speech noting that she “finally sounded like herself in English” (141). Yolanda wants to celebrate this feat with her parents because she is proud of the work she has produced. She reads the first draft to her parents. Her mother listens first and when Yolanda is finished her mother’s “eyes were glistening” and “her face was warm and soft and proud” (141). Her mother, Laura, describes the speech Yolanda has just delivered as “a beautiful, beautiful speech” and Laura asks Yolanda to read the speech to her father (141). However, after Yolanda delivers her Whitman-inspired

speech, her father, Carlos, flies into a rage because the speech “shows no gratitude” is “boastful,” “insubordinate,” “improper,” and “disrespectful” (145). He says, “[a]s your father, I forbid you to make that eh-speech!” (145). He tears the speech to shreds. Yolanda’s father silences her in a violent way, destroying the first piece of writing in which she “sounded like herself in English” (141). By destroying the work she produced, Yolanda’s father censors Yolanda’s voice in English and demands that she write a different speech.

Yolanda and her mother write a new speech, one of “stale compliments” and “polite commonplaces” (145). The new speech is not from Yolanda’s heart or mouth, but rather is what her father will allow her to say. The new speech is met with success when she reads it at Teacher’s Day, but it is not Yolanda’s voice. That evening, when her father comes home from work, he apologizes for his behavior and explains that “Your father did not mean to harm” (149). In an effort to reconcile with his daughter, he buys her a new electric typewriter with her “initials decaled below the handle” (149). Although Yolanda now has a typewriter so that she can continue to write speeches and stories, it is unclear at the end of this section if the gift is indeed a peace offering for forcing Yolanda to write the new speech or if the gift is a way to control Yolanda’s tongue. By bestowing the “voice” of the typewriter upon Yolanda, it seems that her father further controls what she says and writes. While Yolanda is the new owner of a typewriter, it is many years before she is able to assert her voice and agency.

As in the scene above when Yolanda’s father destroys her speech and then buys her a typewriter, Yolanda and her college boyfriend Rudy find themselves at a linguistic impasse. Rudy blames Yolanda for the “failures” in their relationship when gendered

language and the inequality encoded in that language are the real problems between them. When Yolanda and Rudy meet, Rudy convinces Yolanda to help him with the first assignment in their poetry writing class. Already being manipulated by Rudy, Yolanda writes Rudy's poems for him. Rudy blurts out some ideas, but it is Yolanda who organizes his ideas into scanned, rhymed quatrains. Here, Yolanda translates Rudy's crude ideas into something poetic with form, "We spent most of the weekend together, writing it, actually me writing down lines and crossing them out when they didn't scan or rhyme, and Rudy coming up with the ideas" (93). This scene is connected to the Teacher's Day Address since she is using a typewriter, but she is not composing her own thoughts. Instead, she transcribes Rudy's ideas. Ricardo Castells notes that Yolanda's "linguistic shortcomings are such that she and Rudy spend a weekend writing love sonnets to read out loud in class, but she does not even realize that she has co-written a pornographic poem" (39). Yolanda recounts that this "was the first pornographic poem I'd ever co-written; of course, I didn't know it was pornographic until Rudy explained to me all the word plays and double meanings" (93). Ironically, word plays and double meanings in *García Girls* is one of Alvarez's most powerful techniques to sever these power relations.

After several weeks together Rudy becomes annoyed at Yolanda's reluctance to have sex with him. He becomes impatient and begins to blame Yolanda, whose refusals "varied, depending on my current hangups, that's what Rudy called my refusals, hangups" (96). Here Rudy's blame implies that something is wrong with Yolanda for not wanting a sexual relationship with him. However, Yolanda explains that Rudy and Yolanda were not speaking the same language. Rudy uses literal and, to Yolanda, vulgar



terms to describe sex and sex acts. Yolanda however prefers to think about a potential sexual relationship with Rudy in figurative, allegorical, and romantic terms avoiding the clinical and violent connotations in Rudy's vocabulary. She explains that,

Perhaps if Rudy had acted a little more as if lovemaking were a workshop of sorts, things might have moved more swiftly toward his desired conclusion. But the guy had no sense of connotation in bed. His vocabulary turned me off even as I was beginning to acknowledge my body's pleasure. If Rudy had said, *Sweet lady, lay across my big, soft bed and let me touch your dear, exquisite body, I might have felt up to being felt up.* (96)

If, as Joan Hoffman asserts, that "Yolanda insists that language is for her as important as sex" and that "the act must be properly named," then Yolanda here is attempting to do much more than convincing Rudy to use less violent terms for sex (Hoffman 23). In fact, she is trying to claim ownership by renaming the act on her own linguistic terms emphasizing the framing of actions and the framing of words as actions. This move then is a decolonial act and has larger repercussions than whether or not Rudy and Yolanda sleep together. Yolanda wants Rudy to use a female-inclusive language, but since he refuses to speak her language, she refuses to act. When she refuses to participate, he asks her, "What's wrong with you?" implying that Yolanda is the root of the problem and that it is up to her to fix it (97). Unable to speak one another's languages, Rudy and Yolanda end their relationship. Yolanda's search for female-centered language, however, does not end with Rudy.

In a story titled "Joe," which is the English misreading of the Spanish "Yo," short for Yolanda, Yolanda and her husband John are in bed on a hot summer night. John

makes advances toward Yolanda. She is not interested in being intimate but “the hand wouldn’t listen” (76). As John continues his unwanted advances in bed he prints “J-o-h-n on her right breast with a sticky finger as if he were branding her his” (76). In this act, John asserts his ownership by “branding” Yolanda and his advances show that he thinks he is entitled to force Yolanda to be intimate with him. Once she is branded as his property, she loses her unique identity along with her own voice and agency. She attempts to push him away with her hand but he “ignored the violence in the gesture and kissed her moist palm” (76). John, choosing not to recognize Yolanda as an equal partner in their relationship, refuses to acknowledge her protests to stop. Here, the male-centered discourse revolves entirely around John branding Yolanda with his name effectually taking possession of her and speaking for her. When the advances do not stop, Yolanda leaps out of bed and yells expletives at him. She then realizes, that even in this moment of protest he still maintains the upper hand because “he had forced her to say her least favorite word in the world” and she is angry with herself for allowing him to control what she says (77).

To complicate matters further, the cultural miscommunication that takes place in Yolanda’s relationships with both John and Rudy makes Yolanda’s experience in romantic relationships with Anglo men all the more problematic. Although Pérez Firmat argues that the Cuban-American 1.5 generation has “beneficial consequences” associated with its “intermediate location” including being able to “circulate within and through both the old and new cultures,” Yolanda does not always find this to be the case (4). In fact, this Dominican-American lives in a reality much more aligned to Rubén Rumbaut’s approximation of the 1.5 generation, a generation that “must cope with two crisis-

producing and identity-defying transitions” in which “they are marginal to both the old and new worlds, and are fully part of neither of them” (4 qtd in Pérez Firmat). Further, Pérez Firmat and Rumbaut do not address the specific marginalization Yolanda faces as a woman both in the U.S. and in the Dominican Republic. Like Anzaldúa’s “herida abierta,” the colliding of these two cultures is neither neat nor painless (25). Indeed, when Yolanda’s old and new worlds collide, bridging cultures is never easy.

### **Alvarez’s Metalinguistic Methodologies**

Although Yolanda suffers from both linguistic oppression and male-centered discourse, it is the author Julia Alvarez who injects the work with tools for Yolanda and the reader to use in an effort to fight these oppressions. Alvarez employs linguistic tropes and double entendres throughout the novel such that while reading the stories therein, the reader is aware that these stories are told using unmistakable linguistic plays that break the flow of the narrative and jar the reader into remembering that she is reading a text. As noted by Ellen McCracken, “while Alvarez’s narrative appears on the surface to be a straightforward telling of events,” signs of a much more complex structure, “are quickly evident” (28). These surface cracks are the theoretical strategies within the novel that speak between and through the text as lessons on how to eradicate, or at least minimize the oppressions that Yolanda faces. Alvarez’s use of linguistic tropes, double entendres, and rhyme destabilize the asymmetrical relationship between Spanish and English in the United States, claiming both languages as equally valid for the multilingual, multiethnic subject (Yolanda) as well as interpolating a multiethnic, multilingual readership. Thus, Alvarez uses literature in the same way as Augusto Boal views activist theatre, that is, it

embodies, “a theater [or novel] that attempts to influence reality and not merely reflect it” (168). As an “attempt to influence reality,” Alvarez’s interpellation of the reader through the linguistic strategies Yolanda uses to overcome oppression impels the reader to act in her own life.

Since third-wave feminism and women of color made clear that middle-class white feminism did not meet their needs, many feminist theorists have begun the long process of creating new methodologies by which to measure feminist scholarship by women of color. Black feminist theorists have been at the forefront of understanding feminist tendencies and methodologies in literature as theory itself. Critics including Carole Boyce Davies suggest that theory can be found within literature, that methodologies can be traced, not by theorists imprinting on a text, but by teasing out epistemologies from an author’s work. Many feminists of color thus argue that using only Anglo feminist theories to critique work by a woman of color is an unfruitful and even violent act. Boyce Davies adds that

cultural theorizing is often done by those with the power to disseminate, generally male scholars (more recently white women and Black men). Because of heterosexism and male dominance, the language and concepts of [white] male scholars gain easy currency. The ways in which Black women/women of color theorize themselves often remains outside of the boundaries of the academic context. (18)

In response to heterosexism and white male dominance, Boyce Davies then proposes “to read Black women’s writing within the context of cultural theory and a variety of new forms of knowledge, but also to see what the texts themselves offer, theoretically, on the

questions with which we are grappling” (19). Keeping in mind the violence that occurs when the One speaks for or as the Other, I posit that Julia Alvarez, Dominican American feminist author, presents a methodology or a set of tools that can be used by readers to combat the oppressions that the characters face in her work.<sup>1</sup> This section employs a feminist reading of Alvarez’s text in so far as it examines what the text itself offers theoretically (Boyce Davies 19). In the following examples in which Alvarez speaks through Yolanda and her actions, bordering is evident as Alvarez interprets for her readers how to subvert the oppressions that Yolanda faces in her life.

One of the meta-aspects of the text that Alvarez employs in *García Girls* is the use of rhymes, off rhymes, and repetition of words in order to highlight the importance of a bilingual identity for Yolanda. Before the branding scene described above, Yolanda and her husband begin to play a rhyming game with their names. Yolanda rhymes first with her husband’s name modeling the game for him, “John, John, you’re a pond!” but John cannot think of anything to rhyme with Yolanda and does not want to play the game. (71). Yolanda suggests using her English nickname Joe, “so use Joe. Doe, roe, buffalo” but John cannot come up with a rhyme (71). She then suggests using the word sky to describe her but John retorts, “That’s not allowed ... Your own rules: you’ve got to rhyme with your name” (72). Yolanda counters, “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

---

<sup>1</sup> I am referring to Simone de Beauvoir’s critique of the duality between the Self and the Other in *The Second Sex* and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s argument in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, states that “humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him” ... “He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other” (xxii). Spivak argues that current criticism takes the western world as Beauvoir’s Subject leaving the rest of the world as the Other, pointing out the violence that occurs when the West attempts to speak for the subaltern (66).

proudly monolingual John could not catch her, even if he tried” (72). Yolanda is able to manipulate the rules of her own game in this scene to silence the monolingual John, if only for a brief moment. This example demonstrates the importance of a bilingual identity for Yo even if John doesn’t recognize or cannot understand what she says. It is suggested through this rhyming game that Yolanda must assert her complex linguistic identity if she wants to be an equal partner in this relationship. Yolanda speaks and even if John does not understand her, for a brief moment she has asserted herself as a bilingual subject with agency during the rhyming game. Unfortunately for Yolanda, this agency does not last. As soon as she speaks into John’s mute mouth he responds with a claim that, as a bilingual woman, she is crazy, “What you need is a goddam shrink!” thus ending the rhyming game as a fight ensues (73).

Yolanda in fact does begin seeing a psychiatrist and is eventually admitted into a psychiatric hospital. Ironically, it is in the hospital that Yolanda is able to, if not free herself from dominating men in her life, then at least carve a space for herself in which she can see how she is being oppressed and begin to assert herself. In the hospital she is at the mercy of Dr. Dennis Payne’s diagnosis of her. One day Yolanda watches her doctor cross the yard outside of her room. At that moment she feels a tickle in her throat and vomits “a huge, black bird” that flies at the doctor and attacks him with its beak (83). “It plummets down toward the sunning man on the lawn” and then its “hooked beak rips at the man’s shirt and chest; the white figure on the lawn is a red sop” (84).<sup>2</sup> The action of

---

<sup>2</sup> The black bird featured here is most certainly a reference to Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Birds*. In a later novel by Julia Alvarez, *Saving the World* (2006), the black bird and psychiatrist Dr. Payne reemerge on the first page of the novel-within-a-novel, “She explained that she felt as if a whirling darkness were descending on her, like dirty water going down a drain or that flock of birds in the film by Hitchcock. The doctor, who’d been jotting down her explanation, had looked up. He was so young; he probably hadn’t seen the film. ‘What kind of birds?’ he asked” (1).

this part of the novel can be read as a violent and bloody attack on Dr. Payne, and more broadly on patriarchy, which decides, limits, and measures Yolanda's abilities, freedoms, and agency as a woman. When the bird, birthed from Yolanda's mouth attacks the doctor, Yolanda rejects the notion that it is up to Dr. Payne to diagnose her, to tell her what is "wrong" with her, and to tell her when she is "better." The violent imagery of the scene suggests that violence is a necessary agent of action, but the scene can also be read as a visualization or projection that does not actually occur. For the purposes of my argument here, it is the meta-linguistic aspects of this passage that are central to the scene and which contribute to the feminist message in the action of the text.

Throughout the interactions with Dr. Payne, Yolanda is described in the text using several double entendres. These figures of speech point out places in the text in which Yolanda is being manipulated by the male power figures around her. These double entendres both draw attention to the injustices Yolanda faces and underline the arbitrariness of these unequal power dynamics that so often go unnoticed. This aspect of the novel is a prime example of a transgressive act that employs bordering as a powerful tenant in the narrative. One of John's nicknames for Yolanda is Violet, "after shrinking violet when she started seeing Dr. Payne" (75). During another fight in which John calls Yolanda "Violet" Yolanda replies, "Stop violeting me!" (75). This demand can be read two ways: one, Yolanda wants John to stop calling her patronizing names such as shrinking violet, and two, she wants him to stop violating her and respecting her. The use of the double entendre in this place in the text jars the reader from the narrative of the story highlighting the double play on the word "violeting/violating."

Later in the story, after Yolanda has vomited the black bird and the bird is flying toward her window, she realizes that it will not be able to fly through the screen. “It flies toward the window. ‘Oh my God! The screen!’ Yo remembers in a moment of suspension of belief” (83). This “suspension of belief” is a play on the suspension of disbelief, in which an audience is asked to suspend judgment on fantastic or non-realistic elements or events in art. However, here the trope is turned on its head asking Yolanda and the reader, not to suspend disbelief that the bird can or cannot fly through the screen window, but to suspend *belief*, that is, to suspend and by extension examine seemingly realistic elements. Yolanda suspends her beliefs in what she thinks is *real*. That is to say, to see beyond what *seems* right into the deep structure of things. Gloria Anzaldúa calls this act “la facultad,” “the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface” (60). These plays on words then do much more than offer a humorous quality to the work; they disrupt the story in obvious ways in order for the readers to reflect upon what is happening to Yolanda. This disruption of the text, what I term bordering, then calls attention to the paradigm or deep structure of the language of the story and to the unspoken rules of patriarchy through which Yolanda is oppressed.

These meta-aspects of the text make it revolutionary because the text is the embodiment of one of Chela Sandoval’s technologies. She identifies a technique in *Methodology of the Oppressed* that she calls “chiasmic change of signification” (84). This chiasmic change of signification is a “twisted trope that makes meaning by turning in on itself, by repeating while simultaneously inverting the relationship between two concepts” (84). In the examples from *García Girls* above, Alvarez creates her own



chiasmic change in signification in her text. As such, Alvarez not only paints the way for Yolanda to subvert or at least battle against her multiple oppressions, but she also teaches the reader how to invert these oppressive relationships in real life. It is this aspect of Alvarez's text that makes it more than an award-winning literary achievement, as the text becomes a weapon with which women can arm themselves against the oppressions that Yolanda faces. Moreover, Alvarez employs these same techniques in the narrative structure of *García Girls* as she constructs her narrative in a reverse-chronological order.

### **Reverse Chronological Order: Seeing the Beyond the Surface of Things**

The title of Julia Alvarez's novel *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, suggests that language, culture, gender, and wordplay are investigated by a meta-narrative that privileges language and linguistic power.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the structure of the narrative, along with a host of narrative strategies that comprise Alvarez's *García Girls*, is uniquely important to the text in relation to gendered linguistic oppression. The reverse chronological order of the novel demonstrates Alvarez's commitment to unveiling gendered language oppression in *García Girls*. She employs meta-narrative techniques in order to prime the reader for what is to come in the novel itself. This priming both breaks down the boundaries between author and reader and implicates the reader in the message of the text, thus initiating a dialogue between author/protagonist/reader. This unique relationship between these figures marks another example of bordering in *García Girls*.

The novel is divided into three parts, each part containing five stories that move backward in time beginning from 1989 when the four sisters are adults living in the U.S.

---

<sup>3</sup> Although Ilan Stavans writes in a 1992 review that Alvarez's novel "isn't about language," the critical scholarship produced after Stavans's review, most notably Ricardo Castells's "The Silence of Exile in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*," proves otherwise (23).

to 1956 when the family lives in the Dominican Republic. Therefore, the first chapter of the novel, where we meet Yolanda as an adult returning to the Dominican Republic after a long absence, is the last chronological moment included in the work. Consequently, in the final chapter of *García Girls*, Yolanda is five- or six-years-old living in Santo Domingo before her parents were forced to flee to the United States. William Luis calls this reverse-chronological narrative technique “regressive narration” occurring throughout until the last few paragraphs in which the “novel pivots; the events stop unfolding in a regressive manner and are now narrated in a chronological one; time is accelerated, and life appears to make sense” (847). Luis then compares Alvarez’s narrative structure with Alejo Carpentier’s “Viaje a la Semilla,” which follows the protagonist Don Marcial backward in time from after his death to before his birth (840).<sup>4</sup> However, whereas “Viaje a la Semilla” has a backward narrative in which time actually moves backward depicting candles that do not burn down but get longer as they “unburn,” the narrative of *García Girls* does not move backward in time within the chapters; the chapters are placed in a reverse chronological pattern, but within each chapter, time moves forward. Each following chapter then picks up with one of the four sisters at some moment before the previous story occurred. In Carpentier’s story, time moves backward in a regressive form whereas, in *García Girls*, time moves forward in chapters that are placed in reverse chronological order in episodic flashbacks. This reversal of chronological time marks one of the formal ruptures in *García Girls* that impacts the reader by disengaging and then reengaging in every section. Further, Stephanie Lovelady explains that there are different types of reverse chronological works

---

<sup>4</sup> Other critics have also made this comparison including Ilan Stavans and Stephanie Lovelady.

and that in *García Girls*, “time is not experienced backward by the characters and causality is not reversed” (32). Even though causality is not reversed in the chronology of the novel, Alvarez emphasizes the binary relationship between effect and cause using this narrative technique.

Highlighting the reversed nature of effect and cause in the very structure of the novel before any of the stories are read, compels Alvarez’s readers to recognize her text as more than a literary work, more than a loosely biographical account of the author’s life, but as a primer and weapon that contains counter voices. Gloria Anzaldúa calls them “counterstances,” which “refute the dominant culture’s views and beliefs” as a position “towards liberation from cultural domination” (100). Alvarez creates a counterstance in the framework of her novel’s reverse chronological time through the lives of the four García sisters and this counterstance, creates a meta-narrative through which Alvarez can instruct her readers. This metanarrative is an example of bordering because it is a device that textually marks a bold change in the literary work. Hence, *García Girls*’ reverse chronological order accomplishes what Ellen Maycock describes, “the format of the backwards timeline demonstrates the mature protagonist Yolanda’s return to her past, implying perhaps a need to recover a distant self or cultural location through memory, nostalgia, and the power of the pen” (223). This technique also points to technique *as* technique. By emphasizing the structure of the novel *as* a structure, Alvarez is complicating and calling into question the very ways in which we make sense of things, complicating the notions of cause and effect, chronology, and reader expectations. The reverse chronological order of the novel jars the reader to such an extent that even from the first section of the novel to the next we have moved back in time seventeen years.

To return to Carpentier's story for a moment, "Viaje a la Semilla" has been championed as a prime example of backward narration in which time is reversed. In Carpentier's story Don Marcial's house, which has been destroyed after his death, rebuilds itself in the reverse time device of the story. This fantastical element of the story, its use of magical realism has not been compared to the fantastical elements mentioned above that occur in *García Girls*, but magical realism is mentioned in *Julia Alvarez: A Critical Companion* in relation to Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies*. Straddling the borderlands between the real and the fantastic, Alvarez asks her readers to revisit assumptions and entertain "la percepción remota de otras posibilidades" (Partridge 115; quoted in Lovelady 32). By positioning her novel in so many of the borderlands that Anzaldúa articulates, Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* becomes a manual for new epistemologies of feminist Latina literary analysis. Roberto González Echevarría notes that "On the whole, magical realism was an effort to express counterintuitively the world as if the presuppositions of Western, bourgeois society could be erased and a fresh look possible" (19). My argument here is that Alvarez's use of reverse chronological time in *García Girls* "expresses counterintuitively" the lives of four girls growing up between New York and the Dominican Republic providing "a fresh look" at the presuppositions of patriarchy and sexist tendencies across cultures and languages. Therefore, her use of reverse-chronological narrative structure is not merely an homage or harkening back to Latin American roots and magical realism, but her technique highlights the "presuppositions of Western, bourgeois society" and its systems of oppression and patriarchy on women of color in borderlands.

The counterintuitiveness of this narrative device places effect before cause as we see the García sisters as adults and then become acquainted with them throughout the novel as they get younger and struggle as young women battling patriarchal oppressions in the U.S. and the Dominican Republic. This strategy of effect before cause frames the novel, and, I argue draws attention to what Anzaldúa calls the “deep structure of things,” which thereby question both the dyad of cause and effect and the very ways in which these oppressions are perpetuated and repeated in Western Cartesian binary thought patterns.

### **Conclusion**

Catherine Romagnolo notes in her article “Recessive Origins in Julia Alvarez’s *Garcia Girls: A Feminist Exploration of Narrative Beginnings*,” that the “recessive nature” and “formal complexity” of the text “destabilize hegemonic connotations of beginnings while embracing their subversive potential” (150). Beginning the novel at its chronological end, Alvarez emphasizes the importance of origins, memory, and nostalgia in constructing subjectivity and identity. Further, by beginning the novel with the chronological end and ending the novel with the chronological beginning, Alvarez’s text is conceived in a non-linear fashion that interrogates binary thought while it subverts this either/or paradigm.

If, as González Echevarría asserts, that, “to Latin American writers such a new look could be attained if reality could be observed through the eyes of those Latin Americans whose cultural presuppositions were different because of their ethnic or class origin,” then I contend that the reverse chronological order of the narrative is Alvarez’s “new look” by bicultural women of color “whose cultural presuppositions [are] different

because of their ethnic [and] class origin” (20). Indeed, by drawing back the curtains of form in the novel, Alvarez asks us to examine and question the foundations and deep structures that are so often are taken for granted.

### Works Cited

- Alvarez, Julia. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2010.
- . *In the Time of the Butterflies*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2010.
- . *Saving the World*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2006.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007.
- Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde, Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, and Judith Thurman, New York: Vintage, 2011.
- Boal, Augusto. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. London: Pluto, 2000.
- Boyce Davies, Carole. *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Carpentier, Alejo, and Carlos Santander. *Viaje a La Semilla y Otros Relatos*. Santiago de Chile: Editorial Nascimento, 1971.
- Castells, Ricardo. "The Silence of Exile in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*." *Bilingual Review/ La Revista Bilingue* 26.1 (2001): 34-42.
- González Echevarría, Roberto. *The Oxford Book of Latin American Short Stories*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Hitchcock, Alfred, et al. *Alfred Hitchcock's the Birds*. 2021.
- Hoffman, Joan M. "'She Wants to Be Called Yolanda Now': Identity, Language, and the Third Sister in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*." *Bilingual Review/La Revista Bilingue* 23.1 (1998): 21-7.

- Lovelady, Stephanie. "Walking Backwards: Coming of Age in *My Antonia* and *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*." *Modern Language Studies* 35.1 (2005): 28-37.
- Luis, William. "A Search for Identity in Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*." *Callaloo* 23.3 (2000): 839-49.
- McCracken, Ellen. *New Latina Narrative: The Feminine Space of Postmodern Ethnicity*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1999.
- Maycock, Ellen C. "The Bicultural Construction of Self in Cisneros, Alvarez, and Santiago." *Bilingual Review/La Revista Bilingue* 23.3 (1998): 223-29.
- Pérez Firmat, Gustavo. *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012.
- Romagnolo, Catherine. "Recessive Origins in Julia Alvarez's *García Girls*." *Narrative Beginnings: Theories and Practices*. Ed. Brian Richardson. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2008. 149-165.
- Sandoval, Chela. *Methodology of the Oppressed*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.
- Sirias, Silvio. *Julia Alvarez: A Critical Companion*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2001.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*. Eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994. 66-111.
- Stavans, Ilan. "Daughters of Invention." *Commonweal* 119.7 (1992): 23-5.