

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

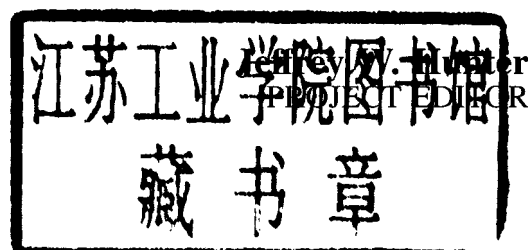
CLC

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Volume 274

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers



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Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

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- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, films, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hèbert: The Tragic Melodramas." In *Canadian Women Writing Fiction*, edited by Mickey Pearlman, 41-52. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 246, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, 276-82. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

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Julia Alvarez

1950-

American novelist, poet, essayist, and writer of children's books.

The following entry provides an overview of Alvarez's career through 2008. For further discussion of her life and works, see *CLC*, Volume 93.

INTRODUCTION

A political exile from the Dominican Republic, Alvarez documents the Hispanic American experience in novels, poetry, and essays that address issues of acculturation, alienation, prejudice, and power. She is best known for her novels, which redefine the U.S. Latino identity with a mix of fact, fiction, and autobiography related through the perspectives of multiple narrators. Citing Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior* as one of her greatest influences, Alvarez has frequently chosen as subjects women of historical importance to the Dominican Republic, women who, as she wrote in the postscript to her novel *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994), "can only be understood by fiction, only finally redeemed by the imagination." Alvarez's novels, especially the semi-autobiographical *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) and its sequel, *¡Yo!* (1997), are considered important additions to postcolonial literature because of their exploration of the Caribbean diaspora in terms of the U.S. presence in the Dominican Republic.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Alvarez was born in New York City in 1950. When she was just three months old, her parents, both native Dominicans, decided to return to their homeland. Alvarez's father, a medical doctor, actively participated in the underground movement to overthrow U.S.-backed dictator Rafael Trujillo. However, her father was continually spared in the government's regular purges of dissidents because of his wife's wealthy and powerful family, which had strong ties to the United States. According to Alvarez, her parents feigned an obsession with all things American as a strategy for survival, seeking to conceal their opposition to Trujillo's regime. Following an aborted assassination attempt on Trujillo in 1960, the Alvarez family moved

back to the United States. Four months after their escape, the founders of the underground movement, the Mirabal sisters, were murdered. The Mirabal sisters are the subject of Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies*, which was adapted into a popular film starring Salma Hayek in 2001. Trujillo was ultimately assassinated in 1961, ending his thirty-year reign. Growing up in the Bronx, Alvarez and her sisters experienced American culture firsthand. In her first novel, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, Alvarez documents the ambivalence she and her siblings felt toward their adopted country as a result of their prior experience with American government and business infiltration in the Dominican Republic. Alvarez's adolescence is also recollected in the essay collections *Something to Declare* (1998), which includes pieces on her influences as a writer, and *Once upon a Quinceañera* (2007), which describes the long tradition of elaborate celebration surrounding a Latina's fifteenth birthday. Alvarez completed her undergraduate studies at Middlebury College in Vermont in 1971. In 1975 she obtained a master's degree in creative writing from Syracuse University. Since 1988, she has taught at Middlebury College, where she is currently writer-in-residence. In addition to her five novels and two works of nonfiction, Alvarez has published four collections of poetry and several books for children. She frequently travels to the Dominican Republic, where she and her husband, Bill Eichner, have established an organic coffee farm that doubles as a literacy center. Their experience in progressive agriculture is documented in Alvarez's fable for children, *A Cafecito Story* (2001). Alvarez's most recent project is the children's novel *Return to Sender*, (2009) about Mexican migrant workers in Vermont. The title refers to a 2006 dragnet operation in which undocumented workers were seized and separated from their children.

MAJOR WORKS

Alvarez manipulates literary genres in all of her novels, which present both history and autobiography in the form of fictionalized memoirs, the validity of which are further called into question through the device of competing narratives. In this way, Alvarez seeks not authentic documentation, but rather an imaginative view of the past that incorporates the perspectives of its many participants, according none

superiority. Alvarez's most personal collective histories are *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, a PEN/Faulkner award winner, and *¡Yo!*, both of which are based on her family's immigration experience. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* is actually a series of fifteen short stories, told in reverse chronological order and spanning the years from 1956 to 1989. Through the alternating perspectives of the four García sisters—Carla, Sandra, Yolanda, and Sofia—the reader is introduced to the large family compound inhabited by the García clan in the Dominican Republic, where a life of privilege comes at the price of constant fear of government reprisal. Speaking through her double, the poet Yolanda García, Alvarez recalls being punished for inventing stories in an atmosphere where silence was prized. Coming of age in the liberated culture of the 1960s United States, the girls confront ethnic discrimination as well as an onslaught of popular culture urging behaviors that defied their strict Catholic upbringing. The girls' accounts of their resistance to parental authority as they seek to assimilate are mirrored by the Dominicans' rebellion against Trujillo. Alvarez the author emerges as the central character of *¡Yo!* Each chapter of this novel narrates an episode in the life of Yolanda García from the perspective of another person involved in the event, many of whom are friends or family members who appeared in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*.

In the Time of the Butterflies is also narrated by four sisters—the Mirabals—Patria, Minerva, Maria Theresa, and Dedé. Set entirely in the Dominican Republic, the sisters' stories document how they came to be leaders of the anti-Trujillo political movement, code-named Las Mariposas (The Butterflies). Three of the sisters were killed in the violence that ensued between the insurgents and the military police. Although Alvarez has been criticized by some scholars for portraying the Mirabals as martyrs, Alvarez claims in her postscript to the novel to have resisted this approach: "As for the sisters of legend, wrapped in superlatives and ascended into myth, they were totally inaccessible to me. I realized, too, that such deification was dangerous; the same godmaking impulse that had created our tyrant [Trujillo]." The novels *In the Name of Salomé* (2000) and *Saving the World* (2006) both juxtapose the life of a nineteenth-century Dominican heroine with that of a more contemporary woman. In the first, Salomé, the poet of the Dominican Republic's struggle for independence from Spain, is viewed in relation to her only daughter, Camila, a professor at Vassar college who in 1960—at the age of sixty-three—joined a literacy brigade in Cuba. The parallel stories in *Saving the World* are those of the real-life Dona Isabel, who embarked on a crusade against smallpox in 1803, and the fictional Latina author Anna Heubling, whose

discovery of Isabel's story makes her regret not being more involved in her husband's work with deforestation and AIDS in the Dominican Republic.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Alvarez's novels have contributed greatly to critical theories about multiculturalism. She is generally considered one of the earliest writers to move away from the static binaries of home/exile and patriot/expatriate, instead revealing the fluidity of the immigrant experience through shifting narrative perspectives, nonlinear chronology, and geographic flux. For the most part, critics consider Alvarez's novels to embody the author's theory about hybrid identities: "We travel on that border between two worlds and we see both points of view." Critic Karen Castellucci Cox writes, "The mental affliction that signals . . . a split identity, where one experiences authentic citizenship only in the shadowy borderlands between juxtaposed worlds, haunts much of Alvarez's written work."

In a review of *¡Yo!* Ellen McCracken concurs: "Alvarez exemplifies the hyphenated Americans whose formation links them crucially to both the North and the South, and whose writing glides perpetually between these distinct geographic, cultural, and political spaces." This state of spatial transition has been seen to further disrupt the classic dualisms of postcolonial theory. David T. Mitchell writes, "Parallel to other postcolonial writers, such as Salman Rushdie, Michelle Cliff, and Bharati Mukherjee, Alvarez attempts to destabilize the binary of the postcolonial writer's 'absence' or 'presence' in a geographical homeland." Critic Katarzyana Marciniak also addresses the issue of objectivity as related to the displaced writer. She praises Alvarez's approach, claiming that the self-reflexive nature of Alvarez's writing, which calls into question the authority of the author through the use of multiple narrators, serves to "debunk the idea that a transnational position implies a new, liberatory identity that allows an exile-immigrant a special epistemological insight and overall empowerment."

Still, a few critics argue that Alvarez has been too long away from the Dominican Republic to sympathize with its concerns. For example, Trenton Hickman, in a review of *A Cafecito Story*, charges Alvarez with perpetuating colonialism: "Even as [the book] envisions a new future for Dominican coffee growers, it reinscribes the U.S. expansionist policy of Manifest Destiny as a white Nebraska farmer, Joe, seizes control of land as part of a new paternalism." The multiple narrative voices in Alvarez's fiction have also been

viewed as a paradigm for the power dynamics of race, class and gender, especially as they relate to the Dominican experience of American capitalism and the authority of history as written from the standpoint of the dominant power. In addition, Alvarez has received much attention from feminist critics, who have adopted her as an important revisionist historian for her portrayal of women in the service of revolution.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Homecoming (poetry) 1984
How the García Girls Lost Their Accents (novel) 1991
In the Time of the Butterflies (novel) 1994
The Other Side/El Otro Lado (poetry) 1995
Homecoming: New and Collected Poems (poetry) 1996
¡Yo! (novel) 1997
Something to Declare (essays) 1998
In the Name of Salomé (novel) 2000
A Cafecito Story (fable) 2001
How Tía Lola Came to Stay (juvenilia) 2001
Before We Were Free (juvenilia) 2002
Finding Miracles (juvenilia) 2004
The Woman I Kept to Myself (poetry) 2004
Saving the World (novel) 2006
Once upon a Quinceañera: Coming of Age in the USA (nonfiction) 2007
Return to Sender (juvenilia) 2009

CRITICISM

David T. Mitchell (essay date 1999)

SOURCE: Mitchell, David T. "The Accent of 'Loss': Cultural Crossings as Context in Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*." In *Beyond the Binary: Reconstructing Cultural Identity in a Multicultural Context*, edited by Timothy B. Powell, pp. 165-84. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1999.

[In the following essay, Mitchell explores Alvarez's use of multiple perspectives in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, arguing that this technique emphasizes the various facets of her characters' identities.]

It would be years before I took the courses that would change my mind in schools paid for by sugar from fields around us, years before I could begin to comprehend how one does not see the maids when they pass by.

Julia Alvarez, *Homecoming*

For postcolonial novelists, the enunciative position of the exile, émigré, or expatriate serves as an apt metaphor for the paradoxical desire of their fictions to capture the ambivalence of immigrant lives. The "loss" of an ability to depict an absent homeland empirically becomes a key characteristic of postcolonial writing; the central tension is informed by a desire to look back on what has been "lost" in order to restore or regain one's place of origin. The impossibility of such a repossession, imaginative or otherwise, produces profound uncertainties about cultural belongingness and the artistic pursuit of "authentic expression."

This defining ambivalence characteristic of postcolonial writing inscribes the idea of "loss" in terms of a negativity that forever places the postcolonial writer in a subordinate position to those who retain "unhindered" access to the desired artistic object of the homeland. The critique of culturally produced binaries that separate enunciative positions such as home/exile, patriot/expatriate, and citizen/alien serves as the guiding impetus of the postcolonial writer's narrative explorations and calls into question those divisions as flawed and unnatural categories of contemporary cultures and identities that are always already hybrid cultural products.

Crucial to understanding the contemporary postcolonial writer's definitive sense of "homelessness" is the analysis of the ways in which he or she seeks to go beyond the stale binaries of state-imposed identities in narrative. Often this objective is accomplished by demonstrating that each character possesses only some of the pieces that make up an absent or inaccessible whole. Postcolonial writers privilege the culturally mixed heritages and influences of their protagonists in order to de-essentialize nationalist polemics that seek to define the characteristics of the true geographical native. By challenging authorial and authoritative claims to geographic and cultural binaries that falsely legislate what counts as the official experience of a community or place, postcolonial writers strategically foreground and celebrate either the limitations of the first-person perspective or proffer multiple narrators who decenter readerly identifications with a singular or omnisciently controlling narrative perspective.

Such a project informs *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, the first novel by postcolonial writer Julia Alvarez. The careful positioning of the verb "lost" at the heart of the novel's title promises a document that will ferret out the moment or moments of cultural extinction/assimilation for the title characters—four sisters who grow up in an upper-class family in the Dominican Republic and are later forced into exile in the United States. Parallel to other postcolonial writers, such as Salman Rushdie, Michelle

Cliff, and Bharati Mukherjee, Alvarez attempts to destabilize the binary of the postcolonial writer's "absence" from, or "presence" in, a geographical homeland. Alvarez's first novel seeks to delineate the complex interplay of colliding ideological and political systems that inform the experiences of her culturally hybrid subjects of the Dominican Republic and the United States. By pluralizing the lost accents of the title, Alvarez presents a novelistic strategy that fragments and multiplies the story of immigrant experience into competing accounts and thus rejects the impulse to reduce the interplay of individual and cultural influences to a static binary of dominated and dominant.

How the García Girls Lost Their Accents, which won the Pen/Faulkner award in the ethnic fiction category, marks Alvarez's debut as a novelist who contemplates the complex intersections of class, nationality and race for her Dominican American characters.¹ Since Alvarez's family was part of a wave of middle-class immigrants who came to settle in New York City during the second half of the twentieth century, her work privileges the cultural limbo of migratory groups as an important site of fictional investigation.² The geographical and imaginative terrain of *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* is consistently saturated with the economic and political influence of an exported U.S. capitalism that has resulted from years of military and market control. As Alvarez explains in an autobiographical essay, "An American Childhood in the Dominican Republic," the two cultures are inextricably bound together:

[My mother] enrolled her daughters in Carol Morgan's school where we began each day by pledging allegiance to the flag of the United States, which I much preferred to the Dominican one, for it had the lovely red-and-white stripes of the awning at the ice-cream parlor. . . .

We also sang the marine song, "From the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli," marching in place to the rallying beat. The marines had occupied the country often, most recently when they had installed Trujillo as head of state two and a half decades before, and their song as well as the light-skinned, light-eyed children with American names in the barrios were some of the traces that they had been there.³

Such entwined racial and national histories openly inform the narrative trajectory of *García Girls* [*How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*] as well as the novel's oscillation between assimilating into the lifestyles promulgated by middle-class consumer culture in the United States and longing for a lost Dominican origin. The oscillation of her characters between the "promise" and "tragedy" that each cultural experience affords establishes the binary nationalist affinities that compete for authority in the midst of her characters' migratory movements between two countries.

The argument that this essay pursues is located in an analysis of the significance of this nationalist ambivalence in postcolonial narratives. For Alvarez, the infiltration of U.S. culture, military, and governments into the Dominican Republic has produced neither a sense of colonial resentment nor an open ideological embrace of capitalist infiltration. Instead, the writer explores the class and racial dimensions of such a relationship in ways that complicate an understanding of cultural privilege in the colonial commerce of nations:

What kept my father from being rounded up with the others [political dissidents of the Trujillo Regime] each time there was a purge . . . was his connection with my mother's powerful family. It was not just their money that gave them power, for wealth was sometimes an incentive to persecute a family and appropriate its fortune. It was their strong ties with Americans and the United States. As I mentioned, most of my aunts and uncles had graduated from American schools and colleges, and they corresponded regularly with their classmates and alumni associations. . . . The family subscribed to American magazines, received mail-order catalogues, and joined American clubs and honorary societies. This obsession with American things was no longer merely enchantment with the States, but a strategy for survival.⁴

It is this particular history of cultural appropriations and incestuous political crossings that structures the postcolonial backdrop of Alvarez's novel. As members of a privileged class in the Dominican Republic, the García family has the capacity to negotiate the fraught binaries that exist between nationalist loyalties and political tyranny. Rather than cast the colonialist heritage of the Dominican Republic as a choice between colonial servitude and naive ideological indoctrination, Alvarez's family consciously embraces their Dominicanized version of an exported American culture in order to maintain and bolster their economic and social advantage. By surrounding the family with the accoutrements of a U.S. export economy, they temporarily secure their safety despite their opposition to the United States-backed Trujillo regime. In attending to this aspect of Alvarez's interests, this essay goes on to explicate the ways in which class privilege interrupts and complicates strict nationalist binaries by promoting the alternative values of postcolonial multiplicity.

How the García Girls Lost Their Accents charts the reactions and responses of familial and cultural relations among four sisters: Carla, Sandra, Yolanda, and Sofia. Sociological studies have often endeavored to use sibling groups as a means of charting the ways in which environment and/or genetic inheritance affect the development of children who are brought up in the same environment. Alvarez employs a similar strategy

by maintaining a simultaneous focus upon a cast of characters who develop within a shared social and familial milieu. In situating her characters together as a discursive “family,” Alvarez seeks to explore the means by which her characters appropriate and recognize their narrative stories as shared and/or separate from a unitary body of gendered familial identities. Throughout the novel, numerous commentators remark on the poor fortune of a family that consists entirely of girls—“what, four girls and no boys?”—while each daughter struggles to free herself from the limitations of a communal designation that strips them of their uniqueness and individuality. Because the label “García Girls” stands in for the plural identities submerged beneath the faceless anonymity of daughters (who, unlike their male counterparts, do not need to be individuated as distinct human beings), Alvarez remains ambiguous about the prospects for her four narrators throughout the novel.

Since multiple narrators (or what I will term multiperspectivity from this point on) afford novelists the opportunity to simulate access to a variety of first- and third-person narrators within the same text, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* exploits such a tactic by oscillating between diverging narrative lines that upend and dynamically revise each other. Multiperspectivity succeeds in breaking the binary between narrator and narrated and paves the way for the interruptive force of hybrid postcolonial forms. Rather than explicating one specific response to the dislocating sensations of cultural transition, the novel situates the notion of “loss” in terms of each characters’ responses to the intersection and clash of U.S. and Dominican cultures. Alvarez’s use of multiple first-person narratives formally mirrors her understanding of the shifting and multiple nature of postcolonial identity itself.

The poster image of the Palmolive woman near the García daughters’ home in the Dominican Republic establishes the influence of American postcapitalist forms long before any member of the family ever sets foot in the land of “concrete cities and snow.” Because the novel moves backward in time from 1989 to 1956, rather than forward to chart the movement (in some progressive chronological sense) of the Dominican family’s transition from the island to the States, readers are set up to anticipate that the novel will present a vision of the Dominican homeland prior to U.S. cultural infiltration and military intervention. Yet the reader’s arrival at the multiple first-person narratives of the title characters does not coincide with this notion of a “pure” cultural setting. Despite the narrative’s interest in explicating the alienating cultural terrain to which the daughters are exposed in the United States, Alvarez’s analysis becomes increasingly geared toward plotting the ways in which such a sense of estrange-

ment seems present from the outset. In doing so, Alvarez attempts to imagine the contradictions inherent in any return to a geographic space once occupied and then relinquished.

Although [. . .] *García Girls* charts numerous reactions on the part of its characters to the move from the Dominican Republic to the United States, the most significant aspect of negotiating such “returns” entails the ability or inability of each daughter to understand her specific relation to the family servants. Unlike the more prototypical plot lines of the immigration novel, *García Girls* details the experiences of characters who operate within the upper echelons of economic status and political power in their homeland. Their cultural positioning is interesting because they literally move from a position of dominance to a racially marginal position in the United States. Alvarez’s story contemplates the exploitive social conditions of each culture and refuses to privilege the country of origins over the newly adopted nation—each exists in a dialectical tension within the minds of her narrators in such a way that the binary of national identity gradually falls away to be replaced by the more indeterminate identity of a multinational clan.

Thus, the move from the Dominican Republic to the United States involves a “fall” from influence for the family. After discovering that they will be forced to leave the family compound because of a failed CIA-backed governmental coup, the family’s visionary mother, Mami, explains that the relocation means an abdication of material wealth and relative security:

So, Laura thinks. So the papers have cleared and we are leaving. Now everything she sees sharpens as if through the lens of loss—the orchids in their hanging straw baskets, the row of apothecary jars Carlos has found for her in old druggists’ throughout the countryside, the rich light shafts swarming with a golden pollen. She will miss this glorious light warming the inside of her skin and jewelizing the trees, the grass, the lily pond beyond the hedge.⁵

The “lens of loss” that Alvarez uses to underscore Mami’s instantaneous sense of desire for the home and countryside she has come to cherish epitomizes the way the novel situates nostalgia for the homeland. In the wake of the class privileges that have been stripped from the island family once they are forced to seek exile to escape Papi’s impending imprisonment and the random searches of the government *guardias*, each family members’ narrative investigates how their experiences on the island of the Dominican Republic condition their responses throughout their lives. The household accoutrements that Mami longs to retain even before she has stepped outside the compound for the last time indicate the history of acquisitions and

purchases that represent the multinational life of consumption she has created for herself and her family.

Such longing for the life that has been lost reverberates throughout the novel, and like Yolanda's craving for guavas, the native fruit she ate as a young girl, all the characters in this fiction attempt to reclaim the present in terms of the past—their experiences in the United States compared and contrasted to their lives before the family's exile. The imaged or imagined homeland that haunts each narrator serves as a barometer to gauge the "success" or "trauma" of the years that follow. The "lens of loss" inevitably alters, however, and as each child relates her story to the reader, individual notions of "loss" shift and collide. When Yolanda, for instance, arrives on the island after a five-year hiatus in the United States, her memory of the land she left is rekindled and reinvested with the startling beauty of the country and the warmth her relatives provide:

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

(12)

Yet, despite the apparent parallels between Mami's earlier sense of loss for the island atmosphere and her third daughter's nostalgia for "palms . . . [that] whisper like voices [, . . . and the] solitary life" of the hillside *campesinos*, Yolanda's return is tempered by her growing awareness of the servant classes who make the family's life of relative luxury possible. Rather than smoothly assimilate back into her prior existence as the pampered daughter of a wealthy political official, Yolanda's experiences in the United States provide her with a politicized context of class consciousness that troubles the family's once naturalized Dominican lifestyle. Rather than circulate on the periphery of the family, the maids immediately erupt into Yolanda's description of the scene. The "invisible" labor force that populates and "invisibly" maintains the family estate forms a separate enclave that is openly excluded from the closeness the rest of the family enjoys: "She [Yolanda] pictures the maids in their mysterious cluster at the end of the patio" (11).

Because "home" has taken on differing significances for Yolanda now that she has, like the narrator of the epigraph with which I began, taken "the [college]

courses which would change [her] mind," the homecoming that establishes the narrative tone and mood of *García Girls* is one of tension and profound ambivalence. The mature narrative perspective that begins this novel cannot simply recapture the girlhood geography of her previous recollections. Alvarez invests her imaginative reunion with images that disrupt and revise her protagonist's relationship to the familial and cultural beliefs that she fails to recognize at an earlier age. The benefits she and her immediate family have reaped at the expense of the servant classes they employ and exploit lose their luxurious gloss. Armed with a repertoire of political theories from her college classes and her own racial experiences in the United States, which irreparably change her vision of home, Alvarez points to the ways in which her characters respond to the context of upper-class privilege in the Dominican Republic that once went unarticulated in their day-to-day lives. The racial binary of U.S. culture (dark/light) provides a new context from which to collapse a previously unchallenged binary of self/darker-skinned other that the class system of the Dominican Republic perpetuates.

This exposed "absence" of the novel's working classes does not, nonetheless, allow Alvarez's fictional servants a space from which they may speak their own lives. Although the eldest maid, Chucha, briefly narrates her own response to the family's departure later in the novel, *García Girls* attempts to theorize the significance of the racialized dimensions of class overtly. While the novel engages in the significant political act of articulating the experiences of Dominican Americans who have remained largely invisible in U.S. discourses, her own concerns also focus upon the "others" she cannot quite reach in the Dominican Republic. While the novel offers developed subject positions to its upper-class Dominican characters, it simultaneously acknowledges that granting "voices" to some falls short of "speaking" for other marginalized perspectives.

In fact, the lost accents of the title alludes to the difficulties inherent in the Garcia family's ability to "read" or "represent" the experiences of servants who prove absolutely essential to maintaining the familial fabric. In the wake of becoming political exiles living in the United States, they struggle to understand the changes that assault them once they land on foreign soil—"There have been so many stops on the road of the last twenty-nine years since her family left this island behind. She and her sisters have led such turbulent lives—so many husbands, homes, jobs, wrong turns among them" (11)—but such a volatile transition has not necessarily enabled them to make anything more than a nod in the direction of the "inscrutable" nature that the maids seem to harbor: "In

the fading light of the patio, Yolanda cannot make out the expression on the dark face [of the maid, ironically named *Iluminada*]” (10). For Alvarez and Third World theorists such as Trinh and Spivak, the subject speaking position of these subaltern characters already presupposes the impossibility of capturing the “lost accents” of difference that the title contemplates.⁶

Despite Yolanda’s attempts to analyze the meaning of the family’s willingness to use its class position at the expense of other island denizens, the sisters’ narratives, which conclude Alvarez’s novel, completely overlook the hierarchical class system from which their family has benefited. This fact is perhaps most evident in the oldest sister, Carla’s, chapter, “An American Surprise.” While the adult Yolanda’s chapter moves back and forth between her sense of security in the island homestead and her growing dis-ease with the now ever present servant class who fulfill the needs of the Garcia clan, Carla’s narrative demonstrates that even her own experience of racial denigration in the United States cannot bring her to an awareness of the Dominican situation.

Because Carla is the oldest of the four sisters, her relationship to the family’s live-in maids is the most established of the four sisters. As in Mami’s “lens of loss,” Carla’s chapter begins most forthrightly with a contemplation of her own private sense of loss in the wake of the family’s relocation. Unlike the “welcome back” cake that Yolanda is offered as a sign of appreciation from her island relatives, the celebration dinner in “An American Surprise” marks the day the Garcias turn “one American year old.” After Carla listens to her father make a speech that misquotes the poem on the Statue of Liberty, she wonders exactly what such a celebration means to her own experience in her newly adopted country: “What do you wish for on the first celebration of the day you lost everything?” (150). The homesickness she feels manifests itself most specifically in terms of her unfamiliarity with English slang and colloquialisms that elude her comprehension. As soon as she asks God to let the family return home and helps blow out the celebration candles that line the cake, she recalls a scene that vividly reminds her of her exclusion from the culture she now circulates within:

Down the block the neighborhood dead-ended in abandoned farmland that Mami read in the local paper the developers were negotiating to buy. Grasses and real trees and real bushes still grew beyond the barbed-wire fence posted with a big sign: PRIVATE, NO TRESPASSING. The sign had surprised Carla since “forgive us our trespasses” was the only other context in which she had heard the word. She pointed the sign out to Mami on one of their first walks to the bus stop. “Isn’t it funny, Mami? A sign that you have to be

good.” Her mother did not understand at first until Carla explained about the Lord’s Prayer. Mami laughed. Words sometimes meant two things in English too. This trespass meant that no one must go inside the property because it was not public like a park, but private. Carla nodded, disappointed. She would never get the hang of this new country.

(151)

Because language represents one of the most significant barriers to the characters’ ability to discover a space from which to speak and be understood, Carla’s frustration serves to highlight the fact that accents are not just lost but also get in the way. Her inability to comprehend the alternative context for the trespassing sign (that is, her lack of knowledge about the rules of private property) is highlighted by her “only other context,” the Lord’s Prayer, which she has memorized as a young girl and carried with her from the Dominican Republic. To the oldest daughter the alien notion of “no trespassing” serves a dual function: to highlight the narrator’s inability to contemplate the “meanings” of an Other culture that deviates from the linguistic rules to which she has grown accustomed, and to signal a metaphorical exclusion as well. Not only does Carla sense her loss of cultural privilege in the transition from a social context she understands to one she does not, but Alvarez also wants to foreshadow the impending hostility that will greet the transplanted family in the “new world.” The Garcias’ relocation to a different culture upends their sense of class privilege and simultaneously challenges the American myth of a classless society. This cultural transition not only thrusts the family into a new national context but also revises the daughter’s previously uninterrogated class identity in the Dominican Republic. “No trespassing” represents the loss of access to the institutions of authority and meaning making that matter in an American context.

Parallel to the immigrant-novel tradition from which it hails, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* explicitly engages in a critique of the inhospitable promised land that remains indifferent and even violent toward its newly arrived inhabitants. Unlike other versions of the genre, such as *The Rise and Fall of David Levinsky*, *The Breadgivers*, *China Men*, *The Borderlands*, and *Jasmine*, Alvarez’s novel emphasizes the time before the relocation of her characters.⁷ Instead of positing a moment when her characters were fully “at home” on their native soil (that is, a time when the characters believed in their thorough comprehension of cultural codes, customs, and social contracts), Alvarez’s attention to the daughters’ experiences in their childhood prior to expatriation demonstrates that their collective sense of security is founded upon their familial myths of class and social privilege. The