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Transnational Identities in Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*

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Introduction

The identity of Hispanic groups that migrate from Latin America to the United States has been reflected upon in literature in recent decades. With the Chicano movement gaining recognition in the late 1960s, the emergence of Chicano literature contributed in displaying the cultural diversity brought by Mexican descendants to the US. However, the female Latina voice would not receive attention in the United States until, as Juanita Heredia (2009) observes, Chicana and Puerto Rican fiction writers emerged as a collective voice during the 1980s. These women opened the way for other Latin American heritage women writers to play a part in influencing the American literary canon. Heredia explains that, in the American context, contemporary Latina authors have been publishing for an English-speaking audience to national acclaim since the 1990s, beginning with Julia Alvarez's first novel *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991).

This novel plays a significant role in the definition of transnational identity in Latina women's writing. Alvarez was one of the first exponents of Contemporary Latina American literature among other known writers of the genre, such as Sandra Cisneros, Denise Chávez, Cristina García, and Angie Cruz. Silvio Sirias (2001) states that because of these authors' shared heritage, they share many themes in their writing such as acculturation, cultural displacement, assimilation, politics, racism, machismo, superstition and generational differences (14). Heredia illustrates that contemporary Latina authors hail from different national heritages and their narratives contain different representations of history, politics and popular culture. However, according to Heredia, they share common concerns regarding certain literary tropes such as travel, voyages, and migrations across national borders. In the light of this, the author maintains that a common trait in these Latina

writers is that they allude to a legacy of colonial history in a transnational context which begins with the Spanish Conquest of the Americas and other forms of US domination which have had repercussions for US Latina/o communities up until the present.

Furthermore, Latina writers stress the importance of including in their writings the participation of other races and cultures, i.e., African, Asian, Middle-Eastern diasporas and at times, mixtures of these cultures, inversely from Chicana/o studies that frequently focus on the binary model of European vs indigenous (Heredia 9). The involvement of these mixtures of cultures in Latina writer's work comes from an interest in exhibiting how race politics vary in Latin America. Heredia emphasises that there is often an assumption that racism is the same in every nation, while, for example, being of African descent has different connotations in the Spanish Caribbean, Mexico and the US. Heredia also comments on the significance of the role of these Latina writers as they influence American history, which is often recorded by men obscuring the position of the marginal social groups, i.e., black, indigenous, Asian, mestizos, women, and the working class. According to Heredia, "these women writers present alternative histories to contest the hegemonic power of official history" (4). Further, these women writers are not merely presenting a woman's perspective and exploring gender matters on official history, but they also impart a view on popular culture. Ultimately, through their writing, the voice of marginal groups that had traditionally been omitted is raised.

Consequently, as Heredia states, many scholars have been interested in the examination of critical theories based on field research by investigating transnational communities in Latin America, the United States and other countries in the world (4). The field of transnational studies has provided a critical frame to

studies of contemporary Latina narratives by analysing the connection between these writers in terms of the sociocultural context concerning the US. Many scholars have defined transnationalism in different ways. One of the definitions that Heredia includes in her book is “people who migrate from a country of origin to a host one and maintain cultural, emotional, or physical connections to the residence of origin in the host country” (4).

Anthropologist Steven Vertovec (1999) has also explored in his scholarly work the notion of transnationalism and its multiple and varied definitions. He notes that, although the meaning of the term is nebulous, most social scientists have come to agree that transnationalism broadly refers “to multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states” (Vertovec 447). However, according to Vertovec, most of this growing topic refers to fairly diverse phenomena. He remarks that this term has been applied to studies on communities, trade, politics, families, identities, among others. Evidently, these situations require different kinds of research and theorisation as they relate to different fields. Vertovec explains that transnationalism as a social morphology that concerns social formation spanning borders is the definition that perhaps has been the most studied. In this understanding of transnationalism, ethnic diasporas have become the paradigm, according to Vertovec.

The term diaspora has also been interpreted widely by contemporary scholars. One of those analyses regards diaspora as a social form that encompasses “a triadic relationship between (a) globally dispersed yet collectively self-identified ethnic groups, (b) the territorial states and contexts where such groups reside, and (c) the homeland states and contexts whence they or their forebears came” (Vertovec 449). In addition, Vertovec points out the debate around “diaspora consciousness”

particularly in Cultural Studies that regards transnationalism as a type of consciousness that is marked by dual or multiple identifications. The author implies that most migrants identify themselves with more than one society, and therefore maintain several identities that tie them to more than one nation. This awareness of multi-locality motivates a longing to connect oneself with others who share the same 'routes' and 'roots', explains Vertovec. Further, he states that this consciousness produces a multiplicity of histories and selves that refuse fixity. He claims that often this attitude is "a valuable resource for resisting repressive local or global situations" (Vertovec 451).

To illustrate the transnational experience of a family that migrates to the US, Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* centres on the exile of the four Dominican sisters García de la Torre —Carla, Sandra, Yolanda and Sofia —along with their parents Carlos and Laura. They move to New York in the middle of the 1960s due to the father's oppositional stance to the dictatorial regime of Trujillo. The novel revolves around the four sisters, each one represented with a different personality and a different perspective of their transnational experience. While it is true that the story is narrated through the personal experiences of the four girls, Yolanda (Yo, Yoyo or Joe) is the main character. She plays the role of protagonist of the story in most of the chapters that populate the pages, and the greater weight of the action detailed in the text falls on her. Indeed, Yolanda's voice begins the work and ends it. Additionally, as revealed in the final pages, there is a reflective pace of Yolanda in her own discourse and memories of her past: "There are still times I wake up at three o'clock in the morning and peer into the darkness" (Alvarez 290). She reflects on her life and recreates the origin of her complex present being in-between two cultures. This complexity derives from an adaptation to a new

country and a new culture. Thus, the novel articulates the evident impact of a border-crossing experience on identity formation.

Regarding the influence of the transnational experience on the identities of the characters in *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, Manuela Matas Llorente (2001) emphasises that their identities are fragmented by significant events in their lives. Namely, when the family departs from the Dominican Republic to migrate to the US, leaving behind their monocultural Dominican identity and when they enter a state of acculturation, i.e. “the process of adopting the cultural traits or social patterns of another group” (Stein 10). When the family is confronted with a new cultural environment, according to Matas, a negotiation between their identities becomes a complex issue characterised by a double consciousness. Matas concludes that the Garcia girls, represented by Yolanda, “articulate a bicultural self to navigate between different cultural and linguistic realities” (75), transcending common assumptions of a stable, singular identity.

Conversely, Rachel Adams (2016) argues that there actually is a singular identity that is formed through a process that takes place in the present and is developed towards the future taking into account past experiences of the person. She states that, although there is a common tendency among studies on transnational experiences to divide identities into two parts — namely, the idealised memory of their former residence and their present, identities cannot be divided. Adams also contends that the past experiences do not constitute an identity; instead, they help shape the individual’s identity. Therefore, Adams criticises Alvarez’s approach to the construction of identity since in *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* the characters regularly visit their past looking for their identities.

As Sarika Chandra (2008) points out, there is a debate regarding the identity of the characters of the Garcia family. As presented above, two different points of view on identity formation collide within critical works on Alvarez's narrative, namely the concepts of transnational identity as dual/multiple or singular. On the one hand, Matas (2001) perceives the negotiation of identity as part of the migratory process that the Garcias undergo. This negotiation occurs between their native Dominican cultural identity and the new American one. This perspective regards the identity of the Garcias as dual or bicultural. On the other hand, Adams' work argues against the dual/bicultural identity of the characters, proposing an approach that describes identity as a single unit.

Despite the common approach mentioned by Adams that regards the Garcias' transnational identities as a phenomenon marked by dual or multiple identifications, this work will take a different stance and regard their transnational identity as not only singular but also fluid and dynamic. This study could not find this particular approach within the research done on analyses about the border-crossing experience in Alvarez's novel. The focus of this study is to reconsider a perspective towards transnational identities that rejects the view of identity as fragmentable. Instead, this thesis comprehends identity as a unified social notion that encompasses the past, present and future of an individual regardless of their geographical location. Although the location of the individuals plays a role in the development of their identity, it does not fragment it, but instead, the identity flows with the individuals wherever they go. Identity moves through time and space, always remaining unified.

Moreover, several works and articles that explore the narrative of *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* focus on themes such as sexuality, gender

inequalities, language, family relations, and the search for identity. There is an immediate need, as Vertovec puts it, for more comparative empirical studies of transnational human mobility, social ties, commodities, information and images. In that light, this work attempts to contribute to Vertovec's call by analysing a literary work and looking into the fictional character's transnational experiences. Accordingly, this thesis aims to explore Julia Alvarez's narrative through the lens of transnational theory framing the notion of diaspora consciousness displayed in Alvarez's work. It will be argued that the characters in the novel involved in a transnational process resolve their identity conflicts by breaking free of the fixed constructs imposed by society. They come to realise that they are more than Hispanic, Dominican, American, women, or even the sum of all these parts.

Socio-Cultural Clashes in the Migrant Experience

Clara Rodriguez (2001) notes that because Latinos/as are represented as a diverse ethnic group, they are often targets of racist discrimination in the United States. She observes that despite darker individuals being more likely to experience direct discrimination, looking white or fair-skinned does not largely change their experience of segregation. Thus, all Latinos may experience discrimination, because, as Rodriguez puts it, Hispanicity is based on more than skin colour. She mentions other aspects, such as accent, residence, surname, or first name, that can reveal the person's background (Rodriguez 20). For instance, the Garcia family, coming from the Dominican Republic, and despite their European ancestry, are subject to discriminatory events. The girls soon became targets of mockery in the school environment. There are many times in which the rest of the children of the

school address them with the derogatory ‘spic’, a term used towards individuals of Hispanic roots, or they want them to return to their native country. Racial discrimination is not only limited to the school environment, but it also takes place in their neighbourhood. Their neighbour, whom they call ‘La Bruja’, the witch in Spanish, also discriminates against them: “One day soon after they had moved in, La Bruja had stopped her mother and the girls in the lobby and spat out that ugly word the kids at school sometimes used: “Spics! Go back to where you came from!” (Alvarez 171). The words of La Bruja are evidence of the contempt to which the sisters are also subjected to outside the school. Not only do the people around them make them marginal subjects, but the Anglo-American culture in which they live disfavours the figure of the non-whites. Beverly Araújo Dawson observes that “Dominicans can be perceived as African American based on their dark complexions . . . These characteristics can expose Dominicans and other Latino/as to increased rates of discriminatory experiences” (98) since African Americans are considered to be at the bottom of the racial hierarchy in the US. In this regard, Benjamin Bailey (2007) maintains that “white is the privileged, unmarked category; black is the most denigrated category” (159).

Comparable to the racial politics in the US, in the Dominican Republic “blackness and African ancestry have historically been attributed to neighboring Haitians, who are racialized in similar ways to African Americans in the US” (Bailey 158). This differentiation is displayed in one of the minor characters of Alvarez’s work. Chucha is one of the family maids on the island. She was forced to move from her native country, Haiti, to the Dominican Republic. She had escaped from the Parsley Massacre and arrived at the house of Señor de la Torre, Laura’s father and grandfather of the girls. Chucha had asked for work in the house and had

become employed as a maid. She is different from the other servants; she is old, dark-skinned and practices a non-Catholic religion. These socio-cultural aspects complicate the process of adaptation to her new environment, and therefore Chucha also experiences discrimination in the Dominican Republic as she is alienated for her race, accent and religious beliefs.

The Dominican politics of race situate Chucha at the bottom of the social and racial hierarchy. Chucha is discriminated by the other maids: “What do you want, old woman? None of the maids liked Chucha because they all thought she was kind of below them, being so black and Haitian and all” (Alvarez 219). As James Ferguson (2003) notes, hostility has marked relations between Haiti and the Dominican Republic since the political conflicts that took place during colonisation. Hence, the resentment remains in the Dominican national consciousness, according to Ferguson. He explains that defenders of Dominican nationhood stress that the island is “essentially Hispanic, Roman Catholic and Spanish-speaking, its traditions drawn from those of Spain” (Ferguson 19). Conversely, Haiti is represented as intrinsically African, deeply influenced by voodoo and Creole-speaking. Therefore, Haitian immigrants are often considered racially inferior in the Dominican Republic. Ferguson explains that this racist view was developed by the dictator Trujillo, who denigrated and abused Haitians and sought to “whiten” Dominican society by encouraging migrants from Europe. Such is the derogation enacted on Haitian people that, as Ferguson states, “in a sense, dominant Dominican identity is the negation of all that is Haitian” (20). Many Dominicans, although having African ancestry, deny their blackness as they do not wish to be associated with Haitians. The novel displays the racial hierarchy based on skin colour that exists in the Dominican Republic. For instance, Laura, the mother, is proud of her white ancestry,

which guaranteed her family's fair skin colour and therefore a higher social status: "My great-grandfather married a Swedish girl, you know? So the family has light-colored blood" (Alvarez 52). Laura goes as far as to claim that her daughter with the fairest traits has an easier life: "The others aren't bad looking, don't get me wrong. But Sandi, Sandi got the fine looks, blue eyes, peaches and ice cream skin, everything going for her!" (Alvarez 52). On the other hand, despite Chucha being a servant of the family for so many years, she does not escape the stigma of being Haitian and therefore experiences otherness powerfully and painfully, as the Garcias do when they migrate to New York.

Moreover, Chucha undergoes a similar linguistic alienation to the Garcia girls due to the struggle with language. Although she has been living and working in that house for many years, she still speaks with an accent, as Spanish is not her mother tongue: "She was real Haitian too and that's why she couldn't say certain words like the word for parsley . . . that had *j* in it" (Alvarez 218). Her nickname, Chucha, is a permanent reminder of this struggle as the girls named her that because of her mispronunciation of the word "muchacha" ('girl' in Spanish).

Chucha is also discriminated against because of her religion, Voodoo, which is inherently linked to Africa and different from the dominant Roman Catholic that prevails on the island. The other maids do not like her as they are afraid of her practices with the Voodoo. Chucha has a different way to approach death. While the other Dominican maids and people surrounding her are afraid of death, she seems to be preparing herself for her departure from this world by sleeping in a coffin: "Mami finally had to give her a room to herself, because none of the other maids wanted to sleep with her . . . They say that she cast spells on them. And besides, she slept in her coffin" (219). Chucha's distinct behaviour is strongly

influenced by her Voodoo religion and the customs of her culture. The experiences of otherness that Chucha endures are especially tangible on occasions when the topic regards her black skin or her religion.

Religion in the novel shapes cultural differences among the Dominican, Haitian and North American people as it is used to defend the roots of national identity. For instance, the Garcia girls go to a Catholic school because their parents believe that public ones promote Protestantism. Their parents fear that the girls' exposure to a different religion would negatively impact on their lifestyles and take away their Dominicanism. Alicia Re Cruz (1998) explains that for Catholic traditionalists "any type of deviation from the traditional Catholic lifestyle meant a conversion to Protestantism, a term used to encapsulate different Protestant denominations and religious systems" (87). On the other hand, Chucha practices her Voodoo despite the judgement of Dominicans as a way to maintain her native culture. Religion seems to be the last bastion of attachment to people's origins, and the last identity trait one loses when assimilating to a new culture, i.e. "unlearning of the original culture and learning the new culture" (Callahan 2010).

Acculturation and Rejection of Acculturation as Coping Mechanisms

Bradatan (2010) observes that "being part of a stigmatized group is a challenge, and people from that group can fight against the stigma either by disassociating themselves from that community [or] by trying to get quickly [acculturated]" (175). Beverly Araújo Dawson (2009) presents the definition of *acculturation* in her work as "a shift in cultural values that occurs when individuals come into contact with a new culture" (99). The resistance towards acculturation is, as Dawson observes, a

consequence of the discrimination that migrants suffer in the host country. Therefore, they seek comfort in their native culture and strengthen their cultural ties to protect themselves from discriminatory experiences (Dawson 99). For instance, Chucha resists the acculturation process as she keeps her cultural values despite living in the Dominican Republic for a long time.

While some migrants resist acculturation and become more immersed in their native culture, others seek to acculturate faster. Dawson argues that Latino/as in the United States feel pressured to adapt and assimilate to mainstream behaviours. This is the case for the Garcia girls who, through the acculturation process, attempt to stop being the subjects of mockery and discrimination due to their outsider status. The contact with American individuals contributes to the girls' adaptation to American cultural values and language. The arrival in the United States soon makes the sisters aware of the need to integrate to a reality different from the one they have known. The discrimination suffered by the girls increases their need to be part of their new environment as quickly as possible in order to stop being the target of insult and segregation. Further, to integrate they first need to understand why they are being mocked and what makes them different: "Here they were trying to fit in America among Americans; they needed help figuring out who they were, why the Irish kids whose grandparents had been micks were calling them spics" (Alvarez 138).

The transnational experience is displayed not only on the Garcia family but also on members from other migrant groups such as the Irish. One could theorise that when the grandparents of these Irish kids arrived in the US, they were victims of the same alienation that they are now enacting on the girls. However, the Irish kids are already part of the American culture as they belong to a third generation of

migrants from a European English-speaking country, who are known to have higher rates of acculturation. Bailey (2007) states that “the descendants of these European groups not only acculturated but they also largely assimilated. As part of this process of assimilation, these descendants of immigrants gained access to the unmarked ethnic/racial category ‘white’” (159). Therefore, the Irish kids consider themselves to be hierarchically equal to white Americans and in a position to mock new migrants. Later on, the girls rhetorically ask, “Why had they come to this country in the first place?” (Alvarez 138), which suggests a sense of estrangement or not belonging. This increases the painful need to forsake their Caribbean heritage and to acculturate to their new environment.

The girls experience in their own routine a clash of habits that pushes them to be part of the hegemonic culture that surrounds them and reject the situation of being immigrants. However, even in their attempt to integrate into the Anglo-American reality, the sisters do not initially find it easy to fit in and feel a certain sense of ‘imitating’ rather than developing their own individuality within a different socio-linguistic context. Their desire to deculturate and be one of them can be seen in the chapter where Yolanda tells the story of Rudy and her experience as a major English student. Reflecting upon her sense of difference, Yolanda notes: “If only I too had been born in Connecticut or Virginia, I too would understand the jokes everyone was making . . . I too would be having sex and smoking dope [...] and I would say things like “no shit”, without feeling like I was imitating someone else.” (Alvarez 94-95). At this point in her life, Yolanda would have preferred to be born part of American society and not have to adapt to it.

It is no coincidence that Alvarez named her work *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, since this title alludes to the process of adaptation these

girls undergo. Accents are linguistic elements materialised in speech, and they signal the origin of individuals. Therefore, by losing their accents, which represent the tangible trait of their Dominicanism, they display an acclimatisation to the Anglo-American culture. After some years, the girls become skilled at English and can sound like Americans. Hence, they can also consider themselves American. By acculturating, the girls develop a diasporic consciousness, as they become aware of their sense of belonging to more than one nation. Alvarez reflects in more detail the process of intercultural transit in Yolanda, who is the main character of the novel. Her acculturation emerges from the solitude in which she finds herself, facing a hostile environment that excludes her due to her Hispanic origins. This isolation opens the doors to the development of her skills in the English language. “Yoyo had been a terrible student . . . 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” (Alvarez 141). With this behaviour, she tries to get rid of the “spic” tag to which she is constantly subjected. Thus, Yolanda undergoes the arduous task of erasing the Spanish accent of her speech, which she starts doing in her school years: “She still had a slight accent, and she did not like to speak in public, subjecting herself to her classmates’ ridicule. [...] Night after night, she sat at her desk, hoping to polish off some quick, noncommittal little speech” (Alvarez 141).

However, the time and the unpleasant experiences the girls are subjected to turn them into acculturated individuals who manage their host social environment as if they belonged to it. They acquire the customs, traditions, daily routine and idiosyncrasy of their new environment. For instance, they experiment with smoking, something that they would not succumb to in their native country as young women of an upper-class family: “Fifi was on for some smoking in the

bathroom” (Alvarez 110). They use the most innovative cosmetics available in New York: “Carla was on for experimenting with her hair removal cream” (Alvarez 110). They also consume feminist texts that broaden and change their socio-feminist ideology: “Yoyo was on for bringing a book into the house, *Our Bodies, Our Selves*. The women all celebrated women and their bodies [...] and a whole chapter on lesbians” (Alvarez 110).

However, all these actions are done behind their mother’s back, Laura, who would not approve of such actions from her daughters: “Mami threw a fit . . . She made it sound like drinking or drugs . . . Things, Mami said, examining the pictures, to be ashamed of” (Alvarez 110). Mother and daughters’ attitudes reflect the generational conflicts in the migrant experience and acculturation process as the younger generations tend to be more outgoing and likely to fraternise with the new environment. Therefore, their ability to integrate is more prominent in contrast to older generations who are deeply committed to their customs. Regarding this, Avtar Brah (1996) explains that:

The relationship of the first generation to the place of migration is different from that of subsequent generations, mediated as it is by memories of what was recently left behind, and by the experience of disruption and displacement as one tries to re-orientate, to form new social networks, and learns to negotiate new economic, political and cultural realities. (Brah 190)

In order to re-orientate and negotiate a new cultural reality, the girls mirror the dominant culture by adopting the Americans’ behaviour. For instance, they experiment with recreational drugs such as marihuana, something not uncommon amongst the rest of the young Anglo-Americans with whom they

surround themselves while trying to fit in: “Fifi held up a Baggy with dregs of greenish Brown weed inside” (Alvarez 112).

The process of acculturation has influenced how the Garcia girls view the customs and traditions of their country of origin. In one of the summer visits where they return to the Dominican Republic, they meet again with little Fifi who had taken responsibility for possessing marihuana when found out by their mother and was sent back to the island as punishment. The three Americanized sisters are horrified by the clothes and beads that her sister wears at their meeting. In fact, Fifi does not embody anything abnormal for the high society in which Carla, Sandi, Yolanda and Sofia lived before their exile: “Fifi, there to meet us at the airport, is a jangle of bangles and a cascade of beauty parlor curls held back on one side very smartly by a big gold barrette” (Alvarez 117). However, once they have acculturated to the Anglo-American culture, they are no longer used to the Dominican elite fashion of women but see it as distasteful: ‘Elegante’, Mami has said of Fifi’s new style, but on our lips are the other epithets. ‘She’s turned into a S.A.P.’, Yoyo mutters. A Spanish-American princess” (Alvarez 117-8). Fifi, unlike her sisters, stays on the Island for a year, where she continues her growth as an individual and a woman. This interrupts Fifi’s process of Anglo-American acculturation as she follows the typical Dominican customs during this time. This implies following the rules of a prevalent patriarchal society.

Fifi’s temporary exile to the Dominican Republic proves to be a new challenge, in her process of re-aculturating to the island. In her attempt to integrate back into Dominican society, she begins to date a boy who expects her to behave according to the gender roles of Dominican culture. The girls’ educational development corresponds to the latest trends that question authority and oppose

oppressive cultural constructs towards women. Thus, they consider Fifi's boyfriend's expectations to be antiquated: "Yoyo begins by asking him if he's ever heard of Mary Wollstonecraft. How about Susan B. Anthony? Or Virginia Woolf? "Friends of yours?" he asks" (Alvarez 121). The girls, nurtured by a young American progressive perspective, see their native Dominican fellows as old-fashioned conservatives. This passage shows cultural relations where the ones being discriminated against in their first transit, i.e. the Garcia girls, now start judging people in the island according to American cultural expectations. As Brah mentions, the dividing lines between borders are not only geographical but also social, cultural and psychic, that construct people on the other side of the border "as outsiders, aliens, the Others" (194). The girls are aware of the cultural and social differences that separate them from their Dominican acquaintances. That awareness of the discrepancy between their ideologies and the Dominicans' depicts their diasporic consciousness, as they are conscious of how their American upbringing has influenced them to think differently from their Dominican fellows. They feel rather superior because of their foreign avant-garde views which lead them to perceive a certain otherness in the inhabitants of their native land. This perception is similar to the manner in which they were seen on their arrival in the United States.

Diasporic Identities and Fixed Social Constructs

How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents exemplifies the traumatic experience of diasporic displacement. Brah (1996) states that "the word diaspora often invokes the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation, and this is certainly a very important aspect of the migratory experience" (190). Despite Yolanda mastering the language, forgetting her accent as a result of a climate of hostility towards difference

and becoming an acculturated subject, something still feels dislocated in the course of her university days in New York. During a time when sexual relations are a way of experiencing and enjoying without major sentimental implications among university students in the 1960s, Yolanda cannot fulfil her adaptation regarding such an intimate aspect: “By the time I went to college, it was the late sixties, and everyone was sleeping around as a matter of principle” (Alvarez 87). During this period, as a protest against patriarchal structures many young American women would have casual sex. However, for Yolanda it is not as easy to have sex without commitment. In fact, none of the relationships work out despite Yoyo’s desire to establish a romantic bond with someone: “I’d meet someone, conversation would flow, they’d come calling, but pretty soon afterwards, just as my heart was beginning to throw out little tendrils of attachment, they’d leave” (Alvarez 87). She does not find the perfect moment to lose her virginity with the man she considers appropriate despite all the push to do so given the environment of sexual freedom that prevails among Anglo-American university students in the 1960s. This causes all the boys to end up abandoning her in search of another woman with whom to have sex more quickly. In this sense, Yolanda observes, “Why I couldn’t keep them interested was pretty simple: I wouldn’t sleep with them” (Alvarez 87). Although she is perfectly aware of the reason for her unsuccessful relationships, she cannot help but feel the pressure to act according to the Dominican principles of behaviour. As a member of a family that follows patriarchal codes, she should not be having casual sex.

Yolanda receives with great pain a lesson about what is expected from her from her first college boyfriend, Rudy, who plays the role of the New York society of the 1960s in the novel. Although she has managed to master the English language and American customs, she is still seen as a Hispanic girl. The dominant

culture will irremediably label her according to American exoticising constructs of Hispanic women, according to which a woman will always be willing to offer herself sexually due to her 'hot-blood'. This is depicted in the passage where Rudy reproaches her for not conceding to have sex with him. He says, "I thought you'd be hot-blooded, being Spanish and all, and that under all the Catholic bullshit, you'd be really free [...] But Jesus, you're worse than a fucking Puritan" (Alvarez 99).

Accordingly, Yolanda evokes the first experiences she had with the society that had welcomed her and the offensive words that were directed at her at school. Yoyo finds shelter, as she had done so many times before, in the religion of her choice, halfway between agnosticism and Catholicism. Her reflective discourse displays a duality of her consciousness, as she identifies herself as both Catholic, due to her Hispanic background, and Agnostic, due to her immediate American culture: "I saw what a cold, lonely life awaited me in this country. I would never find someone who would understand my peculiar mix of Catholicism and agnosticism, Hispanic and American styles" (Alvarez 99). Later on, she uncovers the crucifix that she had hidden between her clothes in a drawer and lets it rest under her pillow. The crucifix, main token of the Catholic religion, offers Yolanda the security that she does not find in her agnostic environment: "I opened my drawer and took out the crucifix I kept hidden under my clothes, and I put it under my pillow for the night. This large crucifix had been a "security blanket" I took to bed with me for years after coming to this country" (Alvarez 99-100).

Indeed, Yolanda does not present herself as a wholly assimilated subject despite the fact that this process is the only viable path she sees to adapt to a new medium and to stop being a Hispanic immigrant that is relegated to the marginal space in the social hierarchy. She comes to recognise the transnational

reality that she is part of, as she becomes aware of the ties she holds with the native culture and the host culture. This represents the notion of diasporic consciousness in transnational identities. However, “as any social identity, being transnational is not fixed forever, it varies over time as people change through interaction” (Bradatan 175). Yoyo does not find her own space within the fixed social identities, not at least entirely since her identity is not limited to being Hispanic, American, Dominican, woman, Catholic, Agnostic, etc. In light of this, Brah argues that “the concept of diaspora offers a critique of discourses of fixed origins . . . The process of diasporic identity formation is *exemplars par excellence* of the claim that the identity is always plural, and in process” (194). In Yolanda’s identity, there is also room for a crucifix of her religion of origin, even though she is not a devoted believer, which explicitly reflects the need to find her own identity outside the fixed identity constructs. The Dominican identity construct does not fulfil her identity either since she had many years of growth in the United States. All those years of use of the English language in which she found comfort while facing a hostile environment, thousands of readings that made her understand the possibility of feeling fulfilled as a woman without the need to conform to patriarchal impositions, are an undeniable part of her identity. Therefore, as Brah puts it, diasporic identities “challenge the idea of a continuous, uninterrupted, unchanging, homogeneous and stable . . . identity; instead, they highlight the point that identity is always in process, even when it might be constructed or represented as fixed” (194).

The identity complexes that arise from the social constructs are resolved when the Garcia girls understand that they do not need to split their identities or side with one construct, but instead, they can accept all experiences in

their lives, their origins and their acquired views. Also, they understand that memories do not form an identity but rather are part of the one they already have.

Conclusion

As discussed previously in this essay, the continuous growth of cross-border migration has generated an increase in the scholarly study of transnational experiences in fictional literature. These studies emphasise the unstable circumstances to which immigrants are subjected to regarding sociocultural clashes. Race, language and religion are the most prominent aspects concerning these clashes and are exemplified in *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*. Firstly, the girls experience racial discrimination as soon as they arrive in the US, not only in the school environment but also in their neighbourhood. When settling, the Garcias are immediately classified as part of the Latino racial group, and, like any other individual from a minority group, suffer from rejection. Similarly, Chucha experiences racial discrimination while living in the Dominican Republic. Secondly, immigrants face linguistic barriers which commonly make them targets of mockery. For instance, Chucha is mocked by Dominicans because of her struggle with the Spanish language. On the other hand, Yolanda goes to great lengths in order to erase her Spanish accent, as she seeks approval from the Anglo-American society by mastering the English language. Thirdly, religious segregation is also prevalent towards immigrants who do not share the host country's beliefs. Chucha, a practising Voodoo, is persistently separated from the other maids. Regarding religion, Yolanda also experiences a clash between her Dominican Catholic background and the American Protestant environment.

All these sociocultural clashes promote a sense of alienation, which immigrants frequently combat by acculturating or rejecting acculturation. In the novel, these two stances towards the process of acculturation are displayed; namely, Chucha who resists acculturation as a way of evading discrimination and the Garcia girls who strive to acculturate in search of validation. In the case of the Garcia girls, this process has affected the perception of their own identities. The girls, as acculturated individuals, live in-between two cultures and identify themselves as both Dominican and American. As analysed in this essay, this particular duality of consciousness in the transnational experience is named 'diasporic consciousness'.

Moreover, while undergoing a process of acculturation in order to integrate and escape alienation, the Garcia girls encounter fixed identity constructs of society such as Hispanic, American, woman, and Catholic. Those constructs are a foundation for their inner conflicts as they try to fit into them. As an attempt to be accepted and avoid being segregated, the girls have internalised the Anglo-American culture, which eventually becomes part of them. Their conflict is then to figure out whether they belong to the American culture or the Dominican. However, they find resolution when they stop focusing on fitting into the constructs and embrace their past, both in the Dominican Republic and America, without splitting their identities. Once they realise that identities are not fixed but evolve from the experiences of individuals, they stop looking back, trying to reconcile with their past, which they incorporate as an integral part of their transnational identity. This is symbolised by the ghost of Yolanda's black cat, Schwarz, which, as Yolanda concludes, is "a black furred thing lurking in the corners of my life, her magenta mouth opening, wailing over some violation that lies at the center of my art" (Alvarez 290). The passage refers to the kitten taken by a young Yolanda, which,

similarly to the girls, was removed from the safety of its mother at a young age when it was vulnerable to the threats of the new environment. Thus, the cat represents the girls' traumatic experience of being uprooted from the Dominican Republic, their motherland, and relocated to New York where they face sociocultural clashes, alienation, and are eventually forced to acculturate as a coping mechanism. Nevertheless, they come to terms with their turbulent past and embrace it as part of their diasporic identities.

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