

Border Crossings in Latina Narrative: Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*

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Summary

In spite of being labelled a postcolonial novelist, Julia Alvarez avoids becoming a spokesperson for a generalised US Latino/a experience in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) and thus escapes the double bind of group identity, or “representation” that is often associated with so-called multi-ethnic literature. Although Alvarez fits perfectly in the pluralist view of American society in the last few decades, her novel is different in the sense that it spells discursive trouble, marked as it is by transgressions, thereby subtly undermining the happily pluralist view implicit in much contemporary multiculturalism.

Opsomming

Ten spyte daarvan dat Julia Alvarez as 'n post-koloniale romanskrywer bestempel word, vermy sy dit om 'n spreekbuis te word vir 'n veralgemeende Amerikaanse Latino/a ondervinding in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) en spring so dié dubbele binding van groepsidentiteit of “voorstelling” wat dikwels geassosieer word met sogenaamde multi-etniese literatuur vry. Alhoewel Alvarez perfek pas in die pluralistiese siening van die Amerikaanse samelewing gedurende die laaste paar dekades, is haar roman anders in die sin dat dit diskursiewe probleme voorspel, gekenmerk, soos dit word, deur oorskrydings wat op subtiële wyse die gelukkige pluralistiese siening wat implisiet is in baie kontemporêre multi-kulturalisme ondermyn.

Although the United States is usually thought of as an immigrant country, it is only in the last decades of the twentieth century that “difference” became the central focus in the field of American Studies. This focus on difference led to a flourishing of multi-ethnic theory and writing practice. And since the 1960s, writes Karen Christian in *Write and Tell: Identity as Performance in U.S. Latina/o Fiction*, “Latinos have made substantial achievements in the American cultural and political spheres” (1997: 4), culminating in a boom in the last twenty years in US Latina/o cultural production, accompanied by mainstream reviews of Latina/o fiction, university-level courses on this literature and Latino Studies departments.

It is within this context that my discussion of Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) – a novel which has become representative for a new pluralist view of contemporary American society – takes place. This is testified by the flood in recently published hyphenated creative and theoretical texts, both Latino-American and Asian-American, in which the once perceived homogeneous nation-state and dominant Anglocentric culture are no longer seen as congruent with the emerging hybrid cultural identities.

It is a given that immigration, either forced (slaves, American Indians, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, native Hawaiians, Cubans) or voluntary (white ethnic groups), has always been a central given in the history of the United States. But until not that long ago immigration was considered to mean integration in the main stream of Anglophone society. The very fabric of society, that of an alleged shared understanding of national consensus, would have been undermined, as Gregory Jay argues in *American Literature and the Culture Wars* (1997), if America's population, consisting of immigrant groups, expropriated peoples and imported slaves, would have tried to define themselves as national minorities.¹ "Cultural and economic assimilation", writes Jay, "has historically been relatively easy for those of European descent, more difficult for those of Hispanic descent, and virtually impossible for those of African descent" (Jay 1997: 60) and assimilation of Asian Americans still remains problematic.

In 1995, according to the Census Bureau figures, Latinos² comprised 10.2 per cent of the total US populations; at present rates of growth and immigration, Latino peoples will make up one quarter of the population of the US by the year 2050. Projections like this indicate that the United States is undergoing one of the most profound demographic shifts in its ethnic and racial make-up since the late nineteenth century, thereby creating a multicultural society of unparalleled diversity. By the middle of the twenty-first century the descendants of white Europeans, who have defined US national culture for most of the country's existence, will be in the minority (Augenbraum & Olmos 1997: xiii). As Mary Louise Pratt writes in "Daring to Dream" about the dominant Anglocentric culture in the United States: "Europe has continued to possess the American, especially the Euroamerican, imagination, to be its point of reference, regardless of the realities that surround us here" (unpublished 1992 manuscript, quoted in Saldívar 1997: 201, Note 1).

It was only in the late 1960s – early 70s that US ethnic groups became more conscious of their status as a group when it had become legitimate (or no longer "un-American") for ethnic groups to express their distinctive characteristics, as opposed to the earlier "Anglo-conformity" model of immigration. It was only then that expressions of these diverse ethnic groups started to reflect "the tendency of the nation to see itself as a conglomerate of distinct groups rather than as a social contract among highly individual and independent

persons”(Jay 1997: 72), which had for a long time been the traditional view of American society. Consequently the very field of American literature as a field of study was also brought into question. American literature and culture were and are no longer considered to be limited by the borders, or even powers, of the United States – refer in this respect for instance to the establishment in 2001 of the International American Studies Association, whose first conference³ theme “How Far is America from Here?” indicates a rethinking of “American identities relationally, whether the relations under discussion operate within the borders of the United States, throughout the Americas, and/or worldwide”.

American Studies originally emerged at particularly tense moments of North American nationalism, and the virtual exclusion from the canon of marginalised groups such as early Spanish and French exploration texts, or of black and Indian sermons and autobiographies, served the important ideological role of maintaining boundaries between what was “truly” American and what was “other”, or marginal. But in the last two decades of the twentieth century texts like Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, published in 1987, and anthologies like the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* (edited by Paul Lauter), published in 1994, were instrumental in redrawing these boundaries, the first for instance by problematising and redefining Mexican-American writing as North American literature, and the latter by including American Indian myths of origin, which previously would only have found their way into anthropological or ethnographic texts.⁴ Gregory Jay, however, sounds a warning against “naive pluralism or heated celebration of ethnic tradition”, which should in his view be avoided as “the uncritical assertion of the value of one’s personal or cultural identity is not ultimately a sufficient response to those who have, on the basis of their own identity politics, repressed and denied one’s identity”(1997: 74) and it is in this context that multi-ethnic writers like Julia Alvarez play an important part.

Julia Alvarez was raised in the Dominican Republic and emigrated to the United States in 1960. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, published in 1991, was her first novel. It received the PEN/Oakland Josephine Miles Award and was named by both the American Library Association and the *New York Times Book Review* as a Notable Book of 1991. Her second novel, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, was nominated for the 1995 National Book Critics Circle Award. She has since published another novel, entitled *¡Yo!*, children’s literature as well as collections of poetry and essays.

Although Alvarez is often referred to as a multi-ethnic writer, her work makes it particularly clear that it cannot be assumed that the multi-ethnic writer is a spokesperson for the central experience of the writer’s group. Her work clearly shows that as a so-called multi-ethnic writer one can hold one’s own cultural identity and yet explore the differences within the self as well as

within the group, community or state one forms part of. Julia Alvarez does not, and indeed cannot, speak for, or represent her ethnic group, nor can she be considered to be representative of this ethnic group.

It was Gayatri Spivak who outlined the problematics of the double meaning of the term “representation” in her famous essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988: 276), referring to these mechanics as “proxy” and “portrait”. She insisted that these two meanings should be considered separately when discussing the dynamics of “speaking for” a particular group. By charting the different family members’ reactions in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* to how an Americanised, upper-class Dominican family, forced into political exile in the United States, comes to terms with life in America, Julia Alvarez avoids becoming a spokesperson for a generalised US Latino/a experience and thus escapes the double bind of group identity, or “representation”.

In the novel the García family moves from a position of dominance in the Dominican Republic to a racially marginalised position in the US; the family’s sense of social security in the Dominican Republic was based on class and social privilege, in the US they are marked as ethnic. What makes the novel so different from other immigrant literature, apart from the fact that “it operates within the upper echelons of economic status and power in the homeland”, as David Mitchell argues in his essay “Immigration and Impossible Homeland” (Mitchell 1998: 29), is that instead of speaking for her ethnic group, Alvarez writes both “inside” and “outside” her group identity, by taking the problematics of cross-cultural and cross-class understanding, of borderlands if you will, as her subject matter.

Alvarez’s characters oscillate between the promise of a life-style promulgated by middle-class consumer culture in the US and a longing for a lost Dominican origin. Alvarez depicts the García family, while still in the Dominican Republic, as “consciously embracing their Dominicanised version of an exported American culture in order to maintain and bolster their economic and social advantage” (Mitchell 1998: 28). After a failed CIA-backed governmental coup in an attempt to oust dictator Trujillo, the family has to flee from the Dominican Republic to the United States. It is ironic that the family’s relocation to America means in fact an abdication of the material wealth and class privileges that symbolised their American life-style in the Dominican Republic.

In her essay “An American Childhood in the Dominican Republic” Alvarez describes a situation of her cultural appropriations and political crossings that form the backdrop of her postcolonial novel:

What kept my father from being rounded up with the other [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 United States, but a strategy for survival.

(Alvarez 1988: 80)

In the novel we find similar cultural appropriations and political crossings, constituting the site of borderlands. Borderlands represent the physical and discursive place where cultures meet and collide. In the work of Alvarez the border becomes internalised as a psychic space negotiating cultural collisions and is turned into a metaphor touching on the tensions of cultural "in-between-ness". José David Saldívar theorises the border zone in *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* as "a paradigm of crossings, intercultural exchanges, circulation, resistances, negotiations that inflect the material reality of cultural production" (Saldívar 1997: ix). Linear narratives of immigration, assimilation and nationhood, writes Saldívar, have been "replaced by more dialogical, multifaceted migrations across borders" (p. 1), resulting in "new relations, hybrid culture and multi-voiced aesthetics" (p. 13).

Being a Dominican American herself, rather than an American, Alvarez is aware of the difficulties involved in understanding borders, borderlands, hybrid spaces, difference. In her novel she considers the complex intersections of class, nationality and race for her Dominican American characters. In one of the sections of the novel for instance, we find Yolanda, one of the García daughters, on returning to the island, realising that her memories of a happy childhood on the island were at the expense of the servants the family had employed and exploited. As David Mitchell says in afore-mentioned essay about the author:

Armed with a repertoire of political theories from her college classes and her own racial experiences in the US which irreparably changed 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 which once went unarticulated in their day-to-day lives.

(Mitchell 1998: 31)

Alvarez contemplates the exploitative social conditions of both cultures she has moved in and "refuses to privilege the country of origins over the newly adopted nation" (Mitchell 1998: 29). She is aware of the advantages her

insider/outsider position offers her. In a special edition dedicated to her work, the Australian journal *Antipodas* interviewed her saying:

Living at a distance from some of the things that truly move me deeply gives me a certain kind of freedom. I'm not controlled by forces that silence me there. Being outside the country allows me the freedom to reject the typical stance that I would have to adopt towards my history.

(Alvarez quoted by Caminero-Santangelo 1998: 21)

In a similar vein Vietnamese American Trinh T. Minh-ha, in "Not Like You/Like You: Post-Colonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference", explicates the position of a subject who is both inside and outside as follows:

The moment the insider steps out from the inside she's no longer a mere insider. She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside. Not quite the same, not quite the other, she stands in that undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out.

(Minh-ha 1990: 374)

Like Minh-ha, Alvarez is quite aware of the implications of this double bind of borders, borderlands and border crossings, where inside and outside change position all the time. She is also aware of the danger and impossibility of speaking for others. In her novel for instance, no attempts are made to speak with the voice of another, lower-class Dominican, one of the family servants, for instance, being aware that telling the story of the other robs that other of control over her own story. Instead of speaking for the servant, and thus potentially violating the voice of the other, Alvarez tells the story through multiple perspectives and has the characters speak for themselves, in an unmediated way, being self-consciously aware that it is "through" the author of course that the characters are allowed to speak for themselves.

When the story offers competing versions of events for the readers to make sense of, Alvarez has deliberately created uncertainty by mixing narrative perspectives, thus invoking a site of borderlands and creating a postcolonial, i.e. hybrid, stance. Also in this sense the author can be said to be inside and outside the text at the same time.

The chronological order of the narrative is reversed, and characters move in and out of story, identity, name. As Ellen McCracken points out in *New Latina Narrative: The Feminine Space of Postmodern Ethnicity* (1991: 28), memory works in the same way. The stories within the novel are told backwards, from various narrative perspectives with voices of different characters, and sometimes they even change within one story. Even the narratees within one story change as each of the mother's narratives about her daughters is addressed to

various characters within the novel: strangers, wedding guests, the man in an adjacent seat at her daughter's poetry reading, the hospital psychiatrist and the mother's infant father at the hospital nursery.

This notion of inside and outside, of crossing over, of borderlands, has been identified as "the historically rooted trope of the border", being "central to Mexican American writing" by Paul Lauter in *Canons and Contexts* (1991: 78), which text in itself constitutes an exploration of the function of canons in the sense of maintaining and defining borders. Four years before, in 1987, as mentioned above, Mexican American writer Gloria Anzaldúa was one of the first to problematise the notion of borders in North American literature in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. In her Preface she writes:

I am a border woman. I grew up between two cultures, the Mexican (with a heavily Indian influence) and the Anglo (as a member of a colonized people in our own territory). I have been straddling the *tejas*-Mexican border, and others, all my life. It's not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions. Hatred, anger and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape.

However, there have been compensations for this *mestiza*, and certain joys. Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an "alien" element No, not comfortable, but home.

(Anzaldúa 1987: i)

The concept of borderlands, of a hybridisation of culture and identity, which is troubling and liberating at the same time, comes into play in Anzaldúa's postcolonial text. It can be read as a poetic theory about being informed by different cultures, and in her specific case, sexualities. Anzaldúa argues that those who inhabit borderlands develop a new consciousness, "*la conciencia de la mestiza*", a tolerance for contradictions leading to new ways of thinking and being, new alliances and new strategies of resistance. For Anzaldúa borderlands occur "wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy" (Anzaldúa 1987: 78), as well as within the "mixed breed", straddling two cultures.

In her book the radical alterity of contemporary ethnic and/or racial experience is foregrounded by means of tonal and linguistic elements in such a way that readers who are not Chicana, are purposely made to feel displaced. Carla Peterson reports in "*Borderlands in the Classroom*" that her female, white, middle-class students at the University of Maryland, College Park, became disgruntled with the writer's anger, claiming that "as an American writer, she had no right to use any language other than that of the dominant culture, English". They also "resented her insistence that the borderland could

not be confined merely to one geographical place – the Texas/Mexican border – or even to a place outside the self” (Peterson 1993: 298). To add to the discomfort of using an unfamiliar language Anzaldúa used eight different varieties of Spanish alongside English in her book. Her text thus not only forces the Anglo reader to confront the borderlands in one’s self, but also forces her to acknowledge the “significance of *who* gets empowered to tell the story in *what* language” (p. 299). Which brings us back full circle to Alvarez’s novel, as both texts drive the point home of the centrality of storytelling within a multicultural society as “an important constitutive act of literature, literary studies and cultural work”, to use Peterson’s words (p. 300).

I want to return now to *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* to see where and how some of the borderlands operate in this particular text. Both Anzaldúa’s and Alvarez’s texts oscillate between different genres (albeit in very different ways), and in this way both can be said to be borderland texts. Anzaldúa’s bilingual book combines several genres; it is a sort of anti-colonial literary mixture, or *mestizaje* (racial mixing) as historiography is mixed with poetry, philosophy with autobiography, English with Spanish.⁵ In *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* this takes the form of a merging of elements of the short story with those of the novel, also known as the composite novel. Composite novels are like a short story cycle; they work as a set of short stories that are interrelated to function novelistically, but can also stand on their own. Margot Anne Kelley suggests in “Daughters of Invention” that Alvarez’s choice for this intergenre is based on “dissatisfaction with the ideological assumptions inherent in the novel form” (1998: 43) and in general the novel’s tacit modernist assumptions of a coherent identity and a true self.

In the Alvarez novel for instance, one of the García daughters, Yolanda, thinks, speaks and acts differently in the different parts of the text; in the chapter called “Daughters of Invention” she is Yolanda, in “Joe” she is Yo and in “In the Drum” she is Yoyo. Yet as these characters are all within the body of one text, the reader presumes a coherence among the characters who all bear reference to the same. The composite form with its focus on “disparate, individual moments” suggests that, as Kelley points out, “identity is not inherent, but rather is constituted” and is “continually negotiated and renegotiated” (Kelley 1998: 44-45), something the traditional novelistic form with its notion of character coherence would not allow for. Through the composite novel’s usage of several points of view and different narrators and narratees, as referred to above, the reader gets different perspectives on various events, thus creating different epistemological positions (p. 45).

This uncertainty could be seen as an occurrence of borderlands. Borderlands occur in the multiperspectives in the novel, in the oscillation between multiple first- and third-person narratives, breaking down the barrier between narrator

and narratee, and thus creating a hybrid, or postcolonial, narrative form, mirroring the shifting and multiple nature of postcolonial identity itself. Homi Bhabha has referred to this utilisation of multiperspectivity as “living perplexity” (Bhabha 1994: 157), when the story moves between past and present in a contest of a controlling master narrative and the past is reverberated in the narrative present. The example of Yolanda’s multiple stances comes to mind.

Borderlands also occur when a person straddles over two languages. Alvarez refers to this in an interview as a process of transformation:

It’s not that I’ve totally lost my Spanish, but my dominant tongue is now English, and yet I’m also a person in Spanish. The process that has happened for me is that I – not just language, but *I* – have become translated, with all the richness of that word in terms of its Shakespearean meanings – being transported somewhere else – I have become translated. The minute you’re in another language, you’re transformed, you are another person.

(Alvarez quoted by Caminero-Santangelo 1998a: 16)

In the novel, as indicated by the title, the role of language in identity formation plays a major part: not only does the father lose his grip on his daughters the better acquainted they get with the English language, and he does not, culminating in the incident where he tore his daughter’s speech for Teacher’s Day to shreds for insubordination to his patriarchal rule after Yolanda finally found her voice in English after having discovered Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself” (Alvarez 1991: 142-143). Language becomes a big issue in the family when Papi wants Mami to talk Spanish, but Mami refuses, speaking a mishmash of mixed-up idioms and sayings (p. 135).

Borderlands, as Alvarez says in the same interview, is also the space occupied between what actually happened and the memory of it (Alvarez in Caminero-Santangelo 1998: 18). It is the space occupied by Carla García’s experiences of a privileged childhood when being surrounded by servants in the family compound, moving between the world of her family and that of the family’s servants living in the back of the compound. Borderlands are created by multi-ethnic writers themselves, being on the move between two countries. Migrant literature, as Elleke Boehmer argues in *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, is characterised by the straddling of two different worlds. The immigrant is encapsulated in nostalgia, which becomes the immigrant’s borderland – as the space between what was left behind and what the mother country has become. In her interview with Caminero-Santangelo (1998a: 22) Alvarez refers to this as being frozen in time. This straddling of different worlds “intensively exploits the double perspective or ‘stereoscopic vision’ that its in-between position allows” (Boehmer 1995: 241). Borrowing from

Salman Rushdie she calls the migrant novel a “translated” novel, which “creates a constant interaction of styles, voices, stories, legends, geographies” (p. 242), reminiscent of Bhabha’s “living perplexity” referred to earlier.

For Alvarez borderlands occur as the space where multiculturalism is located; for her multi-ethnicity is not only encapsulated in the multiplicity of each person, but also in the multiplicity of Latino culture:

I think this multiplicity of perspectives comes from my culture. We are often members of big, bungling, tribal families in our Latino culture. You’re never just one person I’m interested in that multiplicity, that multiculturalness, of each person. Not just the singular self, which is so much of the Western tradition; the hero on his journey, on his Odyssean voyage. I’m much more interested in the many-mirrored reality which is very much a part of where I came from.

(Alvarez quoted by Caminero-Santangelo 1998a: 20)

We are all so mobile and populations are on the move and people have children formed of two or more traditions, as people get married to people that are not just in their neighbourhood and in their province and in their city-state or whatever. We’re creating these interesting combinations of people who hear multiple languages and see varied images and know different stories, and they pass these on to their children and the children make new combinations. To me that’s what’s most exciting and energizing about what’s happening to literature now.

(Alvarez quoted by Caminero-Santangelo 1998a: 24)

And although Alvarez fits perfectly in the pluralist view of American society in the last few decades, her novel is different in the sense that it spells discursive trouble, marked as it is by transgressions, or in the words of Ellen McCracken in her book on postmodern ethnicity: “formal, diegetic, gender, ethnic and class trouble” (McCracken 1999: 28), thereby subtly undermining the happily pluralist view implicit in much contemporary multiculturalism.

Notes

1. The only exception in this is of course constituted by American Indians, who after the attempts to wipe them out had completely failed, resisted to become “just another ethnic group” and fought to protect their own status.
2. The word “Hispanic” is resisted by many Latinos. In *The Latino Reader: An American Literary Tradition from 1542 to the Present*, which constitutes the first attempt at canonising Hispanic American texts, the term “Latino” is preferred over that of “Hispanic American”, although considered unsatisfactory; “Hispanic” is considered politically incorrect as it is too reductive in its association with Spain, Spanish culture and white Europeans (Augenbraum & Olmos 1997: xii), and

“Chicano” and “Nuyorican”, for Mexican American and Puerto Rican respectively, are considered too narrow.

3. IASA’s first conference was held at Leiden University, The Netherlands, 22-24 May 2003.
4. Inclusion of a Zuni oral narrative from the colonial period in the anthology is in itself not unproblematic since fixing the text in print lends an unacceptable authority to the particular nuances of a particular story-teller, but its inclusion is intended to remind the reader that American society was right from the start a multicultural one.
5. Anzaldúa calls herself neither Hispanic nor Latina, but Mestiza, since all Latinos are of mixed origin: cf her usage of eight variants of Spanish in *Borderlands*.

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