

Introduction

Inhabiting *La Patria*

Identity, Agency, and *Antojo* in the
Work of Julia Alvarez

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Emily in one hand, Walt in the other,
That's how I learned my craft, struggling
To navigate my own way between them
And get to where I wanted to end up:
Some place dead center in the human heart.
I've had an odyssey with both along:
Emily with her slant sense of directions;
And rowdy Walt, so loud and in my face,
I've had to stuff his mouth with leaves of grass
At times to hear my own song of myself!

—Julia Alvarez, “Passing On”

It is just the right time to be talking of Julia Alvarez. Her work engages all our contemporary intellectual obsessions, intersects all our coffee shop talk, all our most volatile news. It gets us at every age, arrives in every possible written form. Our children listen to us read her beautifully illustrated books, fingering pictures of Tía Lola's bright dresses and bag, and ask us (if we are English speakers) to say again and again the unfamiliar words: *adiós*, *buenos días*, *tía*, *mami*. If we are Spanish speakers, and all of Alvarez's works come in

both languages, the children may ask about Vermont, the snow, why what's so familiar—Tía Lola's colorful personality, her language, her food—is so hard for Americans. Our teenagers can pick up *Before We Were Free*, *Finding Miracles*, and *Return to Sender*. They can read about people their age negotiating situations both like and perhaps unlike their own. That is, they can read about Anita, who falls in love with a boy and writes her secret attraction in her diary; meantime her world, under the dictator Raphael Leónidas Trujillo, falls apart. The regime endangers Anita's sister and members of her extended family, who must flee the country (as Anita herself does, eventually). Trujillo's rule suppresses speech, makes Mami careful, makes everyone paranoid and overwatchful. How does anyone survive that? Alvarez's books model endurance and a kind of good humor under trying circumstances common to any teen: the hidden boyfriend, the surveillance of parents, the difficulties of moving. But almost uniquely, they contextualize these trials in larger ones, in visions of the incomprehensible grinding of individuals caught in history. Trujillo and his goons threaten Anita's sister with rape and torture, and Anita herself survives attacks on the family compound by living in a closet; Milly, a transnational adoptee, discovers she will never know her birthparents because they were killed in a civil war that decimated her original home; the Cruz family, whose matriarch was kidnapped by a *coyote* and must be ransomed, is caught in an ICE raid and deported to Mexico.

But it is in Alvarez's writing for adults that the difficult questions about the intersection of the political and the personal, of history and the quotidian ticking of nonevents, are presented with all their complexities. In a book like Alvarez's award-winning *In the Time of the Butterflies*, historical fiction that reanimates Las Mariposas—the sisters who helped bring Trujillo to curb at the cost of their lives—we see characters struggle with how much and what kind of involvement they should have in injustices perpetrated outside their control. We ask ourselves what brings people to a government that so abuses them; what makes it possible to endure its oppressions and its tortures? We have to think about concepts such as *strength*: is active revolution, is speaking and doing as Minerva does, really *strength* if it brings her and her family such grief? Is survival stronger than dying for a cause? Is Dedé the strongest of them all in refusing involvement, living on, and being able to husband the memories of her sisters' lives into the

future (an inspiration to others and a grief to herself)? Or is Minerva stronger, most dedicated to the cause, most committed to defiance of Trujillo? How best to counter injustice? How best to fight? What does it mean to win, especially if winning costs everything, and does not necessarily mean ending pain and suffering anywhere? These are questions all of us face, even now, even here: what do we do in the face of inequity, oppression, corruption, and all the evils our institutions can perpetrate and perpetuate? Like *Butterflies, In the Name of Salomé* engages these issues and then asks us more explicitly to consider the intersection of history (and its writers) with nation: that is, what is the role of the historian in making nation? Is there *nation* without history, and which histories matter? Who tells us the story of our place, and why those people and not others, perhaps equally talented, perhaps equally informed?

The who of any story concerns Alvarez deeply: her work speaks in many voices, sometimes at once. She wants us to hear what we do not normally listen to, what we cannot normally have access to. In poems such as “The Other Side/El Otro Lado,” she represents speakers who have all kinds of silenced positions: the poor, the racially oppressed, the fool, the other. She is interested in her own silencing and silences, too; this is the hook in the title of her latest poetry collection, *The Woman I Kept to Myself*. In novels such as *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and its companion, *¡Yo!*, it becomes clear how much Alvarez is invested in making sure women, in particular, get heard. Both novels canvass the multiple distractions and oppressions that keep women from their own voices—a phenomenon whose logic is insanity, the kind that drives the heroine, Yolanda, right out of her mind (but into her right mind, in a sense). Technically, Alvarez treats voicelessness not just by voicing: that is, she does not simply give speech to the silent. She has them speak in a tumult, in a context of many like and disparate voices. There are the villagers of Boca, all talking together; there is the extended family, carping, supportive; there is the section of writing from this perspective, the next from another, the third from yet another. No one has to speak alone, since voices without context are pointless—without an audience, what use is language? Thus *¡Yo!* gives us mothers, daughters, sisters, friends, an entire world of voices—as *García Girls* does, too, in a perhaps less obvious way. Thus in *Saving the World*, a footnote in history gets two voices, Alma’s and Isabel’s. In *Salomé*, mother and daughter speak,

through and around their editors and censors, husbands and brothers, painters and revisionists.

It is the role of the writer, and thus necessarily the identity of the writer, that most engages Alvarez. The one who writes: who is she, and how will that change the story that comes from her mouth to your ear? Alvarez's life writing—some of it obviously autobiographical, like *The Woman I Kept to Myself*, *Something to Declare*, *A Cafecito Story*, and *Once upon a Quinceañera*, some of it slightly disguised (she is the *gringa* who bumbles into Dedé's museum, the wanderer in the Dominican Republic in "The Other Side/El Otro Lado"), some of it even more hidden, as in *García Girls*—engages us in the most current debates about identity. She asks us to think not just about the important role of race and geography on the formation of the (writing) self, not just about hybridized and in-between ethnic self-representation, about the subaltern, the other, the exile, and the immigrant. Nor is she simply having us consider what it means to be a woman now, and a woman writer in particular. She does this important work in a startlingly nuanced fashion, certainly. But she also forces us all, regardless of our other identifications, to ask deeply important questions about who we are to each other; that is, her work holds before us the paradoxes of the modern self. Are we who we are because of others, or did we make ourselves? What is the balance between our self as constructed through relationality (our family, our community, our context) and our self as constructed through our own endeavors (our force of will, our "personality," our intellect and our imagination of ourselves)? What do we owe others, in telling of ourselves? In *¡Yó!*, the García family complains about their representation in Yolanda's writing; in *Salomé*, Salomé's self is tailored to the needs of her nation, to the "idea" of her, outside her, as a useful tool in a larger project. What should we do, what can we do, to say ethically who we are as writers/in writing? In an era rife with memoirs and celebrity biography, in which anxiety about selfhood and the value of the self powers narrative after narrative (and theoretical apparatus after theoretical apparatus—think Paul John Eakin, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, Leigh Gilmore, and G. Thomas Couser, to start), Alvarez's skepticism compels us to consider why this, why now?

Ultimately, Alvarez's most urgent concerns lie with what she as a writer can do to assuage suffering, rectify wrongs, make life if not easier then richer, fuller, fairer for others. Her social justice mission

intersects so much of what is in the news and in our conversations—when we think about the role and the size of our government, when we talk about laws governing the personhood of institutions, when we ponder the New Deal and the redistribution of wealth, when we make laws that reverse our history as a nation of immigrants, when we justify war as a way of nation-building in our practice and our speech, we engage ideas Alvarez's books invest everything in. Her work is peopled with characters trying to sort through how best to live their lives in a world where so much injustice happens; she herself, in an afterword to her collected poems, writes that she “yearns to make the world better with her pen” (128), a statement of such pure idealism that if it were not contextualized in a corpus of more than two dozen texts that attempt just that, we might be tempted to take it as laughably naïve. If nothing else, we read Alvarez to watch people like us struggle to do the right thing, fail sometimes fatally, get up and struggle again if they can. Though they do not often succeed, which is a truth in the world, there is such power in the sincerity of their attempts.

Alvarez's work has enjoyed commercial success, certainly; her books win awards, become best-sellers, and have been translated into many languages and onto film. In the past twenty years or so, scholarly attention has grown in tandem with Alvarez's popular success. Over one hundred articles and twenty-six dissertations addressing her work have appeared of late. The dissertations are particularly suggestive, indicating early and burgeoning interest in her work and presaging a future of more of the same; also suggestive is that nearly twenty percent of these essays are written in Spanish, which attests to Alvarez's growing global appeal. Scholarship now engages her texts along a broad spectrum of positions, many of which examine Alvarez's interest in and critique of elements of colonial and postcolonial practices. Much of this scholarship foregrounds her investment in questions of gender, history, home, and memory where individual voices riff with and against a collective identity, where characters seek and ponder the meaning of authorized and unauthorized knowledge. Other scholars spotlight her movement of the female body in the context of the Americas, the Caribbean diaspora, hybridity, and exile. Here, critics explore a Latina *l'écriture féminine* whose main focus is a concern with language and identity across genres and with resisting settled borders of genre and narrative framing. Alvarez is often set

among other contemporary Latina and/or Caribbean writers, such as Edwidge Danticat, Sandra Cisneros, Ana Lydia Bega, and Esmeralda Santiago; many of these essays attempt to define Latina writing and assess Alvarez's merits vis-à-vis her ethnic cohort. Alvarez's two best known novels—*In the Time of the Butterflies* and *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*—dominate much of this scholarship: only a handful of pieces are devoted to the rest of her canon. Though two books contextualize Alvarez and her work, only one full-length study to date critically examines her writing extensively.¹

A prolific writer of nearly two dozen books of poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and children's literature, Alvarez has garnered numerous international accolades, including the impressive F. Scott Fitzgerald Award for Outstanding Achievement in American Literature. She was one of only ten poets invited to write for President Obama's inauguration in 2009, and her *In the Time of the Butterflies* was selected as a National Endowment for the Arts "Big Read," putting her in the company of such authors as Mark Twain, Zora Neale Hurston, and Harper Lee. Yet, despite her commercial success and flourishing critical reputation, no systematic study of her work through *multiple* interpretive lenses exists to date—a striking omission for an author squarely concerned with diversity and voice. As Kelli Lyon Johnson observes, "Alvarez . . . advocates the multiplicity of experience, place, and belonging as she draws together not only myriad races but also classes, language, genders, nations, and cultures in the literature of the Americas" (x). It is in this space that our collection intervenes—to establish her import in American literary studies through a convergence of a broad range of critical discourses focused solely on this figure.

Though born in New York on March 27, 1950, Alvarez passed her childhood in the Dominican Republic. These ten years were spent steeped in a rich oral culture—both that of her large Dominican family and of their Haitian maids—that imparted a deep connection to her native country, though at the time it was roiling under Trujillo's dictatorship and enduring a climate of violence and unrest. Alvarez returns to these experiences in much of her writing: "To know who I am, I have to know where I come from. So, I keep coming back to the Island. And for *fuereza*, I go back to this thought: it really is in my Caribbean roots, in my island genes to be a pan-American, a gringa-dominicana, a synthesizing consciousness" ("Doña" 175). The

family sought refuge in the United States in August 1960 after her father's involvement in a plot against Trujillo was exposed. Here, Alvarez describes not so much landing in a new country as "land[ing] in the English language" ("My English" 29). These years in New York City were difficult as her parents struggled to invent a new life in the face of race discrimination that the Alvarez children had not experienced before.² After receiving a bachelor's degree from Middlebury College in Vermont and a masters in creative writing at Syracuse University in New York, Alvarez spent five years teaching in school poetry programs across the United States before venturing into high school and, finally, college teaching. Alvarez gave up her tenured post at Middlebury and turned her attention to writing full time in 1998. Her impressive publication record and the numerous accolades her work has achieved over the years are complemented by Alvarez's commitment to activism. She and her husband and partner, Bill Eichner, manage Alta Gracia, a sustainable coffee farm and literacy program in the Dominican Republic devoted to "improving the quality of life for . . . [the] community, the workers and small growers, and their families and neighbors" ("Café"). Alvarez resides in Vermont where she is a writer in residence at Middlebury College.

The impetus for this project grew out of cooperation between and the intersections of the University of West Georgia's creative writing program, our diversity initiatives, our commitment to advanced learning in our honors division, our writing literacy program, and our community outreach missions. The result was an invitation to visit, so in September 2010, during National Hispanic Heritage Month, Alvarez came to campus for three days of intensive contact with our students and the local reading public. We invited her not only for her broad appeal—her publication across genres made her familiar to young people and adults alike—but because she could speak to readers and writers about issues important to their intellectual lives and supportive of their social engagement. Nearly half our student body participated in one or more events featuring Alvarez, during which she read from her books, described her literacy work, discussed her heritage and her writing, and engaged students and community in thinking about many of the ideas her writing canvasses: gender, race, history, and memory, among others. She spoke to students of color in particular—we are a diverse campus with a growing population of self-identified Hispanic students—sometimes in their own vernacular.

At an informal breakfast that drew more than 150 people, she spent almost two hours moving table to table—all ten of them—drinking coffee with her guests and drawing out their own unique life stories, all the while taking copious notes in her journal. She spoke to them in Spanish and in English, moving fluidly between the two as her auditors required; she spoke of her Caribbean and her American heritages as she did so and of our students' and our community members' backgrounds in this place and elsewhere. She modeled the erasure of borders for them—author/reader, teacher/student—while validating voice and the writing process. This is just one example arising from the many different forums focused on craft, research, community, and responsible citizenry that Alvarez led that day in our small, rural, western Georgia community. Her insights inspired connections and threads of change that continue moving through our campus today. Our vision for this edition represents the transcendence of the borders of our relatively small university community and the common intellectual experiences the two of us shared during those days spent with Alvarez herself.

We imagined this edition because, in our research for and around this event, we discovered that though critical books on Latin American or Caribbean writers such as *Reclaiming Difference: Caribbean Women Rewrite Postcolonialism* or *Remembering Maternal Bodies: Melancholy in Latina and Latin American Women's Writing* sometimes include single-chapter analyses of Alvarez's writing, these collections are limiting for the serious student of Alvarez's work. The pieces focus almost exclusively on her novels, ignoring her contributions to young adult and children's literature, poetry, and nonfiction. In fact, many of these works address only the *García Girls* and *¡Yo!* Further, as the books are thematically organized and must address many authors, these treatments of Alvarez's work are designed and focused narrowly: for instance, in *Home Matters: Longing and Belonging, Nostalgia and Mourning in Women's Fiction*, Roberta Rubenstein has space to examine only *García Girls* through the lens of Kübler-Ross's stages of grief. Critics interested in Dominican American identity in the context of grieving would find this chapter useful, but its application and the depth and breadth of its analysis are constrained by the edition's need to treat many authors in a single monograph.

As the first collection of critical essays on Alvarez's work, our book furthers existing scholarship and deepens our understanding

of her canon by widening the discussion through the inclusion of a multiplicity of informed voices. We did not seek to collect simply what has already been published and deemed important, as for instance Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations Series or Norton Critical editions do. Nor did we model our collection on popular, useful pedagogical tools, as MLA's Approaches to Teaching Series provides. Instead, our contributors represent both established and up-and-coming perspectives on the full spectrum of Alvarez's work from a variety of disciplines; they approach her texts from multiple points of access and with different critical tools. In sum, this collection provides insightful criticism, grants in-depth analyses of numerous texts, and allows scholars and teachers invested in Alvarez's work to hear in a single edition many voices in conversation with each other, with other critics, and with the primary texts. This work, in its robust treatment of Alvarez's oeuvre, contributes significantly to the evolving critical cartographies of Latina writing. It also enriches current and exciting discussions of the construction of selves in life writing and nonfiction more generally, and furthers our understanding of these selves as particular kinds of participants in the creation of nation and place. In addition, our volume provides fresh insight for transnational feminist studies and fills key voids in the larger study of American and Caribbean women writers. As such, our collection makes a meaningful contribution to the broader study of such writers and the gendered diaspora, as it positions Alvarez scholarship in a global context.

We begin our volume with the chapter from which we take our book's title, Lisa Ortiz-Vilarelle's "Julia Alvarez and the Autobiographical *Antojo*." This chapter not only unearths the autobiographical content of Alvarez's work, but it also frames central questions each of our writers here explore: how nation, loss, desire, and identity mark and make these texts. Ortiz-Vilarelle argues that the *antojo*, which is both a birthmark and a craving for what one can't have, locates Alvarez in "a web of family history" that oppresses her as it gives her content for her stories. The *antojo* also places her and her writing in a "larger political history of women raised in . . . 'The Era of Trujillo,'" which marks her and women like her as sexual prey and creates in them the desire for silence and invisibility, identity positions and strategies that Alvarez redeploys in her art. Finally, though, Ortiz-Vilarelle argues that in becoming a female writer of color looking at and for words from the white American men she takes after, Alvarez locates "the one

network . . . that can best satisfy her *antojo*.” In the end, in this community and through representing her self in art, in words, she finds a way to connect and extend “beyond the singular autobiographical narrative and into an imaginative engagement with others’ stories” that creates her, her family, her history, and her nation (in exile).

This bridging is itself a kind of *antojo*, the ever-receding goal fraught with ambiguities and obstacles that are crucial to Alvarez’s project. Specifically, in texts such as *¡Yo!*, Alvarez’s writing becomes corrective, almost jeremiadical in its nuancing of subject positions, generic convention, and gender expression. This is the reason critics generally neglect *¡Yo!*, a phenomenon Marion Rohrleitner examines in her chapter, “*¡Yo!* On the Margins: Dividing the Family and the Ethnic Writer as Traitor.” The novel’s critique of depictions of the Latina/o family and of national/cultural stories, as they appear in “ethnic” literature, disturbs readers, critics, and purveyors of a monolithic, saleable Latinidad—as does Alvarez’s rejection of the role of speaker for her ethnicity. *¡Yo!* violates crucial expectations of the ethnic writer and her texts, and she exposes flaws in “two central and intertwined myths about contemporary ethnic American literature: the sanctity of the Latina/o immigrant family and the representational role of the ethnic writer in American culture,” Rohrleitner argues.

In Sara Gerend’s hands, Alvarez’s critique of ethnic representation expands to include the Latina coming-of-age ritual, the *quinceañera*. “‘Super-Size Me’: Ritual as Affluenza in Julia Alvarez’s *Once upon a Quinceañera: Coming of Age in the USA*” shows how American affluenza (John de Graaf’s term for overconsumption) has influenced Latina rites of passage, transfiguring and debasing through its materialism Latina self-image and Latina/o culture. Gerend shows how Alvarez tackles the problem of hybridity gone wrong, exploring the ways in which empty consumerist values have insinuated themselves into the language, the structure, and the goal of the *quinceañera*, then reveals how Alvarez’s text proposes a cure: “voluntary simplicity,” the abandonment of excess in the pursuit of something better. Ultimately, Gerend argues that *Once upon a Quinceañera* models the healthy community that fosters simplicity in its rites. As it proposes the cure for the diseased *quinceañera*, not only does the book declutter and simplify itself in form and language, Gerend writes, but also, “just as Alvarez insists the contemporary *quinceañera* must evolve beyond its current status as a consumer-driven, individual celebration, toward a

more non-material and community-oriented custom, so too does the author's text move formally from a secular American-styled opening to a more Latino-inflected spiritually informed close." In important ways, Gerend's chapter addresses the interplay of national values, national stories that tell us who we are.

In Alvarez's texts, this works in the reverse as well. Nations are made of narratives for Alvarez (perhaps for us all); her books insist on stories that resist the official ones, and, in telling them, she provides a dialogic tension in which a richer, more layered idea of nation can appear. This process of layering resistant narratives is what Katie Daily-Bruckner explores in her essay, "Rewriting Master Narratives: Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies*." Daily-Bruckner's argument focuses on the use of the diary form—of Maté's journals—to create a counternarrative, female, quotidian, intimate, as resistance to the public story of the Dominican Republic under Trujillo. More specifically and perhaps more poignantly, she tells us, Maté's diary revises the other important national narrative, that of Las Mariposas as public heroines martyred by a ruthless dictator. The public story flattens the women into caricatures of themselves and obscures their humanity: "*Butterflies* works to revise accepted nationalism that lauds the Mirabal sisters. . . . Instead, she asks her readers to accept these women as citizens working to revise the Dominican Republic, thus pushing us to also reconsider the history and national picture that we have been given." To read *Butterflies*, as to write it, is thus a revolutionary act "that counters the oppressive nation-building of the Trujillo regime" and its stories. Daily-Bruckner reminds us that in *Butterflies*, "Alvarez believed that 'only by making [the Mirabal sisters] real, alive, could [she] make them mean anything to the rest of us.'"

In "Patriots and Citizens of the Planet: Friendship and Geopolitics in Julia Alvarez's Young Adult Fiction," Susana S. Martínez argues for the social justice mission of Alvarez's work. She reveals how Alvarez's commitment to resisting injustice develops in books for teens and children and argues that these texts model attitudes about difference influenced by the voice of *testimonio*: that is, novels such as *Before We Were Free*, *Finding Miracles*, and books in the Tía Lola series first deploy characters who can testify to human rights abuses, then use their protagonists to model compassion through and inspired by friendship. Martínez focuses on the way "that friendship prepares Alvarez's protagonists for the conflicts of the adult world by first creat-

ing a reflective space for dialogue or *testimonio* that engages differences between self and other.” Then, she says, Alvarez makes the self and the other friends, which provides the solidarity in which they can hear about and critically explore “issues of economic disparities, political violence, censorship, and displacement. By centering the realities of violence in society,” and by proposing that young friendships offer galvanizing opportunities, “Alvarez’s fiction not only validates the experiences of that violence on the youth but also underscores the central aim of *testimonio*—to empower readers to take action today.” Thus friendship itself becomes resistance in the context of a larger—and for young adults, a growing—capacity for united, global resistance to injustice, the potential to make a different, more peaceful world.

In Karina A. Bautista’s chapter, “Isolation on Hybridity Road: Complexities of Identity Formation in Julia Alvarez’s *Something to Declare*,” the injustices that lead to and are perpetuated in exile become a kind of opportunity for Alvarez to think about identity, its formation, hybridizing, and fragmentation in particular. The Dominican diaspora, largely settled in America and in New York especially, is the center of Alvarez’s exploration, Bautista explains; and *Something to Declare* is an essential text in understanding that, for Alvarez, diasporic identities are fragmented and complicated by their relationship to the Dominican Republic. This position, however, is far from negative in “Doña Aida, with Your Permission” and “So Much Depends,” two essays from *Something to Declare* that, when set next to works such as Silvio Torres-Saillant’s *El retorno de las yolas: Ensayos sobre diáspora, democracia y dominicanidad*, reveal that the diasporic identity for people from the Dominican Republic is “evidence of life’s natural instability, something all people experience in a fast-changing world.” For Alvarez in these chapters, “the disruption Dominican emigrants have come to understand as part of their everyday lives, a disruption that Alvarez considers through the complicated historical relationship between the national space (the Dominican Republic) and the transnational locality (the United States)” provides a global, nuanced, modern identity best suited to the world that produced it. Alvarez argues that the route to this exilic Dominican identity requires understanding the relationship between American and Dominican history—the political dance they’ve done for more than a century—as well as an understanding of the way in which Dominican diasporic experience and the self it creates interact with the Dominican identity of those

who never left. In the end, the identities of exiled Dominicans can model for us all a new kind of hybridity, an adapted and adaptive identity located not just in geography but also in dialogue with and among the exiles themselves and in response to those who stayed.

Andrea Witzke Slot's chapter brings together ideas of resistance and constructions of identity as it argues that Alvarez's long, narrative poem, "The Other Side/El Otro Lado," engages Chela Sandoval's theories of emancipation as they intersect Homi Bhaba's ideas about cultural spaces. "'Between the Scylla and the Charybdis': Remapping Subjectivity in the Dialogic Waters of Julia Alvarez's 'The Other Side/El Otro Lado'" shows "how the ambivalent positioning in Alvarez's poem sets up a sweeping canvas of voices that eventually circle closer and closer into the lives of those with the least power and 'voice' in society[, creating] . . . a new space of engaged dialogue among and between social constructs—and thus showcases the emancipatory possibilities of dialogic poetry." Witzke Slot's approach to the poem suggests how the genre, and this poem in particular, can model de-hierarchalized identity construction as a way of righting disempowerment; her analysis shows how polyvocality and ambiguous perspective free speakers to speak themselves and "create[s] insurgent . . . weaponry" in the battle for the emancipation of the disenfranchised and silenced. For Witzke Slot, dialogic poetry in general and "The Other Side/El Otro Lado" in particular demonstrate the culturally inclusive self, an identity of both/and-at-once rather than either/or.

For Tegan Zimmerman, in "*In the Name of Salomé: Julia Alvarez's Feminist Discourse on La Patria*," this dialogic emancipation, through polysemy and doubling, functions to make women visible in the creation of "the nation" in literature. Usually, historical novels written by Latina authors that feature Latina protagonists do not become subjects of critical discussion in studies of the interplay between such fictions and making of a national imaginary. For Zimmerman, *In the Name of Salomé* offers a corrective: the novel makes clear that no longer can a nation—the Dominican Republic—ignore gender in its construction. Alvarez "emphasizes this point in the novel by creating consistent shared meanings between woman and *la patria* . . . [meanings] constituted by linguistic and theoretical overlaps (e.g., seeds, birth, children), and her play with doubles . . . [that] suggest that a patriarchal split between the domestic and personal/public, man/woman, family/nation, history/imagination and memory, past/present, and so

on, is undesirable and oppressive.” In other words, *patria* is not only male, and thus cannot be allowed to exclude gender in its construction. Read this way, the novel becomes “an innovative and powerful counterdiscourse to canonical and popular Latin American, Hispanic, and Caribbean historical novels that only focus on the nation in relation to the lives of men.”

We end with Frans Weiser’s “The Hidden Archivist; Or, Julia Alvarez’s Historical Fiction beyond the Borders.” Weiser’s chapter reinforces this collection’s engagement with theories of identity, nation, justice, and inclusion: it argues that Alvarez’s historical novels are neither conventional nor subversive but exist in a dialogue between the two positions as a negotiation of Alvarez’s “aversion to narrow identity categorizations” when they yield only “a reductive understanding of history’s cultural function.” For Weiser, this “strategic location between established binaries, whether related to writing identity, popular and critical success, or the in-between space of her historical novels,” is a space cultural critics such as Silviano Santiago have designated as resistant to colonial logic and oppression in general. But for Weiser, calling it a “space” cannot disguise its inclusivity; in her historical fiction, “Alvarez does not simply replace one metanarrative with another, but rather highlights the multiplicity of versions yet to be discovered.” Ultimately, Weiser argues, Alvarez’s use of archival materials—transparently, so we can see the hand that frames the history and historical selves—“provide[s] life . . . both to the silenced past as well as themselves in the present . . . by making the reader an active agent in the process of collection and dissemination.” In using archival material to call attention to how the present interprets the past, to how many cooks are actually in the literary kitchen, Alvarez enriches national narrative by counteracting the hegemony of accepted stories.

Together, the contributors to this volume explore Alvarez’s distinct, transnational Dominican American female imaginary that contests patriarchal boundaries of nation, self, and genre. They collectively map an exhaustive and complex negotiation of the gendered experience of race, class, and location in the interior and exterior landscapes of the Latina body as it seeks to (re)inscribe and give potency to its unique, intersectional linguistic identity. Their wide-ranging discussions representing multiple critical lenses and disciplines move beyond traditional nationalist, postcolonial readings of Alvarez’s work. These readings reveal a female, Dominican American vision that disrupts

global, masculine political ideologies, cultural economies of assimilation in America, and Anglo-American boundaries of literary form. Ultimately, they structure a Latina imaginary and enact reconstruction and resistance through multivocal visions as alternatives to accepted narratives of self and other. These visions locate meaningful transformation in multiple sites—memory, history, language, geography, and cultural exchange—that defy confining borders.

This volume reveals and traces throughout Alvarez's work her central vision: building bridges of transcultural and translingual understanding, ethical responsibility, and concrete action across divisions created in four hundred years of colonial and postcolonial conflict and conquest. Beginning the tragic history of occupation, captivity, enslavement, and exploitation in the New World, Christopher Columbus reported in his 1493 letter to Luis de Santangel that he had taken possession of Hispaniola, the island shared today by two nations, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. In his letter, Columbus established the paradigmatic trifecta of colonial power—the claiming of land and resources, the subjugation of indigenous people, and the discursive representation of the New World as infinitely valuable and desirable. "Hispaniola," Columbus wrote, "is a marvel" (26). Self-consciously tracing her own family to the "*Conquistadores*," Alvarez takes stock of the tortured history of her country, while countermanding the inevitability of reenacting colonial principles in the *postcolonial* nation.³ Alvarez's ancestors may have been guilty of the atrocities of conquest, yet she and her family also suffered persecution and exile at the hands of Trujillo, another strong man trying to lay claim to the marvels of Hispaniola, especially its women. For Alvarez, the repercussions of colonial power specifically play themselves out in the gendered oppressions perpetrated by postcolonial and national rulers to this day. In her work, she constructs a personal and writerly consciousness that generates knowledge and action *because of*, not in spite of, complicated relationships between complicity and resistance, power and dispossession.

Focusing on themes such as exile and return, memory and recovery (of self, family, community, language, and culture), her works feature subjects or voices trying to transcend and move between seemingly exclusive, hostile, or disconnected spheres, identities, and countries—specifically the United States and the Dominican Republic, the North American superpower and its seemingly marginal

island neighbor. Intriguingly, Alvarez's own hemispheric experiences and hemispheric approach to American identity expose discourses of exceptionalism and nationalist jingoism—often exacerbated through patriarchal claims to power—in both countries. Akin to José Martí's *Our America*, Alvarez's hemispheric perspective rejects neocolonial and neoimperial aspirations in America and across the world. Yet Alvarez's artistic and personal vision rises above scoring political points about U.S.-Dominican Republic relations in the past (such as the cozy relationship between the CIA and the Trujillo dictatorship) or the current geopolitical stakes of the United States in the Caribbean (such as the Guantanamo prison supporting the global war on terrorism). Indeed, her artistic and personal movement among countries, languages, and subjectivities opposes historical and present narratives seeking to construct exclusionary ideologies and exceptionalist identities.

More specifically, in person and in her characters, Alvarez acts as a muse, a storyteller, or a Scheherazade, who tirelessly and continuously harnesses the simultaneously conciliatory and subversive tools of art and language to limit and transcend arbitrary gestures of power.⁴ Knowledge—of the self and of the other—in Alvarez's life and writing derives from multiple acts of crossing among spaces, places, and people. Her writing and personal experiences unmask attempts to define national belonging in terms of mutually exclusive definitions of ethnicity, culture, and language. Alvarez very practically locates the responsibility of writers and artists in their deploying their talents to speak with multiple tongues and inhabit multiple subjectivities so as to mediate between seemingly distant locations and people. During his conquest of the Americas, Columbus first took captives from among the indigenous population with the specific purpose to turn them into translators, negotiators, and guides. We know little about the ways in which these captives carried the dual burden of their bilingual ability and potentially bifurcated cultural identity: they could become tricksters deceiving the invaders as well as opportunists collaborating with their captors. They must have been like, in a certain sense, the writer-self Alvarez adopts, the one in-between, making bridges for better or worse. She herself describes the process of constant negotiation that lies at the center of her literary project:

I'm a mixed breed, as are many of us U.S.A. Latino/a writers. With our finger-snapping, gum-chewing English,

sometimes slipping in una palabrita o frase español. With our roots reaching down deep to the Latin American continent and the Caribbean where our parents or abuelitos or we ourselves came from. Without asabaches and SAT scores; our fast-paced, watch-checking rhythms combining with the slower, eternal wavings of the palm trees.

And though I complain sometimes about the confusion resulting from being of neither world, and about the marginalizations created on both sides—the Americans considering me a writer of ethnic interest, a Latina writer (meaning a writer for Latinos and of sociological interest to mainstream Americans), or the Dominicans reaming me out, saying she's not one of us, she's not Dominican enough—though I complain about the confusion and rootlessness of being this mixed breed, I also think it's what confirmed me as a writer, particularly because I am a woman. (“Doña” 174)

As a wielder of language who is constantly negotiating between and inhabiting multiple linguistic and cultural subjectivities (for instance, claimed as the prototypical Latina author in the United States but sometimes called a *gringa* in the Dominican Republic), Alvarez embraces the special task of tying her words to communal and cultural action that becomes meaningful and useful to those outside the privileged spheres of literary consumption and academic study.

Concretely, her activism in establishing a sustainable coffee farm and combining it with a literacy project that specifically targets young girls and women exemplifies her calls for action. Located in the Alta Gracia area of the Dominican Republic, this cooperative works on land and empowers people who have been exploited throughout the fraught colonial and postcolonial history of their nation. Rather than just doing what she perhaps does best and only writing about this experiment (as she quipped self-consciously during her visit to our campus), Alvarez makes change through paraliterary action. She has established and maintains a variety of reciprocal exchanges between her seemingly far-flung farm and community in the mountains of the Dominican Republic and her home and university in Middlebury, Vermont. Not only marketing the coffee in the United States, she also organizes student groups from across academic disciplines to visit

the coffee farm and work on a variety of projects ranging from constructing, stocking, and maintaining a community library, to building a paved footpath across the mountain to the village, to providing schooling and literacy instruction for local students. Through word and deed, Alvarez promotes a vision of art and action that must always be sustainable—literally, in preserving the productivity of and respect for the land, the animals, and the people who provide sustenance; artistically and metaphorically, in calling for mutual respect and acceptance between ethnicities, cultures, genders, classes, and languages.

In the end, however, her writing and her activism are inseparable: one acts when one writes. One cannot avoid it. Alvarez identifies herself as a writer among writers, an American author in the context of an ever-lengthening history of writers whose forebears are Emily Dickinson who goes about her work slantwise and Walt Whitman who shouts down injustices and names himself so loudly no one else can be heard. But in thinking of herself as a writer, she is not simply American or female or Latina. In the epigraph, Alvarez expands her context almost as far as she can go, around the globe and into the past, all the way to Homer who created for everyone the classical odyssey, the classical Odysseus who fights, lives, wanders, and sees wonders. For us, Homer is Greece as the Dominican Republic, as America, as all nations may perhaps have been formed by poets and storytellers who make history. And even in so short a snippet of verse, we can see Alvarez showing us how best to experience the world: listen to the women; listen to the men, but only until they become too loud to hear over; listen to the past, to myths and stories of your own geography in the context of a global one. When you have done this, you might come to who you are and what's important, that "some place" which is "dead center of the human heart." Our volume provides this multiplicity of voices, contextualizing Alvarez's writing (and her mission) in contemporary global ideas and concerns. It addresses and explores the *antojo*, the mark and the longing that make self and nation in the clamor of voices writing our histories.

Notes

1. To date, three books focused on Alvarez alone have been published: Kelli Lyon Johnson's *Julia Alvarez: Writing a New Place on the Map*, Alice

Trupe's *Reading Julia Alvarez*, and Silvio Sirias's *Julia Alvarez: A Critical Companion*. Trupe's book targets general readers and high school students with little preknowledge of Alvarez, her writing, or the history of the Dominican Republic. Sirias's text treats only *García Girls, ¡Yo!*, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, and *In the Name of Salomé* and is now a decade old. Designed for an undergraduate or introductory market, it contains one relatively long chapter of biography and another on the Latina/o novel, which is described in general terms fitting its presumed audience, one that may be as new to the genre as to Alvarez's work itself. Johnson's book is akin to ours in its perception of its audience and in the scholarly rigor of its approach. This text examines how Alvarez's canon—including poetry, young adult literature, and nonfiction—extends the cartography of American literature to include women, particularly those writing of exile, into postcolonial traditions. This intriguing and thorough investigation, one that highlights disjunctures and the resistance of obscuring multiple identities, furthered our understanding of Alvarez's importance. Yet, Johnson's monograph is already seven years old. And, as a monograph, it cannot provide inclusive interpretive frameworks and a breadth of approach.

2. For more of Alvarez on her experiences with race, see "A White Woman of Color."

3. In her semiautobiographical novel, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, Alvarez includes a fictional family tree tracing the ancestry of her central characters—and, by extension, her own—to "The Conquistadores."

4. In *Something to Declare*, Alvarez identifies Scheherazade as her first muse. As a young girl, she saw her plight as a Dominican female groomed to be a wife and mother in a country run by a dictator who, like the sultan, consumed young girls like Scheherazade, the young woman who (also, first) uses story as resistance.

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