

## No Home: Addressing the Failure of ‘*Mestiza* Consciousness’ in Julia Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*

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Julia Alvarez’s novel *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* depicts the profound social and psychological effects of crossing borders through a series of vignettes focused on the fictional experiences of four Dominican-born sisters, Carla, Yolanda, Sandra, and Sofia, as the novel follows their struggle to assimilate into American culture while simultaneously preserving their cultural heritage. Using a time reverse narrative, Alvarez delves further and further back into their pasts in order to reveal significant life events—moments when cultural clashes occurred—that have helped shape the present identity of each García sister. Cultural and racial identity is crucial in Alvarez’s novel, but whether or not the novel depicts the success or failure of hybridized identities remains a question for scholarly debate.

Scholarship on identity in the *García Girls* takes myriad forms: Bess and Burcon focus on memory and its relation to identity; others, like Castells, Barak, Luis, and Gómez-Vega, emphasize language in the construction of identity; still others, like Nas examine identity in terms of its unique narrative structure. However, only a small group of scholars—Mitchell, Romagnolo, and Schagen—utilize the work of Chicana/feminist/queer theorist Gloria Anzaldúa. These scholars incorporate Anzaldúa’s idea of ‘*mestiza* consciousness’—a state of consciousness that rejects binaries, acknowledges multiple, often conflicting identities owned by a single individual, and celebrates a new ‘borderland’ that blends together multiple identities. Mitchell briefly notes Anzaldúa’s ‘*mestiza* consciousness’ in his conclusion when he suggests that Alvarez utilizes “the narrative strategy of multiperspectivity” (39). He finds that this approach allows Alvarez to blend nationalities and “write across boundaries . . . in order to present immigrant or border subjectivities as a dynamic hybrid prototype of the postcolonial novel” (39-40). Romagnolo goes further when she uses Anzaldúa’s “border woman” as a frame for Yolanda Garcia’s search for origins and suggests that Yolanda cannot find definitive roots because of “imperial and colonial intervention[s]” (186, 195). Schagen depicts the most developed application of Anzaldúa’s theory when she employs Anzaldúa’s “borderland” ideology to depict the “oppositional consciousness” of the subjugated woman (153). Schagen aligns her analysis with Anzaldúa’s ideology when she concludes that it is only through integration of disparate identities and cultures that “the strength of the discourse that evolves from this construction [of identity] is achieved” (158).

While Mitchell, Romagnolo, and Schagen certainly create a conversation that applies Anzaldúa’s ideology, further exploration of her ideas must be made in order to determine whether the ‘*mestiza* consciousness’ is truly effective. Anzaldúa’s theory—drawing primarily from *Borderlands/La Frontera*—requires devotion, sustained hegemonic resistance, and rejection of the imposed imperialist mindset upon the marginalized. However, marginalization is a daily feeling that cannot dissipate by simply imagining it away. Anzaldúa’s theory can either set the marginalized free, or, in the García sisters’ case, send them into a never-ending cycle of searching for home. This essay examines Alvarez’s novel as a failure of the ‘*mestiza* consciousness’ specifically arguing that the García girls’ attempts at maintaining multiple identities only serve as a continuous reminder to them that they do not belong anywhere. As harmonious as ‘*mestiza* consciousness’ seems, it could also mean losing connection to one’s definitive heritage roots thereby becoming culturally diluted and part of no home whatsoever. Building upon the criticism

of Mitchell, Romagnolo, and Schagen this essay intertwines Anzaldúa's ideology with Alvarez's novel. Attention is particularly devoted to analyzing the vignettes of Carla, Yolanda, and Sofia and how they convey the imposition of Western traditional binary identities over a marginalized race. No specific analysis will be conducted on the fourth sister Fifi. Though her character plays an equally formidable role, her story shares many similarities with those of Carla, Yolanda, and Sofia.

### **The *Mestiza* Consciousness: A Utopian Ideology**

Mitchell's essay "Immigration and the Impossible Homeland in Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*," focuses mainly on cultural privilege, appropriation and "political crossings that structures the postcolonial backdrop" of the novel (28). He suggests that Alvarez explores the "class and racial dimensions of such a relationship in ways that complicate an understanding of cultural privilege" (27). He specifically highlights how the class system complicates the family's transition from upper-class Dominicans to lower-class American minorities. The abrupt class change is what Mitchell believes leads to the family's identity struggles; in fact, he states that the girls' "collective sense of security was founded upon their familial myths of class and social privilege" (33). He concludes that Alvarez's novel "transforms the discursive category of 'loss' into a metaphor for the multiple combinations that occur in cross-cultural appropriations and exchanges" (38). Mitchell believes that the girls essentially lose their accents because of cross-cultural appropriation. It is not until the end of his essay that he incorporates Anzaldúa's *mestiza*. However, he parallels Alvarez's novel with the *mestiza* consciousness in order to show the multiperspectivity of Alvarez's novel. Alvarez tests cultural collisions and contradictory influences of multiple communities, thus permitting her to write across boundaries and infiltrate the borderlands. Mitchell highlights the significance of hybridity in the novel, but does not specifically analyze how the *mestiza* consciousness influences the girls' psyche.

Romagnolo uses Anzaldúa differently in her essay, "Initiating Dialogue: Narrative Beginnings in Multicultural Narratives." She finds that Anzaldúa's theory "examined how the centrality of beginnings and origins in the construction of national and individual identity can restrict us to exclusionary, indeed, racist conceptions of subjectivity" (184). According to Romagnolo, Anzaldúa stresses the necessity to contemplate the "conceptualization of beginnings and origins in narrative" in order to think beyond subjectivity (184). Thus, Romagnolo's essay focuses on how beginnings shape identity, subjectivity, history, and knowledge in Alvarez's narrative (183). Romagnolo addresses Anzaldúa's "border-woman" by using Yolanda García as an example of "instability" (186). Romagnolo suggests that, because of Yolanda's border-woman status, she desires a moment of stability that "continually recedes from her grasp" (186). Romagnolo also highlights the family tree in the beginning of the novel in order to illustrate how Yolanda's familial connections leads to her desperately seeking "to recover and understand" her beginnings (188). But as Romagnolo notes, "instead of clarifying who she [Yolanda] is, it [the family tree] signifies the fragmentary, recessive nature of her [Yolanda's] origins and the polyvocality of Alvarez's beginnings" (188). Therefore, it is fragmentation that leads Yolanda in search for her identity.

In comparison to Mitchell and Romagnolo, Schagen provides further connections with the *García Girls* and Anzaldúa's theory in her essay, "Mininarratives: Subversive Discourse in Julia Alvarez Works." She discusses the mininarrative within the novel and suggests how it is a narrative in which marginalized individuals can evolve. Schagen connects the concept to Anzaldúa's new

way of knowing and thinking. For Schagen, Anzaldúa encourages and involves “fragmentation and ambiguity” (153). Schagen believes that Alvarez uses the *García Girls* to “demonstrate how the writer uses her borderland, her (dialogical) oppositional consciousness, to critique the different ways the dominant culture uses to subjugate women” (153). Hence, Schagen focuses mainly on authorial intention and feminism—similarly to Romagnolo and Mitchell—especially when she notes that Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* is a consciousness based on “multi-voices” and argues that out of this consciousness “emerges a discourse . . . that adopts those elements of the culture that are beneficial while it rejects those that will betray it” (153). Schagen uses Anzaldúa’s ideas to demonstrate what Schagen believes are rebellious actions for the García sisters. Schagen suggests they are rebellious because they are able to choose what to adopt and what to reject (153).

The idea that the García Girls actually choose what to adopt and what to reject is conflicting because it is evident that the majority of the novel portrays adoption of cultural American elements, rather than rejection. It is this adoption that causes the girls to be identity-less. Schagen parallels her argument with Anzaldúa when she concludes that the strength of the discourse in Alvarez’s work comes from the success of being able to simultaneously resist and conform to the hegemonic ideology of both the Anglo-American and European-based Dominican culture (158). Acceptance of simultaneous conformity/resistance depends upon the individual’s mentality and requires absolute mental strength and discernment. While Schagen argues that accepting both resistance and conformity serves to produce subversive power for the marginalized, she does not analyze the characters’ participation in these actions. She provides a context to which Anzaldúa’s ideas can be furthered, but does not significantly correlate how Anzaldúa’s ideology hurts or benefits the characters mentally. While there are moments throughout the novel that suggest hegemonic resistance the majority of the novel conveys subjection and marginalization. A specific comparison between Anzaldúa’s ideology and Alvarez’s characters attests that accepting both conformity and resistance leads towards demise, rather than rebellion.

In her essay, “La conciencia de la mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness,” Anzaldúa suggests that in order to solve identity confusion one must essentially look beyond the traditional and constricting categories of identity such as race, culture, class, and gender and be all identities. In an interview titled ‘Speaking Across the Divide,’ Anzaldúa calls this solution “new tribalism”—a composition of multiple identities (9). She suggests *la mestiza* can successfully assimilate if she remains flexible, if she is “able to stretch the psyche horizontally and vertically. . . . She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode . . . Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else” (101). Therefore, in order to be free from the restraints of categorical identity, one must mentally surpass the traditional ideology of constricting identity boundaries.

An opposing factor to *la mestiza* is *un choque*. Anzaldúa explains *un choque* as a perception the Other views as “the version of reality that our culture communicates. Like others having or living in more than one culture, we get multiple, often opposing messages. The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes *un choque*, a cultural collision” (100). Traditionally, in Latin America, *un choque* stems from old world thinking versus the opposing messages of new world thinking. Often, parents and grandparents or elderly relatives strive to give their children the freedom from monetary, class, and race struggles. The older generations believe freedom can be best achieved in America. However, they also strive to remind their children to never forget their roots and heritage; thereby creating *un choque* within the family dynamic. For Anzaldúa, dissolving the cultural collision “lies in healing the split that originates in

the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts” (102). She believes that “the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms, it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures” (102). In order to be free, *la mestiza* must be resilient, subversive, and also healing.

Anzaldúa states in her interview: “I think it’s not enough for me to be a Chicana or an Indian, it’s not enough for anyone to base their identity on race, gender, class, sexuality, or any of the traditional categories. All of us have multiple identities” (9). Though this statement is true, it simplifies an altogether difficult concept. It is not easy to look beyond the identities of race, gender, class, and sexuality. Individuals tend to subconsciously identify with the traditional categories because they are familiar and safe. Anzaldúa highlights how even her own Mexican and Chicana heritage constantly battles the question of “‘who is Indian” (10). She says: “Some Native Americans don’t accept Chicanas as indias . . . Right now Chicanos/as and Native Americans in ethnic studies departments like that of UC Berkeley are experiencing internal rifts and have polarized into separate groups, each entrenched in their positions. People on both sides are angry and bitter” (10). If the marginalized are supposed to mentally go beyond the hegemonic structures of identity boundaries, but are still consistently polarizing into “separate groups,” then there is a step missing in the *mestiza* consciousness. Anzaldúa believes that society should not base identification on traditional categories, however her ideology is difficult to adopt because of the constant borders that keep cultures separate.

Boundaries instilled by culture play a prevalent role in Mimi Yang’s analysis of Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands*. In her article, “The Power of Gloria Anzaldúa’s Mestiza Consciousness,” Yang explores Anzaldúa’s *mestiza* consciousness and focuses on Anzaldúa’s use of the term *facultad*, which Anzaldúa defines as: “the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface. . . . It is an acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols which are the faces of feelings, that is, behind which feelings reside/hide” (38). Yang notes that Anzaldúa creates *la facultad* in order to adopt the *mestiza* consciousness. Therefore, in order to obtain the acceptance of being one of mixed consciousness, the person must become acutely aware of the part of the psyche that holds the mentality to which feelings of marginalization reside. Anzaldúa goes on to say that “the one possessing this sensitivity is excruciatingly alive to the world” (38). Awareness must come consistently and excruciatingly to the body. She who possesses the ability to distance herself from the traditional identity borderland can manipulate her mind to transcend ideas that have been eternally engrained in the psyche. Yang writes:

To unlock the secret of Anzaldúa’s power, we must understand that the Western tradition and knowledge system . . . have inculcated in us a static and dichotomous binary hierarchy: good/evil, black/white, man/woman, subject/object, right/wrong. These polarizations constitute an epistemological absolutism that does not reflect an ever changing and evolving human make-up. In a binary hierarchy, there is always ‘seeing and being seen,’ ‘ranking and being ranked,’ ‘judging and being judged;’ the subject is always versus the object. A cursory binary glance can freeze us in place; it can possess us as its slaves. Worse yet, it can erect a barrier against the world and draws a border to crush the opposite side. (289)

The static and dichotomous binary hierarchy is what the ‘opposite side’ wishes to forego, thus uniting society into a borderless blend of acceptance. Yet, healing the split that divides us may also dissolve the splits that define us. The split is the issue that deters obtaining a successful *mestiza*

consciousness. The issues in Alvarez's novel, such as installing borders, searching for home, and defining oneself are common problems the hybrid generation deals with—the García girls want to remain connected to their roots, but they also want to be accepted into Western culture—thereby subjecting them to feelings of inferiority.

### Carla's Marginalization

Carla García's vignette illustrates Yang's 'binary hierarchy.' Carla is not able to unlock Anzaldúa's power to see past the Western binary traditions. When Carla chooses to attend a Catholic school separate from her sisters, she is not only forced to face the judgments of the American students but is also constantly bullied by the boys in her class:

. . . the boys pelted Carla with stones, aiming them at her feet so there would be no bruises. 'Go back to where you came from, you dirty spic!' . . . Another yanked down her socks, displaying her legs, which had begun growing soft, dark hairs, 'Monkey legs!' he yelled to his pals. 'Stop!' Carla cried. 'Please stop.' 'Eh-stop!' they mimicked her. 'Pleese eh-stop.' They were disclosing her secret shame: her body was changing. The girl she had been back home in Spanish was being shed. In her place—almost as if the boys' ugly words and taunts had the power of spells—was a hairy, breast-budding grownup no one would ever love. (153)

The gang reveals the obvious differences between themselves and Carla. But the deep structure that Carla interprets from their taunts is not a positive one where she can reach *la facultad*, but a negative one that shames her into becoming aware of her changing body, her heavy accent, and her disconnection from the Spanish world. She permits the boys' words to have the 'power of spells' and gives them the permission to demean her. Anzaldúa believes awareness of *mestiza* feelings must first take place before inner changes can happen: "Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the 'real' world unless it first happens in the images in our heads" (109). However, the instability and abrupt change in cultures causes Carla to reject any sort of inner change. The boys make her aware of the 'real world' but she cannot disengage from their taunts in order to change her inner perception of identity: "Sometimes when she woke in the dark, they [the boy gang] were perched at the foot of her bed, a grim chorus of urchin faces, boys without bodies, chanting without words, 'Go back! Go back!'" (164). Later in the chapter Carla accepts the gang's implemented barriers as a societal norm when she fully subjects herself to inferiority: "she would say in a very small voice of apology" that she does not ". . . speak very much English'. . . She hated having to admit this since such an admission proved, no doubt, the boy gang's point that she didn't belong here" (156). Rather than pick and choose which Western elements to accept or reject like Schagen suggests, Carla accepts the Western elements and rejects herself.

Alvarez's novel uses the language barrier as a symbol of the girls' Otherness. Carla's assimilation depends upon losing her accent, and because she can never entirely reject the Spanish accent, she feels she can "never get the hang of this new country" (151). One day, walking home from school, a man in his car confronts Carla and exposes his genitals: "'C'moninere.' He nodded towards the seat beside him. . . He cupped his hand over his thing . . . A pained, urgent expression was deepening on his face like a plea that Carla did not know how to answer. His arm pumped at something Carla could not see, and then after much agitation, he was still. The face relaxed into

something like peacefulness” (157). Carla, shocked, flees the scene but when the police officers come to record her story, the language barrier between Carla and the police officers only frustrates and confuses her more: “Carla thought hard for what could be the name of a man’s genitals. They had come to this country before she had reached puberty in Spanish, so a lot of the key words she would have been picking up last year, she had missed” (163). The police officer managing the investigation exhibits an insensitive attitude making Carla feel like she is “wasting his time” (161).

The interaction between Carla and the police officers further conveys her subjection to inferiority: “There was no meanness in this face, no kindness either. No recognition of the difficulty she was having in trying to describe what she had seen with her tiny English vocabulary” (162). Carla needs validation from the officers. Their failure to validate her struggle furthers her marginalization. Despite the shocking event that Carla faced, the police officers are apathetic to her feelings and only sees the ineptitude of her English speaking abilities: “Their very masculinity offended and threatened. They were so big, so strong, so male, so American. . . . the mean faced cop with the big voice and the pad asked her if she would answer a few questions. Not knowing she could refuse, Carla nodded meekly, on the verge of tears” (160-61). Their threatening presence represents the imposing dominance of Western culture. Thus, while Mitchell is correct in arguing that Alvarez does use Anzaldúa’s cultural hybridity and multiperspectivity in the narrative of the text, Alvarez does not do so within Carla’s vignettes. Adopting *la mestiza* is impossible for Carla because she is unable to lose her accent, thereby symbolizing her inability to break down the mental barriers that were supposed to free her from the hegemonic identity paradigms.

### Yolanda’s Accent

Like Carla, Yolanda García is wary of her differences, especially her accent. When the nuns of her Catholic grade school ask Yolanda to deliver a speech in English she shrinks at the thought: “She should have thought of it as ‘a great honor,’ as her father called it. But she was mortified. She still had a slight accent, and she did not like to speak in public, subjecting herself to her classmates’ ridicule” (141). Even though her accent is slight, and she writes beautiful words worthy enough for the nuns to select her to deliver a speech, she remains mortified at the thought of her dominant, monolingual classmates ridiculing her in public. Even in college after years of adjusting to the American language and culture, Yolanda still demonstrates feelings of inferiority: “For the hundredth time, I cursed my immigrant origins. If only I too had been born in Connecticut or Virginia . . .” (94). When she first walks into her college English poetry class, her teacher reinforces the awkwardness she already feels: “He called roll, acknowledging most of the other students with nicknames and jokes and remarks, stumbling over my name and smiling falsely at me, a smile I had identified as one flashed on ‘foreign students’ to show them the natives were friendly. I felt profoundly out of place” (88-89). Yolanda then refers to herself as an “intruder upon the sanctuary of English majors” and demeans her literacy as “an immigrant’s failing literalism” (89). Both her Catholic school and her college years convey how the Western dominant English language disparages Yolanda’s literalism and makes her feel like an intruder and immigrant. Even after many years of living in the United States, both school experiences cause her to feel apologetic in claiming English as her major. Yolanda’s mental reflection demonstrates how the effect of the standard dominant language builds a further barrier between embracing both cultures.

Barriers are continuously formed when Yolanda meets her boyfriend Rudy Elmenhurst in college. Rudy and Yolanda’s differences appear when he helps her compose a poem for their English class: “It was the first pornographic poem I’d ever co-written; of course I didn’t know it

was pornographic until Rudy explained to me all the word plays and double meanings . . . I was shocked by all of this. I was a virgin; I wasn't one hundred percent sure how sex worked" (93). Not only is she a virgin physically, but also verbally. By college, Yolanda excels in the English language, but still does not feel comfortable with it. Consequently, she is unable to confirm or understand the sexual innuendoes: "English was then still a party favor for me—crack open the dictionary, find out if I'd just been insulted, praised, admonished, criticized" (87). Yolanda is unable to understand her American boyfriend's euphemisms, which leads her to an unhappy relationship, especially when Rudy begins pressing her for sex:

Perhaps if Rudy had acted a little more as if lovemaking were a workshop of sorts, things might have moved more swiftly toward his desired conclusion. But the guy had no sense of connotation in bed. His vocabulary turned me off even as I was beginning to acknowledge my body's pleasure. If Rudy had said, *Sweet lady, lay across my big, soft bed and let me touch your dear, exquisite body*, I might have felt up to being felt up. But I didn't want to just be in the sack, screwed, balled, laid, and fucked my first time around with a man (97).

The disconnect Yolanda feels with Rudy's language causes her to shy away from their sexual relationship. Rudy's constant pressure for sex symbolizes his need to dominate her Otherness. Disrespect towards her body and the need to dictate is clearly seen in his response when she denies him: "I thought you'd be hot-blooded, being Spanish and all, and that under all the Catholic bullshit, you'd be really free, instead of all hung up like these cotillion chicks from prep schools. But Jesus, you're worse than a fucking Puritan" (99). Rudy's categorization of Yolanda significantly highlights the Western need to categorize and limit one's identity to specific labels, as well as emphasize the need to sexualize and dominate the Other's body.

Further, Rudy's connotations, vocabulary, and body language "haunted [her] sexual awakening with a nightmare of self-doubt" (103). His opinions of her cause her to doubt herself and question her identity. Yolanda cannot establish an identity culturally, nor can she establish one sexually. She longs to be valued for who she is and for the many identities she maintains such as her Catholic, Agnostic, American, and Spanish identities. She certainly attempts to become *mestiza* by trying to unify her multiple identities, and yet she also accepts Rudy's labeling as normal, and her desire to unify identities as peripheral: "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" (99). Yolanda finds that America creates lonely lives for those who desire to disrupt identity categories. She believes that the only way to be *la mestiza* would be for her to leave America altogether.

### **Sandi's Lunacy**

Sandra (Sandi) Garcia is a pivotal example that reflects the negative results of attempting to transform into multiple identities. Sandi experienced a massive breakdown, sending her to the mental hospital. Her mother attributes her breakdown to her eating disorder and a peculiar desire to become an intellectual: "It started with that crazy diet . . . Can you imagine starving herself to death? . . . Sandi wanted to look like those twiggy models. She was a looker, that one, and I guess it went to her head. There are four girls, you know. . . . We've had trouble with all of them" (51-53). Her mother says that she cannot understand why Sandi acts the way she does because, out of

the four girls, she was blessed with “fine looks, blue eyes, peaches and ice cream skin, everything going for her!” (52). Rather than be joyful for the supposed blessing of her Western looks, Sandi wants to be darker like her sisters (52). Her breakdown begins with two disparate physical expressions—an attempt to become “American thin” and a desire to be “Dominican dark.” Her mother continues: “[w]e took the next plane, and when we got there, I didn’t recognize my own daughter.’ The mother held up her little finger. ‘Sandy was a toothpick. And that’s not the least of it, she wouldn’t put a book down, read, read, read. That’s all she did’” (54). All her life Sandi desires to be what she is not—a dark-haired, super-model thin intellectual.

Sandi’s weight loss never satisfies her need to belong so she then turns to books. Her response suggests her need to fit into a specific mold, if she cannot be as skinny as the models in the magazines, then she would be smarter. In short, the imposing ideology of having a specific identity in the American culture leads Sandi to madness. She needs the approval of Western society, and in order to gain that approval she feels pressured to starve and subject herself to feelings of intellectual inadequacy. Her mother explains:

[Sandi] told us that she was being turned out of the human race. She was becoming a monkey. The mother’s voice broke. ‘A monkey, my baby! Already the other organs inside her body were a monkey’s. Only her brain was left, and she could feel it going’ . . . ‘It was crazy talk, I tell you. One morning, I go in her room to wake her up, and I find her lying in bed and looking up at her hands.’ . . . ‘I call her name, Sandi!, and she keeps turning her hands . . . I scream at her to answer me, and she doesn’t even look at me. Nothing. And she’s making these awful sounds like she’s a zoo.’ . . . ‘And my Sandi holds up her hands to me,’ . . . ‘And she screams, *Monkey hands, monkey hands.*’ (55)

Sandi’s mental breakdown implies how hegemonic identities control a person who is already confused about who she is. What is specifically significant in the passage is Sandi’s fear of losing her brain, symbolizing a quintessential moment that highlights the negative results of unsuccessfully attempting to reach *mestiza* consciousness. Sandi’s fear of turning into a monkey suggests an evolutionary *reversal* due to her attempt in maintaining multiple identities. According to her vignette, Sandi believes that only white Westerners are real humans. Those like herself, the marginal, must work harder, and learn more, in order to remain human—only to fail in the end. Alvarez uses Sandi’s story to portray the difficulties of reaching an acceptance of one’s multiple identities. This acceptance cannot be a beautiful transcendence into the psyche, but is a very challenging and dangerous road to travel.

### Identity in the Liminal Space

The novel begins and ends with Yolanda because she encapsulates Alvarez’s overall message: losing the Spanish accent in order to be *more* American does not grant the speaker unlimited freedom in her identity. Instead, losing one’s accent symbolizes the loss of cultural roots that keep the marginal connected to a specific place. The first chapter begins with Yolanda as an adult traveling back to the Dominican Republic. Like Romagnolo suggests in her article, Yolanda has returned to the Dominican Republic in search for her roots (Alvarez 3-23). Upon arriving, her aunts remind her of the language she has lost: “See! Her aunts are right. After so many years away, she is losing her Spanish” (8). In this chapter she has a craving for guavas, and against her aunts’



advice, she goes off in the family car in search of them: “‘I can’t wait to eat some guavas. Maybe I can pick some when I go north in a few days.’ ‘By yourself?’ Tía Carmen shakes her head at the mere thought. ‘This is not the States,’ Tía Flor says, with a knowing smile. ‘A woman just doesn’t travel alone in this country’” (9). Their conversation depicts *un choque*. Yolanda has been able to adopt a form of American independence that does not fit in her former patriarchal country. Though it can be argued that the interaction with her aunts suggests Yolanda’s successful adaptation to American culture, thus becoming multiple identities, it cannot suggest a successful transformation into “*mestiza* consciousness.” Yolanda’s arrival in the Dominican Republic only identifies her ability to be either American or Spanish. She returns to her homeland because she feels part of her identity missing; her American enculturation comes with the price of losing touch with her Spanish roots. In other words, Alvarez suggests that assimilating comes with a price; while gaining a new culture, the old culture will be lost.

On Yolanda’s way up the mountain in search for her guavas she listens to the radio sound out her thoughts: “The radio is all static—like the sound of the crunching metal of a car; the faint, blurry voice on the airwaves her own, trapped inside a wreck, calling for help. In English or Spanish? she wonders” (13). Returning to what she thought was home has only provoked confusion. The constant struggle between speaking English or Spanish symbolizes the mental identity struggle Yolanda experiences. It does not help that she is back in her old home. She has been away for too long and has now become marginalized in what was once her homeland. When the chapter concludes, Yolanda comes across an advertisement of a white Palmolive woman: “the Palmolive woman’s skin gleams a rich white; her head is still thrown back, her mouth still opened as if she is calling someone over a great distance” (23). The white Palmolive woman illustrates the constant calling reverberating in Yolanda’s mind. Whether Yolanda is in America or the Dominican Republic she cannot help but feel a calling to a place. But this place is unidentifiable because it unfortunately does not exist.

The ending of the novel returns to the beginning of Yolanda’s life as a young girl in the Dominican Republic. The reverse narrative is so effective because it alludes to the inconclusive story of each girl’s life. Reverting back to her younger years in the Dominican Republic, Yolanda finds a mother cat and her kittens and takes one kitten before it is old enough to leave its mother. The kitten meows endlessly until Yolanda cannot bear it any longer: “Its little human face winced with meows. I detested the accusing sound of meow . . . I lifted the screen and threw the meowing ball out the window. I heard it land with a thud, saw it moments later, wobbling out from under the shadow of the house, meowing and stumbling forward. There was no sign of the mother cat” (288). Using this story as the concluding chapter of the novel alludes to a connection between the kitten and her mother, and the girls and their homeland. The story symbolically connects to the emotional rashness of being prematurely plucked from their home and placed into a world that is entirely foreign. When Yolanda drops the kitten back outside in a very rash manner, she emphasizes how the girls have been dropped and left to ultimately fend for themselves in an unfamiliar world. The last few lines of the novel replicate the inconclusive story of the *mestiza* consciousness: “There are still times I wake up at three o’clock in the morning and peer into the darkness. At that hour and in that loneliness, I hear her, 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” (290). The black cat serves as the insistent feeling of marginality—she does not belong, and she wants to go home, but home is no longer an evident physical space and it no longer exists.

### Failing to Find the Face of Feelings

Alvarez's narrative conveys the inability to successfully adopt *mestiza* consciousness. The Western tradition of needing identity paradigms to feel accepted wholly bars the girls from ever fully navigating the structure below the psychical surface and finding the images and symbols of the face of feelings that is *la facultad*. It is definitely important to find the *mestiza* consciousness within the self in order to be free from identity confusion, but—as Alvarez depicts with her characters—transforming the self to embody mixed identities is not a simple feat. Carla is too emotionally scarred to see beyond American ignorance, and instead lets the voices of the boy gang and police officers resonate in her mind. She needed *la facultad* but unfortunately was unable to reach that mental level. Western insensitivity towards the marginalized is also very prevalent in Yolanda and Sofia's vignettes. While Yolanda appears to embody the intangible consciousness, it does not fully form. Like Carla, she permits the Western epistemology of identity absolutism to prevent her full transformation into *la mestiza*. Yolanda accepts Rudy's American ideals of identity absolutism—that one cannot have many identities—and believes that she will always remain alone if she stays in America. Sofia represents the extreme case of identity confusion. She longs to be labeled as skinny or intellectual, but feels that no matter how much weight she loses or how many books she reads, she will never be accepted in the American culture. Conclusively none of the girls manage to simultaneously reject and accept the American elements.

In her concluding stories, Yolanda conveys her attempt of keeping her American culture, while also seeking the roots of her Dominican culture. This attempt leaves her lost and stuck in a liminal space. The liminal space is what Anzaldúa encourages *la mestiza* to accept as her home. Those that are seemingly marginalized in the Western world should embrace the peripheral position of the liminal space. However, what the García girls portray in the literary world connects to the current world. Their failure provides a pivotal example of many marginalized people who are forced to assimilate in the Western world in order to be 'successful.' The need for categories and the fear of identity fluidity prevents any form of *mestiza* consciousness. The *mestiza* consciousness is a utopic ideology that once achieved can be liberating; however, the question that then arises is whether the *mestiza* consciousness is only achieved at the price of losing culture and heritage that forms one's identity in the first place.

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How the García Girls Lost Their Accents is a 1991 novel written by Dominican-American poet, novelist, and essayist Julia Alvarez. Told in reverse chronological order and narrated from shifting perspectives, the story spans more than thirty years in the lives of four sisters, beginning with their adult lives in the United States and ending with their childhood in the Dominican Republic, a country from which their family was forced to flee due to the father's opposition to Rafael Leónidas Trujillo's regime. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) tells the story of four sisters who, for political reasons, are forced to move to the United States from their affluent home in the Dominican Republic. The novel adopts shifting narrative perspectives and disrupts the conventional chronological plot structure by using a more or less backwards timeline, opening with the protagonists' adult lives in 1989 in the United States and ending with their early childhoods in 1956 in the Dominican Republic. As Richardo Castells explains, this backward