*How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*

**Introduction**

Julia Alvarez

* Raised in the Dominican Republic, born in NYC
* Father involved in the underground resistance against Trujillo regime
* Returned to the US in the 60s, Alvarez was 10 and struggled with assimilation
* Inspired by oral culture/storytelling of DR childhood (43, 67)

In *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents,* Julia Alvarez describes life in the Garcia/de la Torre family in reverse, splitting the book into three parts that work backwards into the family’s past from their present day in 1989. Alvarez focuses particularly on the impact of identity confusion/assimilation and financial hardship on the family that follows its immigration to the United States after fleeing the Dominican Republic in the 1960s.

Given the title of the book, I thought it would be interesting to approach the topics through a discussion of language since many of these topics might seem familiar from other stories of the immigrant and/or coming of age experience.

**Topics**

1. Assimilation, Belonging
   1. American slang and Spanish serve indicators of cultural literacy in a similar way as the American/Chinese references in *The Kitchen God’s Wife*
      1. Compare the facility with English the sisters possess vs. Laura vs. Papi
      2. “’Old world stuff… you know he got a heavier dose than Mami’” (65)
      3. “English was then still a party favor for me” (87)
      4. “spic,” “greaseballs,” “SAP”
   2. But is the actual language of the culture necessary or, alternately, enough to connect/communicate with the culture itself?
      1. *Antojos,* the first chapter reveals Yolanda has lost much of her Spanish and that mere translation might be insufficient towards reaching understanding, but also that she has lost something of her patience for Dominican traditions (8 -9).
      2. How “American” is Laura?
         1. Good Mami, Bad Mom (136), Thomas Edison Mami (137)
      3. How “American” is Papi?
         1. Key scene- Yo’s speech references Whitman and a sort of American spirit that Papi not only fails to understand, but finds threatening and disrespectful (145)
   3. The language of “revolution” – American English as youthful rebellion
   4. What does it mean to lose one’s accent? Have the Garcia girls lost theirs?
      1. Consider *Antojos* in particular given the timeline of the book. Yolanda wishes the island family could become her eventual home (11). Is this because the island no longer feels familiar in a way that she wishes it still did or because the island has always been a place of familiar comfort to her?
         1. How does the relationship between immigrants and the motherland itself change with assimilation? Must it change with assimilation? How is language affected by this relationship?
2. Communication of self and frustrated language
   1. Sandra loses her ability to use words as she obsesses over the task of absorbing them. Language is shown as being central to not just one’s cultural identity, but to one’s very humanity (54)
   2. Laura might use the wrong language but her meaning is almost always translated clearly.
      1. “She spoke in English when she argued with them. And her English was a mishmash…” (135)
      2. Laura helps Yoyo with her speech in *Daughter of Invention*
      3. Likewise, she might not always understand the language of the girls but she perceives their meaning clearly
   3. Poetry and identity are deeply intertwined to Yolanda, who struggles with both at once in each of her failed relationships
      1. “What language…did she love in?” (13)
      2. Yolanda has a mental breakdown after her divorce involving poetry and riddles (79)
      3. Yolanda rediscovers words as she recovers (85)
3. Sexuality & Womanhood, Feminism
   1. The “American Woman” is contrasted with the “nice Old World girl” perhaps as a subpoint on differing cultural values between America and the DR, but is worth discussing in itself
      1. Pg 118- Una mujer del campo, La Virgen, “some nice third-world girl”
      2. Mundin and the patriarchy (woo) (127)
   2. Language helps the Garcia girls to discover their sexuality, themselves
      1. Rudy and Yolanda (93)
      2. Sexuality also becomes a language through which the Garcia girls express and assert themselves (39)
   3. Second wave feminism gives the Garcia girls the language to define their womanhood and possess their own sexuality
      1. Pg 112, 121- confrontation between sisters and Manuel about women’s rights
      2. Even Laura adopts feminist thought (143)
      3. Garcia girls lose power when they give men the ability to name them and the terms of their sexuality
         1. Yoyo, Joe, Jojo, Yolanda, Joey, Violet- What do you make of Yolanda’s various nicknames?
         2. Rudy sucks (99)