



# Assimilation in the American Culture: An Analysis of Julia Alvarez's "How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents" (1991)

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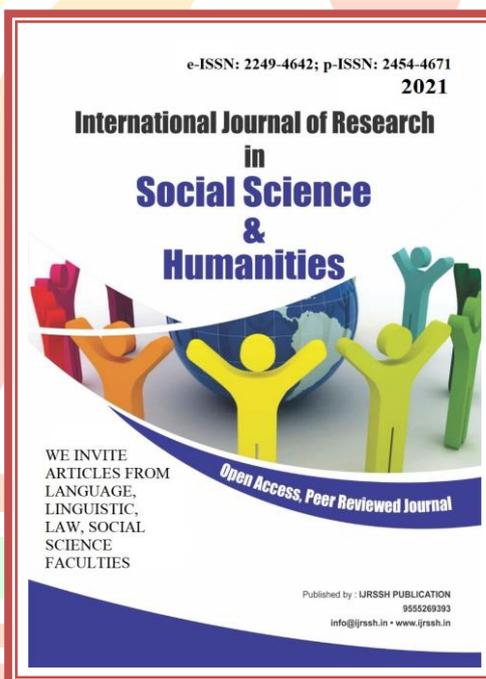
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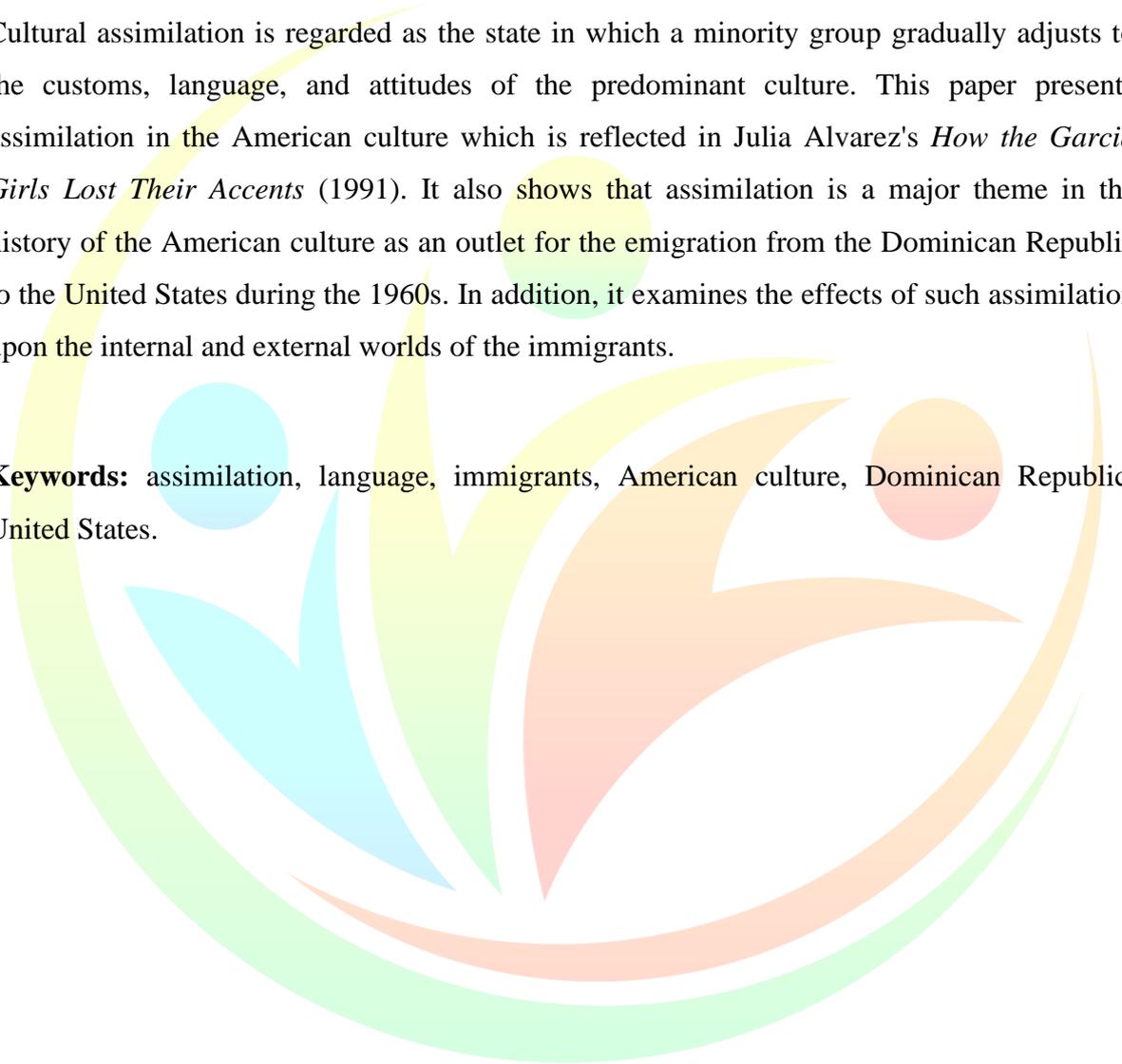


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## ABSTRACT

Cultural assimilation is regarded as the state in which a minority group gradually adjusts to the customs, language, and attitudes of the predominant culture. This paper presents assimilation in the American culture which is reflected in Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991). It also shows that assimilation is a major theme in the history of the American culture as an outlet for the emigration from the Dominican Republic to the United States during the 1960s. In addition, it examines the effects of such assimilation upon the internal and external worlds of the immigrants.

**Keywords:** assimilation, language, immigrants, American culture, Dominican Republic, United States.



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## INTRODUCTION

Assimilation is a process whereby immigrants struggle to incorporate in a new culture or society while retaining the original culture and ethnic identity. In this way, immigrants should respond to or blend with the new culture. There should be contact between the minority culture and the dominant one. Moreover, immigrants try to adopt the language, the beliefs, the attitudes, and the customs of the host country.<sup>1</sup>

Julia Alvarez, the Dominican-American novelist, was an outstanding example of the immigrants who emigrated from the Dominican Republic to the United States in 1960s. She was born in the New York City in 1950, but after three months the family returned back to the Dominican Republic. At that time, the Dominican Republic was a country where poverty, crimes, discomfort, and failed government had been experienced under Trujillo's dictatorship. Alvarez's father was involved in the politics to overthrow the dictatorship, and that was the reason that motivated Alvarez's family to emigrate to the United States.<sup>2</sup> In the United States, Alvarez felt alienated because of the misplacement and separation from her extended family. She was affected by the new environment which was completely different from her original one. The

changes which lie in the language, from Spanish into English, conservative society into free one, the customs and the culture as well, had a great impact upon her. Speaking about her exile from the Dominican Republic, Alvarez states: "I lost almost everything: a homeland, a language, family connections, a way of understanding, and a warmth."<sup>3</sup>

When confronting the new culture, Alvarez felt that she lost her identity. So, a desire of search for identity had emerged in her. Alvarez's parents urged her and her sisters to assimilate into the new world or culture, even though they were afraid of the sisters' forgetting to their heritage, their Spanish language, and the respect to their parents. The parents sent Alvarez and her sisters back to the Dominican Republic each summer to reconnect with their original culture. Alvarez was caught between the two worlds, systems, languages, and customs. She found that writing about the immigrants' experiences was a successful way to reconnect her with the past and the culture she had left behind. She put that into action in her novel *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* which was published in 1991.

*How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* is considered the first major novel written by a Latina writer.<sup>4</sup> It is described as: "a Dominican female bildungsroman

that garnered the author critical praise as an evocative storyteller."<sup>5</sup> Moreover, it traces the assimilation of the four Garcia sisters who try to adjust themselves into the American culture while searching for their lost identity of their past.<sup>6</sup>

**Assimilation in the American Culture:  
*How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*  
(1991)**

*How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* deals with the assimilation of Yolanda and her three sisters who are from the Garcia family, obliged to emigrate from the Dominican Republic to the United States because of their father's involvement in the political issues. When beginning a new life in a new place, the sisters have to respond to the new changes of misplacement; and try to learn the host country's language, customs, and culture. The four sisters have two struggles, external and internal ones. On the one hand, the external struggle is concerned with what they face in the new country and learn about it. On the other hand, what they learned and get from the other world or country causes an internal issue which motivates the girls to compare the new culture with their original one. As a result, learning the new culture or customs leads the sisters to lose their heritage or their identity, and makes a gap between the two cultures. In this case, Alvarez describes what happens to the

Garcia sisters mentioning: "they are swept up in the freewheeling American culture..... What is lost, what is gained when a family leaves an old world to come to a new."<sup>7</sup>

Like other immigrants to the United States in 1960s, the Garcia family has a complex process which is the assimilation. The family tries to reconcile the two cultures of the host country and the native one. As much as language is concerned, the four sisters have to learn and understand the language of the host country in order to form their identities. In fact, they are overcome by the English vocabulary and grammar. The four sisters begin studying English at school. In this concern, Joan M. Hoffman argues: "... Communication is of fundamental concern for each member of this immigrant family as they struggle with the strange vocabulary, difficult grammar...."<sup>8</sup>

When returning back to the Dominican Republic in the summer, Yolanda reunites with her relatives. However, she feels confused as she loses control over her native language, the Spanish. Yolanda wonders about the word "antojo" which is said by her aunt. She asks: "What's an antojo."<sup>9</sup> Though Yolanda partially forgets her native language, she has a desire to remember her past, habits, and childhood that reinforce her identity. She is

enthusiastic to look for the fruit of guavas which is the favourite fruit for the children in the Dominican Republic. Wishing to pick guavas, Yolanda says: "I can't wait to eat some guavas. May be I can pick some when I go north in a few days" (*HGGLTA*, 9). When she faces two men who try to help her, she pretends that she is American rather than Dominican. She is afraid of the danger that can be caused by them. She remembers her aunt's speech telling her: "You will get lost, you will get kidnapped, you will get raped, you will get killed" (*HGGLTA*, 17). This clarifies her inability to be in complete touch with her past or real identity.

According to Julie Barak, Yolanda and her sisters "may have lost their accents... but they can never completely lose or erase the memories of their pasts or, of their first language and the world view that supports it."<sup>10</sup> Therefore, they are torn between the two languages and cultures as well. Besides, concerning the lost or fragmented identity of the immigrants, Alvarez presents the theme of "snow" purposely. Like snowflakes, Yolanda's identity is fragmented between the new and the old country as her teacher says: "Each flake was different, Sister Zoe had said, like a person, irreplaceable and beautiful" (*HGGLTA*, 167). The "snow" is also related to the confusion and the mixture between the Spanish and the English

language. In the new school of New York, Yolanda learns about falling of an atomic bomb and the snow like ash that covers the ground long after the bomb is fallen. She is confused when she notices the natural snow. She screams and scares her classmates and teacher, she says: "'Snow" I repeated. I looked out the window warily" (*HGGLTA*, 167). Hence, the snowflake is frightening to Yolanda because it is understood as an atomic bomb.

When Yolanda works out the meaning of the English words that are said by her teacher, she realizes that she already understands the meaning. Even though, she cannot present her thoughts in longer sentences. Language is also an obstacle in Yolanda's relationship with her college boyfriend, Rudy Elmenhurst, who is raised in a completely different environment from Yolanda's. Rudy practices what is called taboo for Yolanda like sex, drinking alcohol, and drugs. He tries to seduce Yolanda, though he is unsuccessful in doing that. When working on the sonnet in the class, each of them follows his/ her own way of life. Yolanda follows what the teacher says quietly, but Rudy tries to be the centre of attention by expressing the sonnet using casual and sexual words. She rejects his seducing, saying: "Why I didn't just sleep with someone as persistent as Rudy Elmenhurst is a mystery" (*HGGLTA*,

79- 80). Moreover, Rudy's parents welcome their son's relationship with Yolanda to learn about her culture as an outsider. Yolanda is annoyed by being a geography lesson for Rudy as his parents regard her. Yolanda argues: "It bothered me that they should treat me like a geography lesson for their son. But I didn't have the vocabulary back then to explain even to myself what annoyed me about their remark" (*HGGLTA*, 98).

Apparently, Yolanda is interested in the United States, making many relationships with men. Yet, she feels isolated as she cannot communicate or use the English language freely with the others. Besides, Yolanda's marriage from John is ended as they cannot be in harmony with each other. When expressing his love for her for the first time, Yolanda: "... was afraid. Once they got started on words, there was no telling what they could say" (*HGGLTA*, 70). Even when Yolanda speaks with John, he tries to silence her as he rejects her inaccurate use of the English language. For this reason, she decides to abandon him because she: "had begun to mistrust him" (*HGGLTA*, 73). Yolanda also adds: "We just didn't speak the same language" (*HGGLTA*, 81).

Generally speaking, acquiring the English language is easier for the Garcia

girls than their parents because the former are still young. Laura, the mother, urges her daughters to learn the English language at school as much as possible. She obliges them to attend every lesson to be developed economically, socially, and psychologically. When the girls prefer to go to the city rather, Alvarez points out:

Her daughters would seek her out at night when she seemed to have a moment to talk to them: they were having trouble at school or they wanted her persuade their father to give them permission to go into the city or to a shopping mall or a movie-in broad daylight, Mami! Laura would wave them out of her room. "The problem with you girls" [...] "You girls are going to drive me crazy!" (*HGGLTA*, 134-5).

When Laura insists on studying the English language, Yolanda tells her: "You want us to be killed? Those kids were throwing stones today!" (*HGGLTA*, 135). However, for Laura, the more her daughters learn the English language, the more they can assimilate into the American culture and be accepted.

To remove the gap between her and people around, Yolanda tries to write poems to develop her language in the new environment. By writing in the English language, she tries to find her lost identity

in the host country. Her writing cheers Laura, who says: "Ay, Yoyo, you are going to be the one to bring our name to the headlights in this country! That is a beautiful, beautiful speech I want your father to hear it before he goes to sleep. Then I will type it for you, all right?" (HGGLTA, 143). So, Laura regards Yolanda's ability of writing as a worthy achievement to begin a new and happy life in the United States. On the contrary, when listening to what Yolanda writes, Carlos, the father, tears it up and reproaches her as if it were a rebellion against her native values. The situation is described: "Carlos was truly furious. It was bad enough that this daughter was rebelling, but there was his own wife joining forces with her" (HGGLTA, 145- 6). This shows that writing is a construction of Yolanda's independent identity which is refused by the patriarchal society of the Dominican Republic. In response to her father's conduct, Yolanda says: "This is America, Papi, America! You are not in a savage country anymore" (HGGLTA, 146). This clarifies Yolanda's readiness to deny her native culture, to assimilate into the American one.

In addition to the language, sexuality is another significant factor of assimilation. Like her sisters, Carla, the oldest one, has to struggle in order to assimilate into the new traditions, beliefs, habits, and

language. For Carla, assimilation into the American culture is a difficult task, she mentions: "Dear God'... 'Let us please go back home, please" (HGGLTA, 150). She goes to school every day: "... with a host of confused feelings" (HGGLTA, 153). According to Silvio Sirias, Carla is frustrated in the United States, and she "feel utterly alone, certain that she will always be an outsider, that the United States will never be her home."<sup>11</sup> When returning back home from school, Carla is surprised by the sexual behaviour of a man in a car. The man follows Carla and tries to seduce her but she reacts with: "Not one word, English or Spanish, occurred to her" (HGGLTA, 157). When Carla tells her mother to inform the police, the officer offers her if she wants to file charges but these words are not understood by Carla and her mother as the latter says: "File charges? What does that mean, file charges?" (HGGLTA, 159). The difficult communication between the police officer, and Carla and her mother, makes him mock them, expressing that if they want to live in the United States, they have to learn English well.<sup>12</sup>

The youngest sister, Sofia, is involved in the process of sexuality in the United States. Sofia is in struggle with her father's dominance. By making relationships with men, Sofia feels that she is independent. As a reaction of making relationships with

men, Sofia falls in a dispute with her father and runs away from home. Sirias claims that "Sofia is portrayed as the most independent and rebellious of the sisters."<sup>13</sup> Once upon a time at home, Carlos finds out Sofia's love letters from her German boyfriend, Otto. The father screams: "What is the meaning of this?" (*HGGLTA*, 29). Whereas Sofia's response reflects her refusal for her father's interference, she says: "It's none of your... business... You have no right, no right at all to go through my stuff or read my mail!" (*HGGLTA*, 29). Sofia is no longer the Dominican daughter that her father wishes. In the United States, Sofia is free to do what she desires; therefore, she is assimilated into the American culture.

The sisters face problems of gender as they assimilate into the new free American culture. They realize the differences between the old, the Dominican culture which is controlled by men, and the new American one in which women and men are equal. The Dominican women are dependent on their husbands, and they have limited positions in education. So, women are inferior to men in the Dominican Republic. On the contrary, the Garcia sisters begin assimilating in the freedom of the American society which is not fully welcomed and not accepted by their parents. The sisters learn the new American lifestyle which leads them to

take marijuana, for which Sofia is blamed by her mother, and is sent to the Dominican Republic. Sofia has to decide whether to go to the Dominican Republic or to stay at home only. The situation is described as: "Fifi was given the choice of either staying on the Island for a year at Tia Carmen's or going back to the States, but not to her boarding school. She would have to live at home with Mami and Papi and attend the local Catholic" (*HGGLTA*, 116). Sofia chooses the Dominican Republic where she meets her illegitimate cousin and boyfriend, Manuel Gustavo. She becomes under his control, and obeys his tyrannical behaviour to the extent that: "Fifi can't wear pants in public. Fifi can't talk to another man. Fifi can't leave the house without his permission. And what's most disturbing is that Fifi, feisty, lively Fifi, is letting this man tell her what she can do and cannot do" (*HGGLTA*, 120).

The drastic change in Sofia's personality, from a free woman to a completely submitted one, controlled by Gustavo; motivates her sisters to rebel against him, saying: "Women do have rights here too, you know, even Dominican law grants that" (*HGGLTA*, 122). In response to the sisters' attitudes, Gustavo says: "May be you do things different in your United States of America" (*HGGLTA*, 122). Though her sisters blame her for her submission and

loss of independence, Sofia is satisfied with the Dominican lifestyle, and she is described by her sisters as: "... She looks like the *after* person in one of those *before-after* makeover in magazines" (*HGGLTA*, 117).

As much as the misplacement is concerned, the Garcia family members change due to the new lifestyle in United States. When Carlos and his family are invited to have a meal in a restaurant as soon as they arrive at the United States, Mrs. Fanning kisses Carlos in the bathroom, and this situation is seen by his daughter Sandra, and is described as:

Sandi and Mrs. Fanning found themselves in a pretty little parlor with a couch and lamps and a stack of perfumed towels. Sandi spied the stalls in an adjoining room and hurried into one, releasing her bladder. Relieved, she now felt the full and shocking weight of what she had just witnessed. A married American woman kissing her father! (*HGGLTA*, 181).

Additionally, Sandra, who is flirted by the waiter there, confused and feels that she has to assimilate into the new hostile country. Likewise, Sofia, who comes with her sisters to celebrate their father's birthday, kisses her father sexually:

"Quickly, she swooped into the circle and gave the old man a wet, open-mouthed kiss in his ear. She ran her tongue in the whorls of his ear and nibbled the tip. Then she moved back." (*HGGLTA*, 39). Hence, Sofia's kiss to her father is considered as a clear mark of her assimilation into the American culture while she is there. The clear assimilation of Sofia, still annoys her father, who wants his daughter to keep her conservative values and habits. In this way, Sofia's assimilation is blamed by her father, and arises anger in him. Moreover, both parents consider any conduct of assimilation of their daughters into the American lifestyle as a rebellion.

The Garcia family also faces the problem of the social class in the host country. The family members are from upper-class in the Dominican Republic, but they have to be middle class members of the new American society. Carlos is unprepared for dealing with unexpected situations. He also feels ashamed of himself when he is unable to support his family with the same living as they are in the Dominican Republic. Alvarez mentions: "But what he could do in this new country where he did not even know if he had enough cash in his pocket" (*HGGLTA*, 189). The family members feel that they are inferior in the United States, but, in an incomplete manner, they assimilate into the new culture of the

American society and accept it. The daughters want to be Americans and do the things the Americans do just because they live among them. They are caught between the past and the future, between the two worlds, the two languages as well. Unlike their daughters, the parents cannot assimilate into the American culture, and they treat their daughters as if they were in the Dominican Republic.

## CONCLUSION

The theme of assimilation is considered as a main theme for the immigrants in the United States. To assimilate into a new culture, immigrants encounter two aspects of how to keep their original culture while learning the new one. In *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, the Garcia family who emigrates from the Dominican Republic to the United States in 1960s according to the political issues has to assimilate into the new language, habits, customs, and attitudes. Hence, the Garcia family who represents all other immigrant families of the United States, begins searching for their lost identities due to the misplacement.

The Garcia family is divided into two groups, Yolanda and her three sisters whose assimilation is rather easy as they are still young; and their parents whose assimilation is impossible because of their old age in comparison with their

daughters. However, the sisters experience difficulties as they struggle with the new environment and the different culture. The sisters' desire for assimilation into the American culture proceeds from their desire to get more independence and confirmation for themselves.

For the sisters, learning the new English language, leads to forget their Spanish one. As a result, they are captured by the two languages. As an example for that, Yolanda, who returns back to the Dominican Republic to retain her past, prefers to speak English rather than Spanish because she cannot join her old country freely. Yolanda accepts the new culture and makes many relationships with men, yet she is unhappy as she cannot be in fully contact with the Americans. Carla, who feels that she is an outsider, is unable to use the English language openly. She cannot express the sexual behaviour of the seducer man on her way home from school. Therefore, she feels oppressed by the Americans. Sandra becomes aware of the freedom and sexuality of the American society. She realizes that kissing her father by a woman is a usual situation in the United States. Therefore, she feels that she has to assimilate into the American culture and accepts what they do. The last sister, Sofia, rebels against her father's authority. The disintegrated relationship between the daughter and her father symbolizes the

relationship between the two cultures of the Dominican Republic and the United States.

The social class plays a significant role in the lives of the Garcia family members. The Garcia family is from the upper class before emigration. Whereas the family becomes the middle class one in the United States. On the one hand, Carlos is confused of how to support his family financially. On the other hand, though the sisters receive their education in the United States with the Americans, they are considered as common Dominican

immigrants rather than members of a wealthy family.

It is worth mentioning that as the Garcia family lives in the United States, the American culture is imposed upon them. In consequences, assimilation for the Garcia sisters weakens their control over their old Dominican culture. The sisters try to make a balance between the conservative Dominican values and the liberal American customs. Their attempt to compromise the two halves of the Dominican American identity makes them neither Americans nor pure Dominicans. They are caught between the two cultures.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> J. Michael Weber, "An Investigation of Cultural Assimilation and Its Impact on Consumption Behaviors," <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.411.6823&rep=rep1&type=pdf> (accessed May 1, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Jill C. Wheeler, *Julia Alvarez*, (North Mankato, Minnesota: ABDO Publishing Com., 2012), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Heather Rosario-Sievert, "Conversation with Julia Alvarez," *Review: Latin American Literature and Art* (Spring 1997): 32, [https://www.google.iq/search?q=Heather+Rosario-Sievert%2C+\"Conversation+with+Julia+Alvarez%2C\"+Review%3A+Latin+American+Literature+and+Art.+\"\(1997\).+32](https://www.google.iq/search?q=Heather+Rosario-Sievert%2C+\) (accessed May 15, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Alice L. Trupe, *Reading Julia Alvarez*, (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2011), vii.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Ruiz Vicki L. and Virginia Sanchez Korrol, eds., *Latinas in the United States: A Historical Encyclopedia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Trupe, 21.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Julia Alvarez, "How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents," <http://www.juliaalvarez.com/novels/> (accessed May 22, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Joan M. Hoffman, "'She wants to Be Called Yolanda Now,'" Identity, Language, and the Third Sister in *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents*, *The Bilingual Renew*, 23, no. 1 (January-April 1998): 22,

[https://www.jstor.org/stable/25745393?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/25745393?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents) (accessed May 20, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Julia Alvarez, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (New York: Plume, 1991), 8. All the subsequent quotations references to the novel are taken from this edition, with the abbreviation (*HGGLTA*) and the page number (s).

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Julie Barak, "Turning and turning in the Widening gyre,": a second coming into the language in Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents*. *MELUS*, v. 23, n. 1 (Spring 1998): 176, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/467770?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/467770?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents) (accessed May 2, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Silvio Sirias, *Julia Alvarez: A Critical Companion* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001), 2.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Ibid., 27.

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