

REWRITING AMERICAN DEMOCRACY: LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL (DIS)LOCATIONS IN ESMERALDA SANTIAGO AND JULIA ÁLVAREZ

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Upon immigrating with her mother and siblings to the United States, the eight-year-old Puerto Rican American protagonist, Negi, in Esmeralda Santiago's memoir *Almost a Woman* (1998) lacks the words and concepts to describe her new identity amid a mix of cultures, customs, and languages that results from her relocation to American grounds. In Negi's conversation with her schoolmate, Santiago epitomizes the cultural displacement that ethnic American immigrants experience as they negotiate their diasporic identities between the old and new homelands:

So, if you're Puerto Rican, they call you Hispanic?

Yeah. Anybody who speaks Spanish.

[. . .] You mean, if you speak Spanish, you're Hispanic?

Well, yeah. No [. . .] I mean your parents have to be Puerto Rican or Cuban or something.

[. . .] Okay, your parents are Cuban, let's say, and you're born here, but you don't speak Spanish. Are you Hispanic?

[. . .] I guess so, she finally said. It has to do with being from a Spanish country. I mean, you or your parents, like, even if you don't speak Spanish, you're Hispanic, you know? [. . .]

But I didn't know. I'd always been Puerto Rican, and it hadn't occurred to me that in Brooklyn I'd be someone else. (5)

Negi's attempts at formulating workable identity locations for her immigrant experience are indicative of the exile's difficulty achieving placement within mainstream American culture.

The problem of naming and representation, a commonplace issue in diaspora studies, is emblematic of ethnic immigrants' identity negotiations in the United States. Stuart Hall, for instance, defines identity as "a form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable[s] us to discover places from which to speak" (236-37). These places, however, are often ambiguous locations between the old and the new home country as well as between mainstream and non-mainstream American culture.¹ Ien Ang notes, "[t]he very name with which the 'ethnic' is referred to [. . .] already transposes him or her to, and conjures up the received memory of, another site of symbolic belonging, a site which is not 'here'" (17).

Still, their presence 'here' in the United States itself makes such attempts at discovering places from which to speak, no matter how difficult and frustrating this endeavor may be, an everyday necessity.²

Paul Gilroy proposes a set of questions that defines well the duality of a person's diasporic experience: the question about "where you're from" and the question about "where you're at." Gilroy emphasizes that as long as "where you're from" prevails over "where you're at," there is inevitably an implication of a constructed notion of normalcy with which ethnic Americans need to measure themselves in order to determine how well they fit into the homogeneous definitions of mainstream American society. However, the question of "where you're from," this common question about a person's national origin, can be answered without major confusion. On the other hand, the question about "where you're at," which is about a person's identity and location in the United States, often fails to incorporate the complexities of Latin-Caribbean American experiences of diaspora and of ethnic marginality in the United States. This question is difficult to answer because it entails formulating appropriate and adequate terminology to define accurately the location of ethnic minorities in general and ethnic immigrants in particular. It is the question of "where you're from" that leads to the sense of confusion Santiago depicts in the above-quoted dialogue. In that dialogue, these two questions intersect and thus blur aspects of national origin and cultural representation.

In this context of naming and representation of Latin-Caribbean immigrants in the United States, Esmeralda Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican* and *Almost a Woman* and Julia Álvarez's "An American Childhood in the Dominican Republic" and *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* characterize English as an imperialistic imperative in the Caribbean and in the United States. Their depictions of U.S. neo-colonial exploitation of the Caribbean, together with depictions of immigrant Caribbean protagonists who have difficulty achieving placement within U.S. society, challenge America's promise of freedom and thus question—and at times even ridicule—the concept of U.S. democracy.³ At the core of their storytelling is the sense of disillusionment and displacement the protagonists confront as they realize that the so-called "land of the free" is not so free after all. Santiago and Álvarez thus epitomize the location of postcolonial writers and literatures that "emerge in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial culture" (Ashcroft et al 2).

Growing Up American: Imperial Indoctrination and Cultural Belatedness

In her autobiographical essay, "An American Childhood in the Dominican Republic" (1987), Dominican American author Julia Álvarez offers a candid characterization of her home country's Americanization through foreign indoctrination. Álvarez's essay is set during President Trujillo's dictatorship in the 1950s, when the so-called American way of life became an increasingly important cultural import in the Dominican Republic. Álvarez acknowledges this preponderance of American culture in the Dominican Republic in the characterization of her childhood as typically American. She starts her narration with a statement that strongly claims her "Americanness": "Although I was raised in the Dominican Republic by Dominican parents in an extended Dominican family, mine was an American childhood" (71). Her appreciation of what she considers emblematic of

American culture—American ice cream parlors, American schools, and labels of American-brand fashion stores her mother cut out from the hand-me-downs of her nieces and sewed meticulously onto the clothes of her own children—gives Álvarez's childhood the label of American culture. This interference between Dominican culture and a more attractive American culture and the distortion of Álvarez's sense of belonging reaches its full dimensions when the family finally immigrates to the United States. Whereas she distances herself from her Dominican home, for instance, by putting the term "home" in parentheses, Álvarez readily embraces the United States as the home she always felt she belonged to. During the flight to New York, she muses:

All my childhood I had dressed like an American, eaten American foods, and befriended American children. I had gone to American schools and spent most of the day speaking and reading English. At night, my prayers were full of blond hair and blue eyes and snow and just a plane ride as this one. All my childhood I had longed for this moment of arrival. And here I was, an American girl, coming home at last. (85)

Álvarez's explicit act of claiming an American childhood before actually having experienced American culture in the United States might be considered a childish and naïve assumption that foreign indoctrination can prepare a person sufficiently for the immigrant experience of ethnic minorities. In relation to prevalent xenophobic stereotypes of Latinas as "childlike, pampered, and irresponsible" (Takaki 209), it is certainly problematic to characterize the pre-immigrant experience of Latin-Caribbean women as childish and naïve.

However, both Santiago and Álvarez distinguish between mere childhood naïveté and explicit social commentary. In *bildungsromanesque* depictions of the protagonists' transitions from the Latin-Caribbean to the United States, Santiago and Álvarez fuse childhood perspectives with the hard realities of economic, social, and cultural survival of immigrant minorities and raise issues about acculturation to and socialization into mainstream American culture. In the context of cultural politics, ethnic diversity, and ethnic minorities' emancipation in the United States, these comments, articulated through childhood perspectives, become political statements with which the narrators ridicule the dogma of American democracy inside and outside the United States.

However, perhaps one of most problematic moments in Álvarez's essay is its happy ending. Álvarez's narration ends with the young protagonist's belief that her trip to the United States is more of a homecoming than a going into exile and thus does not describe the hard realities of immigrant life that await her and her family. In stressing the protagonist's assumption that her exposure to American culture has made her "American," Álvarez's essay leaves out, but at the same time indirectly calls attention to, the protagonist's impending need to deal with her cultural belatedness between American colonization and indoctrination in the Caribbean and the actual experience of American consumer culture in the United States. As Betty Joseph's definition of cultural belatedness suggests, there is a time lag "between the local and the American model—the underdeveloped nature of local capital in relation to the American (universal) model it must become" (67) which manifests itself in a "time lag between sign and referent in colonialist cultural indoctrination" (73). This belatedness, then, relates to the discrepancy between the protagonists' self-perceptions as American and the way American mainstream culture labels them as Third World. Of course, the Third World is produced in relation to the First World, but are Third World immigrants always aware of themselves as such?⁴ Clearly, as Álvarez's

definition of her childhood as typically American suggests, only after experiencing American culture in the United States can immigrants become aware of their foreignness. Furthermore, this sense of foreignness becomes especially acute through immigrants' acquisition of labels that denote their identities and locations in the United States.

The young protagonists in Santiago's and Álvarez's works become aware of this belated experience of American culture once they immigrate to the United States. A common experience of the so-called 1.5 or one-and-a-half immigrant generation, a concept sociologist Rubén G. Rumbaut uses to describe the status of young refugees who were born abroad and raised in the United States, is the dislocation in language. Their belated experience of America, of the cultural changes in language, customs, and social structure they and their families go through when they establish new lives in the United States, causes ubiquitous disillusionment with the daily hardships of their immigrant lives. At the same time, their experience of cultural belatedness implies a distinct difference between how they define themselves and how mainstream America perceives them. After all, one of the imminent experiences of diaspora is that the individual's existential dilemma, the question of "who am I" is always motivated and determined by the need to achieve placement within the social, political, and demographic landscape of the new homeland and the need to negotiate these terms in relation to the mythic old homeland.⁵ Whereas the question of "where you're from" often conflates national origin with cultural heritage,⁶ the question of "where you're at" makes explicit this sense of disorientation in relation to national origin/culture and location in the United States. In *Almost a Woman*, Negi paraphrases this dilemma well: "I'd always been Puerto Rican, and it hadn't occurred to me that in Brooklyn I'd be someone else" (5).

Negotiating Caribbean Identities in the United States

In addition to renegotiating their identities in relation to mainstream American culture, the protagonists in Santiago's and Álvarez's writing also need to redefine themselves in relation to their cultural origins.⁷ In Santiago's autobiography, *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1993), the prequel to *Almost a Woman*, Negi realizes that to the same extent as American society is profoundly plural and made up of diverse ethnic groups, the Hispanic community, although labeled with one single common term, is far from homogeneous. The confrontation with the heterogeneous constituency of the Puerto Rican American community also makes it difficult for Negi to place herself within her new home country:

There were two kinds of Puerto Ricans in school: the newly arrived, like myself, and the ones born in Brooklyn of Puerto Rican parents. The two groups didn't mix. The Brooklyn Puerto Ricans spoke English, and often no Spanish at all. To them, Puerto Rico was the place where their grandparents lived, a place they visited on school and summer vacations, a place which they complained was backward and mosquito-ridden. Those of us for whom Puerto Rico was still a recent memory were also split into two groups: the ones who longed for the island and the ones who wanted to forget it as soon as possible. (230)

During her ongoing identity negotiation, Negi thus becomes aware that forgetting one's home country and losing one's culture are potential side effects of acculturation and assimilation to mainstream American culture.

The difficulty in establishing a sense of home between their old and new home countries often forces immigrant American writers to create a sense of home in their writing

itself. As Barbara Hoffer reports, Julia Álvarez maintains that “she would never have become a writer if she hadn’t had to cope with being between cultures, and that she made her home in words, not in the United States or in the Dominican Republic” (22). It is in the act of writing that Álvarez claims to reach a sense of home that cannot be found elsewhere. This notion of homelessness in the geopolitical, geographical, and cultural borderlands between Latin-Caribbean and American culture epitomizes the tension between the “where you’re from” and the “where you’re at.” It is within this ambiguous location that Álvarez and Santiago place their narratives. They experience and write from a third space which Homi Bhabha defines in *The Location of Culture* (1994) as cultural space that “constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity and fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” (37). From this third space, Álvarez and Santiago challenge institutionalized definitions of what is American and what is Other without reinscribing nationalist Caribbean or assimilated American discourses. Álvarez’s depiction of the omnipresence of American culture in the Dominican Republic, for instance, points out the absurdity of rigid identity boundaries, especially of those that monolithic discourses of mainstream American culture impose on ethnic minorities. Álvarez’s and Santiago’s depictions of how the United States colonizes ethnic immigrants before and after they come to North America are only two examples of a general tendency in ethnic American literature to expose the absence of democracy in American society.

Hybrid Voices, Ambivalent Locations

Whereas in *When I Was Puerto Rican* and “An American Childhood in the Dominican Republic” Santiago and Álvarez raise issues about cultural transference, issues about naming and labeling of their diasporic locations, Álvarez’s novel *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) revisits the problem of the lost “home” culture by specifically exploring the loss of the native language. Within the García family, political immigrants from the Dominican Republic, the 1.5-generation daughters, experience this loss of language most fully. Although losing their accents is the ultimate goal of socialization into their new “home” country, Álvarez dismantles the loss of the mother tongue as a complicated process in the daughters’ sense of belonging, especially since in part, this loss is emblematic of their increasing inability to communicate with their cultural heritage in the Dominican Republic. In the first narrative of the book’s backward chronology,⁸ Yolanda’s difficult homing-in characterizes her degree of alienation from her native culture in the Dominican Republic. Shortly after her arrival at the family’s compound, her aunts deplore that Yolanda is “losing her Spanish” (8). Yolanda, a.k.a. “Miss America,” does not understand what they mean by urging her to reveal her *antojo*, her desire or craving (8 original emphasis). From her inability to understand the meaning of this term it becomes evident how little Yolanda has retained of her native country’s cultural traditions and confirms the aunts’ assumptions that Yolanda, as her nickname Miss America implies, has assimilated to a large extent to American culture and lifestyle.

Throughout the novel, language is an important aspect of Yolanda’s identity quest. One of her most pronounced character traits is her need to negotiate her words appropriately and effectively. Yolanda “understands and respects the power of words,” as critic Joan M. Hoffman points out (2). Therefore, “it is absolutely crucial that she choose the accurate and appropriate word, that she constantly and properly identify, describe, define,

redefine, and name everything from mere objects to relationships, even to herself" (ibid.). In part, Yolanda's appreciation of the power of words stems from her own experience of powerlessness when she was unable to express herself in English. In prep school, for instance, "English was then still a party favor for [her]"; she had to "crack open the dictionary, find out if [she]d just been insulted, praised, admonished, criticized" (87). And from the traumatic experience of her oldest sister, Carla, who was harassed by a sexual predator but, because of her lack of English skills, was unable to describe the thug to the police, Yolanda knows that language can become a tool for survival.

Language is also the battleground of fierce conflicts within the García family, where accent-free English becomes Yolanda's means of rebellion against and liberation from paternal restrictions upon her individuality, restrictions that her father pronounces and her mother puts into practice.⁹ Yolanda sees language as an empowering tool of self-emancipation against sexism and misogyny of the patriarchal family tradition. In the narrative "Daughter of Invention," Yolanda's freedom of speech is not so much impeded by her limited (English) language skills—after all, she had been chosen to write and deliver the Teacher's Day address—but by her father's censorship. Inspired by the poetry of Walt Whitman, Yolanda writes a speech for Teacher's Day that is a celebration of herself and of American individualism. Considering Yolanda and her speech "boastful," "insubordinate," and "improper," her father tears the carefully scripted pages in half and with them Yolanda's newly gained self-confidence that she "finally sounded like herself in English" (143). While her mother enthusiastically supports the daughter's speech before the father condemns it, she later helps Yolanda rewrite a speech that meets the father's approval. Instead of affirming her daughter's right of free speech, Laura uses parts of a flattering speech her husband had given under the dictatorship of president Trujillo. Yolanda's mother thus becomes complicit in executing the laws of patriarchal society. In opposition to these patriarchal rules that Yolanda literally calls "patriarchal dictatorship," for instance when she refers to her father as "just another Chapita" (147), there is the promise of freedom in American democracy that Yolanda interprets into the United States, that is once she has mastered the English language.

Yolanda's emphasis on powerful, self-affirmative language also becomes a motive for her affirmation of her own name. Throughout the novel, different nicknames evoke her multiple identities in relation to her American life, her Dominican life, her identification as her mother's daughter, and her autonomous selfhood. At the beginning of the narrative "Joe," Álvarez introduces Yolanda by her many names: "Yolanda, nicknamed *Yo* in Spanish, misunderstood *Joe* in English, doubled and pronounced like the toy *Yoyo*—or when forced to selected from a rack of personalized key chains, *Joey*" (68 original emphases). In part, these nicknames imply the numerous facets of her cultural identity and the difficulty of translating/transferring her Hispanic heritage into an American context: thus, "Joey" is a linguistic compromise she settles for in a country in which her name is not mainstream; "Yoyo" is emblematic of the border-crossing between two "home" countries; and "Joe" implies the mispronunciations she confronts and causes when her English is unintelligible.

In addition to juggling two cultures, Yolanda's identity negotiation between independence from and identification with the mother is perhaps the novel's most complex evidence of the sense of ambivalence the young Dominican American protagonist experiences in relation to her new home country. Her resentment toward accepting the nickname "Yo" hints at a profound conflict in her relationship to her mother. The roots of this rejection of the nickname her mother had given her date back to the family's life in

the Dominican Republic. Mother Laura García, overburdened with the responsibility of raising four daughters close in age, cannot "indulge in identities" (41) and thus settles for "shortcuts" in the amounts of individual attention she dedicates to each of the four daughters (47). As the four adult García girls agree, by dressing them alike and after her own model, mother Laura sought to create small versions of herself (40). This underlying reproduction from the mother to the daughter is implied in Yolanda's nickname, "Yo," in Spanish the first-person pronoun "I." By calling her third daughter "Yo," Laura unmistakably claims Yolanda as part of herself and, by logical extension, as her own. Therefore, Yolanda's affirmation of her name is indicative of her attempt to distance herself from her mother and, in the long run, from the image of womanhood her mother embodies.

Álvarez's depiction of the mother-daughter conflict epitomizes the limitations of hierarchical power divisions in patriarchal societies in which a woman's entrance into the symbolic order can take place only at the expense of maintaining feminist coalitions, even a coalition with her own mother. The mother's identification through the daughter, as Nancy Chodorow asserts in *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Reproduction of Gender* (1978), and the daughter's attempted liberation from patriarchal ideals of gender reproduction are a problem in societies that discriminate against women. Such societies are *a priori* undemocratic. Because sexism is a product of chauvinistic divisions of society and because the mother-daughter conflict is a direct response to sexism within societies, the power struggle between mother and daughter questions the democratic principles of patriarchal societies. Otherwise, the daughter would not feel the urge to disassociate herself from the social and cultural location of her mother if this location did not suggest marginality/inferiority according to the measurements of mainstream politics. After all, as Suzanna Danuta Walters notes, it is much easier for the daughter to rebel against her mother "than against a sexist culture that feels overwhelmingly intractable" (233).

Ridiculing American Democracy

Whereas Álvarez's criticism of American democracy is informed by and becomes evident from depictions of a fierce mother-daughter conflict, Santiago's *Almost a Woman* literally ridicules American democracy on the level of American legislature and internal cultural politics. In the portrayal of Negi's difficulty with the English language, Santiago calls into question the monolithic, monolingual discourse of mainstream American society and the underrepresentation of cultural and ethnic diversity within the political discourse of the United States. Certainly, language and the classification of linguistic standards and variety formations often reflect political hierarchies within homogeneous definitions of societies. As Ashcroft and his coauthors assert, "[o]ne of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language. The imperial education system installs a 'standard' version of the metropolitan language as the norm, and marginalizes all 'variants' as impurities" (7). In this context, Negi's ESL problems point to the exclusivist definitions of American democracy, which marginalizes people who do not fit into the hegemonic paradigm of the white founding fathers. Santiago makes apparent this marginal location of Hispanic immigrants within American democracy in Negi's inadequate rendition of the American national anthem:

Ojo sé. Can. Juice. ¿Y?
Bye de don surly lie.

Whassoprowow we hell
 Add debt why lie lass gleam in.
 Whosebrods tripe sand bye ¿Stars?
 Trye de porro los ¡Ay!
 Order am parts we wash,
 Wha sogá lang tree stream in. (10)

Compare Santiago's phonetic transcription of Negi's misunderstandings with the original lyrics of the American national anthem:

Oh, say can you see,
 by the dawn's early light,
 What so proudly we hailed
 at the twilight's last gleaming?
 Whose broad stripes and bright stars,
 through the perilous fight,
 O'er the ramparts we watched,
 were so gallantly streaming?

Emblematic of her confusion about the boundaries between her Puerto Rican and American identities, Negi randomly mixes Spanish words with simple English terms that she has acquired in everyday situations, words such as juice, hell, debt, and lie, which, one might argue, characterize her experience of life in the United States. In "An American Childhood in the Dominican Republic" Álvarez narrates a similar incident of "merely parroting" the words of the American anthem in the new American school she transferred to since her mother had "no faith in Dominican schools." Like Santiago, Álvarez describes the circumstances of her misaligned pledge of allegiance with great humor: "[...] we began each day by pledging allegiance to the flag of the United States, which I much preferred to the Dominican one, for it had the lovely red-and-white stripes of the awning at the ice-cream parlor. We sang a song addressing Osaycanyousee, but since I didn't understand English very well and was merely parroting my class mates, I didn't know exactly what we were asking him for" (77). The protagonists' inability to understand and thus to reproduce the words of the American anthem is indicative of their marginality within mainstream American society. They do not know the meaning of the words they sing and thus produce renditions of the national anthem that sound somewhat like "the real thing" but do not really make sense.

Both authors respond to the lack of representation of cultural minorities in the U. S. political landscape with comic transcriptions of the national anthem and the principles of American democracy that are implied therein. Whereas Álvarez's account of her pledging allegiance to the U.S. flag is set in the context of the Americanization of the Caribbean through foreign indoctrination, Santiago's phonetic transcription of the essence of American democracy is a social commentary on the cultural displacement of ethnic immigrants in the United States. Calling the American Dream "a mystery" and considering the American anthem made up of "nonsense words" that are meaningless for, or at least do not represent the experience of, the economically and socially deprived Hispanic immigrants, Negi's highly amusing misinterpretation of "The Star-Spangled Banner" resonates the hard realities of ethnic American immigrants (*Almost* 10): it describes the sense of confusion, loss, and disillusionment felt once the words of the American anthem clash with the everyday experiences of poverty, racism, ghettoization, and violence in the barrios that

Negi's family faces on a day-to-day basis. Hence, Negi's "mis-tribute" to the American flag stands for the exclusion of ethnic minorities from mainstream definitions of American democracy. In the pre-civil rights setting of Puerto Rican American experiences, Negi's commodified self-definition as "other"—official inquiries offer "white," "black," and "other" as options of ethnic identification (*Almost* 56-57)—sums up her position as an undefined and indefinable subject according to the terminology provided by mainstream American society.

Santiago's protest against the principles of American democracy becomes evident not only from her confused transcription of the American anthem but also from the fact that she refuses to sing its entire first stanza. She leaves out the part about American warfare and, most significantly, the heralding of the United States as the "land of the free and the home of the brave," perhaps the quintessential and certainly most well-known line of American patriotism. This refusal to sing the lines about America's alleged status as the land of the free implies Santiago's skepticism about U.S. democracy. On the basis of her socialization into her new "homeland," and based on the complicated process of identity negotiations of Hispanic Americans, Santiago refuses to herald the United States as the land of the free.

With their counter-hegemonic discourses and social criticism of American cultural politics, Santiago's and Álvarez's depictions of the pre-immigrant colonization of Latin-Caribbean people through the economic and ideological dependency on the United States and the marginality and dislocation of ethnic minorities in a monolingual America calls into question America's attribute as the land of the free. Both authors imply the lack of freedom that Hispanic immigrants experience in their candid, and at times comic, portrayals of the cultural losses that their protagonists' transition into American culture entails. These losses become evident from the sense of depletion invoked in the titles of the individual texts. Santiago's nostalgic account of the times when she *was* Puerto Rican stands in opposition to her experiences as alien other in the United States. The loss of culture also prevails in Álvarez's depiction of how the García girls *lost* their accents and how with the losing of their accents they became Americanized to the point that they could no longer communicate with their Dominican heritage. Moreover, this sense of displacement is implied in the loss of the protagonist's sense of completeness, as in Santiago's remembering of the times when she was *almost* a woman. Finally this loss is suggested in the emergence of contradictory hybrid identities, such as in Álvarez's depiction of an American childhood in the Dominican Republic. These losses also surface in depictions of the protagonists' inability to place themselves within the language of the dominant culture and in their struggles to relocate their native cultures within mainstream American society.

The narrative descriptions of loss and displacement in Santiago's and Álvarez's texts are creative productions that challenge conceptual frameworks of American society. In writing about these losses, Santiago and Álvarez look back at the American empire from the vantage points of both postcolonial Caribbean and ethnic American subjects. In focusing on the persistent lack of democratic diversity, Santiago's and Álvarez's comic depictions of the cultural displacement of their young protagonists are subtle attacks on the rigid boundaries with which America defines its democratic constituency. Ultimately, then, the political locations from which these Latin-Caribbean American female authors write promote ethnic and gender emancipation.

Not only do Santiago's and Álvarez's texts point out the limitations of the hegemonic American political discourse with which their protagonists must determine their

immigrant identities, they also employ a discourse in which their protagonists' Caribbean and American experiences are inseparable. For instance, Santiago's mix of Spanish and English in her transcription of the American anthem in *Almost a Woman* suggests a sense of recuperation of her native language, and thus sets a sign of cultural resistance. What looks at first sight like a confused transcription of the American anthem can in fact be interpreted as Santiago's account of a pluralistic American society and thus as a subversive method of rewriting American democracy in her own terms. In all four texts, there are several instances in which the authors randomly mix Spanish expressions into their English diction. This commonplace technique in postcolonial literatures of maintaining a discourse "of selective lexical fidelity which leaves some words untranslated in the text is a more widely used device for conveying the sense of cultural distinctiveness [. . . and] not only acts to signify the difference between culture, but also illustrates the importance of discourse in interpreting cultural concepts" (Ashcroft et al 64). In *When I Was Puerto Rican*, for instance, Santiago even includes a glossary of the Spanish terms she uses; in addition, the individual chapters have Spanish epigraphs with English translations. Similarly, the backward chronology in Álvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* traces back the García girls' adoption of the English language to their native language. Álvarez's use of Spanish terms to describe personal and cultural idiosyncrasies, i.e. emotions and institutionalized conventions, invokes her multilingual heritage. Even in "An American Childhood in the Dominican Republic," in which she depicts the over-presence of American culture through foreign indoctrination and claims American culture so vehemently, Spanish words break the illusion of the homogeneous English discourse of the American empire. In the context of the authors' rewriting of democracy, this is an act of resistance toward the still prevailing English-only policy of American society.

Conclusion

As American authors of Latin-Caribbean descent, Santiago and Álvarez inscribe their native languages into the discourse of American literature, contributing thus to a more diverse picture of what American culture is. By scattering the hegemonic setup of American culture through language diversification, Santiago and Álvarez inevitably force us to reconsider definitions of American culture, society, and finally of American democracy that reverberate the diverse and complex experiences of ethnic Americans. They epitomize Jules Chametzky's notion in "Reflections of Multilingualism" that "Our sense of ourselves as a society is more complex (and more interesting?) than ever—our newer writers as pilots navigating the ever-changing river of America are showing us new depths, and through the new and expanding work of scholarship, a richer multilingual ancestry" (350).

No matter how diverse American society has become, the question about "where you're from" continues to constitute a double standard between the realities of equal representation versus equal accountability in the everyday experiences of ethnic minorities with American democracy and the constitutional discourse that defines America as democracy. This double standard, as Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt have pointed out in a recent essay, impacts the lives of ethnic immigrants in the form of borders that seem too solid to be moved or deconstructed: "But borders [are markers of alienation] also for those strangers from a different shore who chose to be an immigrant, or were forced to choose, and then found their very presence made alien one generation after the next. Even for their descendants, whose border zones and border towns may not be always so dra-

matically marked but are still there, in daily events such as the question 'but where are you *really* from?' (7 original emphasis). This normalcy implied by the question of "where you're from" becomes the precondition for identity locations that place ethnic immigrants in or in relation to American culture. Therefore, the question of "where you're at" is omnipresent in Álvarez's and Santiago's literary agency and location. Their depictions of their respective origins rely as much on renegotiations in relation to American culture as do their depictions of identity negotiations of immigrants in the United States. With this ubiquitous focus on American society—not so much in terms of their immigrant protagonists' assimilation or socialization into American culture, but, more acutely, in their attempts at reinvestigation and redetermining American society in their own terms—Álvarez and Santiago deconstruct the very borders of American society as a hegemonic institution that their protagonists seek to usurp.

Thus, Álvarez's and Santiago's texts not only renegotiate ethnic immigrant experiences of exile and diaspora, they open up possibilities for the emergence of new discourses on the constituency of American society. Because they are rewriting American democracy by adding diversity to the canon of American literature and by explicitly writing Latin-Caribbean immigrant experiences into American society, Santiago and Álvarez raise issues about the present-day status, constituency, and definition of American society in general. Santiago's and Álvarez's works thus make apparent the fact that the question of "where you're at" concerns not only ethnic immigrants in the United States, but American society at large.

Notes

I presented a shorter, somewhat different version of this article under the title "Ridiculing American Democracy: Language and Cultural Displacement through Children's Eyes in Esmeralda Santiago and Julia Álvarez" at MESEA: Multi-Ethnic Studies of Europe and the Americas 4th Biennial Conference, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece, 22 May 2004.

¹ I am aware of the power hierarchy that the distinction between mainstream and nonmainstream cultures implies. Although I do not mean to reinforce this dichotomy, I shall use it for the purpose of this essay since Álvarez's and Santiago's texts exemplify how the nonmainstream is always produced in relation to, and thus inadvertently conjures up, standards that define mainstream American culture.

² See, for instance, Ellen C. Mayock, "The Bicultural Construction of Self in Cisneros, Álvarez, and Santiago," *Bilingual Review* 23.3 (Sep-Dec 1998): p. 223, 7pp.

³ In two instances, American relations to the Caribbean challenge the political concept of democracy per se. On the one hand, Caribbean immigrants experience ethnic and social marginality in the United States. For instance, the fact that Third World immigrants, as Robert Blauner argues, experience a similar set of problems concerning their socialization, cultural survival, and economic possibilities in the United States as they did in their homeland "is a bold attack on the myth that America is the land of the free" (Takaki 149). On the other hand, American economic interest in the Caribbean has contributed to the political landscape of the Caribbean, which, as Shalini Puri specifies, "has some of the world's most precarious nation-states, often marked by neo-colonial dependency, global capital's assaults on sovereignty, cyclical and mass migrations of populations, environmental and cultural ravages, and bitter ethnic tensions among the member of disparate diasporas" (14).

⁴ I am indebted to an anonymous reader of an earlier draft of this article for pointing out this paradox.

⁵ William Safran, for instance, defines a diaspora consciousness that is "an intellectualization of an existential condition" and that is related to the sense of displacement from the actual homeland or the country of origin (87).

⁶ Ien Ang points out the lack of transparency when cultural and national identity have become conflated (10).

⁷ As Roberto González Echevarría explains, the "constant cross-fertilization" makes it especially difficult for Hispanic migrants and immigrants to establish roots in the United States. González Echevarría argues that they have "old countries that are neither old nor remote. Even those born [in the United States] often travel to their parents' homeland, and constantly face a flow of friends and relatives from 'home' who keep the culture current. This constant cross-fertilization makes assimilation a more complicated process for them than for other minority groups" (28).

⁸ This backward chronology, with "two beginnings and two endings, physical and chronological ones," as William Luis argues (840), privileges the second set of narratives, the decade between 1960 and 1970, the years of the daughters' bicultural identity formation and difficult translation into an American context.

⁹ See, for instance, Julie Barak, "Turning and Turning in the Widening Gyre: A Second Coming into Language in Julia Álvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*," *MELUS* 23.1 (Spring 1998): 159-76; Ricardo Castells, "The Silence of Exile in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*," *Bilingual Review* 26.1 (Jan. 2001-Apr. 2002): 34-42; and Ibis Gómez-Vega, "Hating the Self in the Other or How Yolanda Learns to See Her Own Kind in Julia Álvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*," *Intertexts* 3.1 (1999): 85-96.

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