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Bilingualism and Identity in Julia Alvarez's Poem "Bilingual Sestina"

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US Latino literature in English, especially by Chicano and Puerto Rican (and, to a lesser extent, Cuban American) writers, has long been included in ethnic studies and American literature curricula in North American colleges and universities. Fueled by an ever-increasing interest in multicultural literature in both the marketplace and the classroom, by the changing demographic patterns of Spanish-speaking immigrants, by the rise of the field of Literatures of the Americas, and by innovative thinking in many Spanish departments in recent years about what constitutes Spanish American literature and culture, the diverse body of Latino literature at this time is receiving broader scholarly and pedagogical consideration than ever. That these authors are uniquely and personally caught between cultural worlds is evident in their dual use of English and Spanish.

Some authors, like Miguel Méndez M. and the late Tomás Rivera, write almost exclusively in Spanish, while others write in both literary languages. The Puerto Rican Esmeralda Santiago, for example, rewrote in Spanish her first book, the memoir *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1993). In the introduction to *Cuando era puertorriqueña* (1994), Santiago contemplates the linguistic challenges she faced as a bilingual author writing about a bicultural experience:

La vida relatada en este libro fue vivida en español, pero fue inicialmente escrita en inglés. Muchas veces, al escribir, me sorprendí al oírme hablar en español mientras mis dedos tecleaban la misma frase en inglés. Entonces se me trababa la lengua y perdía el sentido de lo que estaba diciendo y escribiendo, como si el observar que estaba traduciendo de un idioma al otro me hiciera perder los dos. [. . .]

Cuando la editora Merloyd Lawrence me ofreció la oportunidad de escribir mis memorias, nunca me imaginé que el proceso me haría confrontar no sólo a mi pasado monolingüístico, sino también a mi presente bilingüe. [. . .]

Cuando la editora Robin Desser me ofreció la oportunidad de traducir mis memorias al español para esta edición, nunca me imaginé que el proceso me haría confrontar cuánto español se me había olvidado. (xv-xvi)

The life told in this book was lived in Spanish, although it was initially written in English. Many times, when writing, I was surprised to hear myself speaking in Spanish while my fingers were typing the same sentence in English. Then I would get tongue-tied and lose the sense of what I was saying and writing, as if observing that I was translating from one language to the other had made me lose both of them. [. . .]

When the editor Merloyd Lawrence offered me the opportunity to write my memoirs, I never imagined that the process would force me to confront not only my monolingual past but also my bilingual present. [. . .]

When the editor Robin Desser offered me the opportunity to translate my memoirs into Spanish for this edition, I never imagined that the process would force me to confront how much Spanish I had forgotten. (xv-xvi; my trans.)

In light of this conflict it is not surprising that Santiago's second memoir was translated professionally.¹ The Los Angeles-based Mexican writer María Amparo Escandón also has written both in English and in her native Spanish.

The case of the Puerto Rican writer Rosario Ferré illustrates the opposite situation. After writing exclusively in Spanish, Ferré began to write in English; she has written three novels in English and has served as her own translator. Other Latin American writers who grow up in bilingual contexts oscillate similarly between first and second languages; Ariel Dorfman, Gustavo Pérez Firmat, and Ilan Stavans are some who have found literary inspiration in this

biographical circumstance.² Despite such suggestive forays into writing in the other language (whether Spanish or English), however, the admixture of Spanish and English in works written primarily in English is still far more prevalent in Latino literature.

The Dominican American writer Julia Alvarez has examined repeatedly, in a variety of genres, issues of language and cultural identity, in her own life story as well as in the experiences of her fictional characters. In her celebrated first novel, the autobiographical *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), the four García sisters, recently immigrated to the United States from the Dominican Republic, confront their linguistic identity as a necessary part of their growing acculturation. In Carla's experience, for example, standard gender- and ethnicity-based schoolyard harassment assumes linguistic overtones: "She hated having to admit [that she didn't speak very much English] since such an admission proved, no doubt, the boy gang's point that she didn't belong here" (156). In light of similar hostility, Yolanda, a budding writer and Alvarez's alter ego, quickly "[takes] root in the language" (141): she writes "secret poems in her new language" (136) and becomes increasingly "taken with words and their meanings" (93). She ultimately delights in English, as a child in a new toy: "English was then [in high school] still a party favor for me—crack open the dictionary, find out if I'd just been insulted, praised, admonished, criticized" (87). In short, as Joan Hoffman determines in her study of language and identity in *García Girls*, "Words are inseparable from Yolanda's identity" (23), and her "interest in words can be traced precisely to her immigrant experience" (23).

This process of linguistic realization is largely completed by the time Yolanda takes center stage as an anglophone writer in *Yo!* (1997), so the question of language choice vis-à-vis identity is less of an issue in Alvarez's second autobiographical novel. Nonetheless, in the titles of both novels, Alvarez consciously plays with linguistic concepts—foreign accents and the first-person singular subject pronoun *yo* (also the nickname of Yolanda, the protagonist)—to emphasize the identity of the characters.³ Moreover, any careful reader with a knowledge of Spanish orthography quickly notices that the eponymous characters are not so easily anglicized, as the correct application of Spanish accentuation (*García*) and punctuation (the inverted initial exclamation point) reveals.

Nowhere is Alvarez's central preoccupation with language as it relates to identity more unequivocal than in the collection of essays *Something to Declare* (1998). Indeed, much of what she has to declare concerns language and writing. In an expository journey that takes place in rough chronological order, Alvarez traces her earliest experiences with English as a child in the Dominican Republic, her "growing distance from Spanish" ("La Gringuita" 63) and conflicted self-awareness as a "hybrid" or "hyphenated" person" ("La Gringuita" 66), and her ongoing interest in words and writing as a means of finding a place for herself in a new country and a second language. Even the title and the suggestively named sections of *Something to Declare*, "Customs" and "Declarations," underscore the interdependence of culture and language, especially as identified with immigration. Such double-entendres accentuate the role of language as a metaphor for identity, Dominican and American, in Alvarez's world view, an issue she raises frequently when discussing the writing life.

Alvarez once questioned whether she could belong to American literature because English was her second language:

As a young writer, I was on guard *against* the Latina in me, the Spanish in me because as far as I could see the models that were presented to me did not include my world. In fact, I was told by one teacher in college that one could only write poetry in the language in which one first said Mother. That left me out of American literature, for sure. ("Local Touch" 68)

In another essay, "An Unlikely Beginning for a Writer," Alvarez recounts the same event.⁴ Feelings of linguistic inadequacy also plague the fictional Yolanda García as an adult: "That poet she met at Lucinda's party the night before argued that no matter how much of it one lost, in the midst of some profound emotion, one would revert to one's mother tongue" (*García Girls* 13). This unnerves Yolanda, who has become English-dominant and speaks only "halting Spanish" (7).

The extent to which Alvarez reconfigures the foregoing anecdote in her speeches and her writing confirms the central role of language choice as a fundamental aesthetic precept. Alvarez, too, is English-dominant: she "now speak[s her] native language 'with

an accent'" ("La Gringuita" 61); that is, "like a ten-year-old in. . . halting, childhood Spanish" ("La Gringuita" 66). Even so, that childhood language inevitably influences Alvarez's style: "[W]hat most surprises me [. . .] is [. . .] how much of my verbal rhythm, my word choices, my attention to the sound of my prose comes from my native language as spoken by la familia" ("Family Matters" 126). In a personal essay on her morning reading habits, Alvarez revisits the complex relationship between English and Spanish in her creative process:

I made a discovery one summer when I was reading poetry in Spanish in the early morning. I'd move on to my writing and find myself encountering difficulties, drawing blanks [. . .] as I tried to express a thought or capture an image. [. . . T]he whole rhythm of my thinking and writing had switched to my first, native tongue. I was translating into, not writing in, English. ("Writing Matters" 286)

Alvarez now believes that her literary language, her English, at once simulates her mother tongue and reflects her Dominican identity: "I think that the place, the language, the Spanish language, which is [. . .] also the rhythm [. . .] of those palm trees and the waves coming in and the sounds and smells, get into my English and the way that I write" (Interview with Chessher 58). The author's bilingualism is unambiguously inseparable from her self-identity.

The specific issue of bilingualism and self-identity is not present in Alvarez's two historical novels, *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994) and *In the Name of Salomé* (2000), which novelize nation-building and other aspects of Dominican history rather than the author's life story. Nevertheless, the broader theme of identity *per se* is paramount throughout Alvarez's *oeuvre*, and both novels do address that topic as it relates to not only nationalism but also feminism. Moreover, Alvarez's fictitious characters are never far removed from writing and literature. For example, the fictionalized account of the historical "Butterflies" ("Las Mariposas," the four Mirabal sisters Patria, Minerva, Dedé, and María Teresa) is replete with diary and letter writing, journalism, poetry, and storytelling.⁵ In fact, the spunky and literary Minerva is a Yolanda García-like character, even though she portrays not Alvarez's alter ego but a historical figure, Minerva Mirabal (1926-1960). Similarly, Salomé

Ureña de Henríquez (1850-1897), the title character of Alvarez's latest novel, is a writer who uses her poetry and her status as the Dominican national poet to a political end: the independence of the Dominican Republic in the nineteenth century. In addition, the titles of the eight chapters of *In the Name of Salomé* all derive from Salomé's poems, and Salomé's daughter, Camila Henríquez Ureña (1894-1973), is a Spanish professor in the United States. Alvarez also celebrates identity in her lyric poetry, in topics as seemingly divergent as housework and female identity in the "Housekeeping" poems in both editions of *Homecoming*, ethnic identity to varying degrees in each collection, and bilingualism (especially in "Bilingual Sestina"). In other words, Alvarez's preoccupation with language and identity embodies an integral and omnipresent component of her writing.

Identity, of course, has been a mainstay of much of the Alvarez criticism to date, especially in her autobiographical and historical novels, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and *In the Time of the Butterflies* in particular. *Butterflies* criticism, for example, tends to concentrate on Dominican or feminist identity vis-à-vis history; the scholarship on *García Girls*, on feminism, linguistic identity, and other personal and historical issues of the Dominican American cross-cultural experience.⁶ Once the criticism has caught up with Alvarez's more recent publications, the same probably will prove true of *In the Name of Salomé*. Further, the critical application of concepts like autoethnography (Ortiz on *García Girls*), historiographic metafiction (Brown on *Butterflies*), and metapoetry (Umpierre on four sonnets in *Homecoming*), suggests the degree to which writing—about the self, about history, or about writing poetry—dominates Alvarez's subject matter. The scholars of Alvarez's poetry have taken up similar problems: sexuality, poetic creation, and the formation of the female or bicultural self.⁷ The proportionately little criticism devoted to Alvarez's poetry, however, generally focuses on cultural or theoretical considerations without adequate attention to poetic form. Kathrine Varnes's powerful study of the interplay of identity, form, and poetic tradition in *Housekeeping* (with a brief foray into "Bilingual Sestina" [70]) is a notable exception. The following explication of a single poem by Alvarez also demonstrates the degree to which

this interplay both permeates the content of her work and shapes her poetics.

The poem "Bilingual Sestina" is a particularly apt example of Alvarez's poetics of identity. Alvarez structures all her books with painstaking attention to semantic and formal detail,⁸ and the placement of "Bilingual Sestina" at the beginning of *The Other Side/El otro lado* (1995) is significant. As the single-poem section that opens the six-part collection, "Bilingual Sestina" is emblematic of the bilingual writer's search for expression while living between two languages and cultures. Many of the poems in the collection incorporate words or phrases in Spanish, and several (especially the section "Making Up the Past" and the title poem, "The Other Side/*El otro lado*") explore the author's experiences as an immigrant in the United States and as a visitor in the Dominican Republic. The bilingual title of the collection similarly alludes to the myriad borders that mediate the complementary facets of Alvarez's composite identity as a Latina writer: English and Spanish, the United States and the Dominican Republic, the present and the past.

Interestingly enough, these are some of the same borders the García girls confront and cross in their individual quests for identity.⁹ Consequently, certain constants in the *García Girls* criticism are quite relevant to "Bilingual Sestina." The García sisters' "confusion and conflicted feelings about their island past and [. . .] U. S. present," their "experiences with language," and their search for "sense" (Barak 161) are the same confusion, experiences, and search for meaning the poetic persona undergoes in "Bilingual Sestina." She, like Yolanda García, finds herself "caught between languages and cultures" (Barak 160), in a place where "words are crucial to her very identity" (Hoffman 24). By the same token, it is this poetic persona, like Yolanda, "who fights Alvarez's language battles" and "whose quest is identity and whose vehicle is language" (Rosario-Sievert 132). In the sestina as in the novel, "the struggle with language [. . .] highlights the need to find the strength and self-assurance to forge an assimilated dual identity [. . .] that both melds and celebrates cultural and linguistic elements from the Old World and the New" (Hoffman 22). In fact, a correlation between several other Alvarez works can be comprehended just as clearly in "Bilingual Sestina": "[*Homecoming, How*

the García Girls Lost Their Accents, and *In the Time of the Butterflies*] provide Alvarez with the fictional framework to reconcile her personal dilemma of being *una gringa [d]ominicana*, a woman caught in the tangle of two cultures and two languages, a woman who writes in a language that is not her mother tongue" (Rosario-Sievert 125). Ultimately, this concern "permeates each successive work" (Rosario-Sievert 126).

Another point of contact between "Bilingual Sestina" and *García Girls* is the form-content relationship, and the criticism on that novel proves instructive once again. Joan Hoffman, for example, observes that "language, in both its form and content, is an important unifying agent [in *García Girls*]" (22). In a similar vein, Julie Barak analyzes how "[Alvarez's] structural and narrative choices reverberate in her thematic material as she examines the different vocabularies the girls learn in their circulation between languages and cultures, struggling to find their identities" (161). Alvarez herself has identified the thematic consideration that determined the formal choice to arrange *García Girls* in a reverse chronology: "I wanted the reader to be thinking like an immigrant, forever going back" ("A Clean Windshield" 132). Alvarez's poetry is even more inherently prone to formal-semantic symbiosis, as Kathrine Varnes explains in her study of *Homecoming* and "Bilingual Sestina": "[T]he site of [Alvarez's] faithfulness to identity is [. . .] demarcated by her aesthetic choices: content, language, and form" (69). In "Bilingual Sestina," Alvarez similarly mixes form and content—and English and Spanish—to implicitly explore her identity as a bilingual writer. That she has written such an accomplished work under the rigid constraints of the sestina form (and primarily in English, her second language) belies both her earlier reservations about her place in American literature and the assertion in the poem that she is unable to express herself adequately "*en inglés*."

A sestina is a highly structured poetic composition that is comprised of six six-line stanzas and a three-line concluding stanza known as an envoy. Instead of a rhyme scheme, the words at line end in the first stanza recur according to a preordained arrangement in the subsequent sexains and in the envoy. In each of the second through the sixth sexains, the end-words from lines six,

one, five, two, four, and three from the preceding stanza appear in that order in lines one through six; in the envoy, the end-words from the final three lines of the last sexain appear as end-words, while the remaining recurrent words are used internally. Poets and theorists have pointed out how the intricate formal design of the sestina bears upon its content:

Elaborate repetitions build up over thirty-nine lines: [. . .] These patterns of repetition are constructed across a selected number of key words, so that in the end the sestina becomes a game of meaning, played with sounds and sense. [. . .]

Repetition becomes a form of affirmation, a way of establishing fixity. (Strand and Boland, "The Sestina" 22, 24)

In "Bilingual Sestina" five of these "key words"—"said," "English," "words," "*nombres*," and "Spanish"—do indeed work together to establish and affirm a singular aesthetic goal. The poet Richard Wilbur offers further insight into the formal peculiarities of the sestina: "If you're writing out of obsession, I think the sestina might very well serve you very well. An inability to stay away from certain words and [the need to] emphasize those things could be expressed by the sestina" (qtd. in Cummins 134). While it might not be wholly accurate to characterize as "obsessed" a writer as focused yet self-possessed as Alvarez, clearly "Bilingual Sestina" does manifest the requisite triumvirate of obsession, repetition, and affirmation in its formal and thematic articulation of a bilingual aesthetic.

Notwithstanding this fixed composition, as with any structural pattern in poetry there is ample room for flexibility, and Alvarez makes the sestina form her own in a variety of ways. First, five of the six end-words ("said," "English," "words," "*nombres*," and "Spanish") not only are overtly interrelated, they also reinforce the title of the poem, both semantically and by virtue of their privileged position at the end of the line. Not all sestinas exhibit such a heightened thematic focus in the repeated words, even though one of the features of the form is that "the same ideas [. . .] occur to the mind in a succession of different aspects, which nonetheless resemble one another" (Preminger and Scott 1146). That the remaining word, "closed," is also integral to the subject at hand will become apparent only in the envoy at the end of the poem.

Second, the words sometimes recur as lexical variants rather than verbatim. Thus, “said” changes into “say” and “saying”; “words,” into “word is” and “world.” Third, within the bilingual context, Spanish and its translation back into English offer an additional resolution to the problem of lexical variants. The transformation of “*nombre(s)*” into “numbering” and “names” is a notable example of how the author’s bilingualism influences the composition of the poem. And while “names,” of course, is a direct translation of “*nombres*,” its reconfiguration as “numbering” in the fifth stanza indicates the complex linguistic associations between Spanish (the noun *nombre[s]* and the verb *nombrar*) and English (*name[s]*, *number*). Finally, the end-words “English” and “Spanish” remain invariable throughout the sexains until the last line of the poem, when “English” is transposed into its Spanish equivalent, “*inglés*.” This rhetorical *tour de force* is further testament to Alvarez’s singular purpose in “Bilingual Sestina.”¹⁰

Up to this point Alvarez has respected the requirements of the sestina form, but here she abandons the paradigm by changing the structure of the envoy. Significantly, not only does she favor “English” and “Spanish” (from lines two and six) over the specified end-words “said,” “closed,” and “*nombres*” (from lines one, three, and five), she also breaks her own pattern by translating “English” into “*inglés*” at the conclusion of the poem. However, it is precisely by flexing the sestina form in each of the aforementioned compositional manners—the interrelated words at line end, the lexical variants, the invariability of the words “English” and “Spanish” until the surprise poem-ending reference to the English language with a Spanish word—that Alvarez furthers her claim to a bilingual aesthetic.

A linguistic lexicon pervades “Bilingual Sestina” from start to finish, at line end, and everywhere in between. The first and last words, “[b]ilingual” and “*inglés*,” underscore the very notion of the Spanish-English bilingualism that encompasses the poem. The significant end-words are repeated internally for further emphasis. The vocabulary of language is omnipresent: “sounds,” “language,” “sing” and “sang,” “mouth,” “listening,” “I mean,” “I hear.” Some of the linguistic references—“vocabulary words,” “synonyms,” and words used as words—are unconventional as poetic language.

Others—"translate" and "translations," the frequent commentaries comparing and contrasting English and Spanish, and the italicized Spanish words and expressions that appear in every stanza—underscore the significance of both languages in Alvarez's poetics. In all cases, word and world are constantly counterpoised, and the metaphor of language as world predominates. Alvarez characterizes life as a monolingual Spanish speaker as "the world before English / turned *sol, tierra, cielo, luna* to vocabulary words"; these are among the words "from that first world [the poet] can't translate from Spanish." In contrast to the "snowy" coldness of English, Spanish has a warming effect: the sounds of Spanish names undulate and cleanse, "like warm island waters," and the expression "*¡Qué calor!*" actually "warm[s] the sun." Such images reinforce Alvarez's belief in the power of words to influence the world.

The substitution of "world" for "words" in the fifth stanza makes explicit the aesthetic association between words and the world and asserts the need to translate both:

Rosario, muse of *el patio*, sing in me and through me say
that world again, begin first with those first words

you put in my mouth as you pointed to the world—

Technically, the end-word of the first line of a sexain should duplicate the word from the last line of the preceding sexain (here, "words"). The repetition in close proximity both emphasizes the sense of the word and provides structural and semantic links between the two contiguous stanzas, each of which is similarly connected to the other stanzas. The formal synthesis of "words" and "world" in this manner affirms their semantic correspondence within the context of the poem.

Alvarez is highly conscious of the symbiotic relationship between word and world: "I left the Dominican Republic and landed not in the United States but in either the English language or the world of the imagination" (Interview with Rosario-Sievert 32). In "An Unlikely Beginning for a Writer," Alvarez characterizes these earliest years in the United States as "eight [years] of beginning to move toward words" (193), stating unequivocally that she "found [in] language, not in the United States, a new homeland" (197).

Alvarez realized this as early as the sixth grade, upon first awakening to the creative possibilities of English: "I was no longer a foreigner with no ground to stand on. I had landed in the English language" ("My English" 29). Before "coming to this country and this new language" ("First Muse" 145), Alvarez had "lived in another country and in another language" (133). A final example leaves no possible doubt about the interplay of language and place as an aesthetic point of departure: "[I] surely [know] where [my] roots really are—deep in the terra firma of the language" ("Coming Home" 120).

Naming the world is another recurrent image in *The Other Side*.¹¹ In one poem, for example, a new lover spends the night "naming everything" ("You Remember the Definitions, Not the Words" 99). Later, the poet tries to teach a young deaf-mute girl, Esther, to speak and read by "looking for things / to name" ("Estel" 154). She informs Esther that "the world / expressed in words is yours" (154), and warns her at the same time that "there will always be this sheerest gap / between the world and the word" (155). In "Bilingual Sestina," the end-word "*nombres*" and its nominal and verbal variants in English and Spanish ("names," "name," "*nombre*," and "numbering") appear a total of ten times. Additionally, Alvarez enumerates names of things and of people from her past as she considers how those names (and the world they summon) bear upon the process of writing poetry in the present. She also remembers Rosario, the family employee who taught the young Julia her "first words," as "a country girl numbering / the stars, the blades of grass." Later in life, the presence of two sets of names for words, one in Spanish and one in English, complicates the creative process and the world alike:

Some things I have to say aren't getting said
in this snowy, blond, blue-eyed, gum-chewing English:
[.]
—the world was simple and intact in Spanish—

Once again Alvarez asserts the inextricable (if conflicted) relationship between English and Spanish, between word and world.

The word "closed," seemingly unrelated semantically to the other end-words, figures prominently in the encounter between

Spanish and English in "Bilingual Sestina." The word encompasses the human and the natural worlds as it recurs in the first five stanzas: "*persianas* closed," "[l]anguage closed," "leaves closed," "slatted windows closed," "morning closed." The sense of impediment and of lack of communication, both physical and verbal, conveyed in these images reverberates throughout the poem. The poet discloses that things "aren't getting said" in English and that there are words and *nombres* she "can't translate" from Spanish. Her linguistic exhaustion climaxes with the insistence of the repeated negative "no" that connects the final two sexains:

[.] *no English*

yet in my head to confuse me with translations, *no English*
 doubling the world with synonyms, *no dizzying array of words*
 (emphasis added)

By equating English with a "dizzying array of words" that confounds with "translations" and "synonyms," the poem's young speaker unequivocally identifies Spanish as her language of choice at that point in time. Simultaneously, however, Alvarez hints that this lack of expression is not exclusively the result of losing a first language and gaining a second: "Even Spanish / failed us back then when we saw how frail a word is / when faced with the thing it names." Spanish and English can be equally imperfect: in the family home in the Dominican Republic, "*palabras* left behind for English / stand dusty and awkward in neglected Spanish." The materialization of language in this image reaffirms the crucial link between word and world in Alvarez's estimation.

The modification of "closed" into "close" in the final two stanzas finally connects those words semantically to the other end-words, "said," "English," "words," "*nombres*," and "Spanish":

—the world was simple and intact in Spanish—
luna, sol, casa, luz, flor, as if the *nombres*
 were the outer skin of things, as if words were so close
 one left a mist of breath on things by saying

their names, an intimacy I now yearn for in English—
 words so close to what I mean that I almost hear my Spanish

heart beating, beating inside what I say *en inglés*.

In the repetition of the phrase “words [. . .] so close,” the physical presence of “things” (the moon, the sun, a house, light, a flower) yields to the semantic proximity of English words to Spanish meanings. Once again, world and word (as English and Spanish) have found common ground in “Bilingual Sestina.”

Finally, the development of the images throughout the poem progresses from lack of communication (“closed”) to expression (“close”), and culminates in the envoy with the recognition of English as a viable literary language: “I almost hear my Spanish / heart beating, beating inside what I say *en inglés*.” It is at once ironic and poetic that Alvarez uses Spanish to affirm her acceptance of English. That these are the last words of the poem further emphasizes the constant flux between the two languages and their compatibility in the author’s aesthetics. This fact in turn articulates the crucial role of the envoy in providing “a summary and rounding off of the subject and argument of the poem” (Strand and Boland, “Envoi” 290). In this way Alvarez establishes “Bilingual Sestina” as a truly bilingual poem that derives its meaning from the very combination of languages.

“Bilingual Sestina” is an *ars poetica* about words: words in Spanish, words in English, and how the bilingual writer comes to terms with choosing those words to name the world. For the poet Julia Alvarez, coming to terms with words has meant coming to terms with her bilingual and bicultural identity, that is, with the world. “Bilingual Sestina” acknowledges the journey from the other side of language and culture and back again. This is no longer the adolescent girl who encourages herself, “Translate yourself, *niña*, [. . .] put English words in your mouth” (“Sound Bites” 41); nor is it the first-published poet who tries not to “call attention to [her] foreignness” lest her readers “question [her] right to write in English” (“Coming Home” 119). This is the mature voice of the experienced writer who simultaneously embraces Spanish and English, for while the heart still may beat in Spanish, the words emerge *en inglés*.

Notes

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1. Nina Torres-Vidal translated Santiago's second memoir, *Almost a Woman* (1998; *Casi una mujer* [1999]).
2. Escandón wrote her first novel both in English and in Spanish: *Esperanza's Box of Saints* (1999) and *Santitos* (1998). Ferré's novels in English are *The House on the Lagoon* (1995), *Eccentric Neighborhoods* (1998), and *Flight of the Swan* (2001). Previously Ferré had translated into English her collection of short stories, *Maldito amor* (1986; *Sweet Diamond Dust* [1996]). See also these memoirs: Dorfman, *Heading South, Looking North: A Bilingual Journey* (1998); Pérez Firmat, *Next Year in Cuba: A "Cubano's" Coming-of-Age in America* (1995); and Stavans, *On Borrowed Words: A Memoir of Language* (2001).
3. Rosario-Sievert points out further wordplay in the analogy between the title *¡Yo!* and "street language and slang" (138n3).
4. In "An Unlikely Beginning" Alvarez writes: "I have not written a poem in months. A famous poet visited our school last fall and, during a guest workshop, he declared that 'there has never been, and I wager there will never be, a quality poet who writes in a language other than the one he first said Mama in.' I've believed him and been silenced" (192). Later, of course, the experienced Julia Alvarez eloquently defends the complexities of her identification as a Dominican American writer and a Vermont writer (not a Dominican writer, even though her heritage language is Spanish). See the essays "Doña Aida, with Your Permission" and "A Vermont Writer from the Dominican Republic." (I am indebted to the anonymous reader who pointed out the relevance of "Doña Aída" and "A Vermont Writer" to my argument.)
5. These include the anti-Trujillo verse drama that Minerva and her friends write in the convent school in 1944 (25-28); the chapters of *Butterflies* that are a diary kept by the youngest sister, María Teresa (30-43, 118-47, 227-56); Minerva's affinity for poetry and for writing "poems and papers and letters" (43); Lío's letters to Minerva; and the storytelling that is a hallmark of all of Alvarez's novels.
6. See, for instance, Bados Ciria, Brown, and Valerio Holguín on *Butterflies*. Barak and Hoffman exemplify the mentioned tendencies in *García Girls* criticism.
7. Rosario-Sievert, for example, offers a psychoanalytic approach to the psychological, cultural, and linguistic ramifications of separation anxiety with regard to language and identity in *Homecoming*, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, and *In the Time of the Butterflies*. Vela interprets motifs of poetry writing in Alvarez's "most ambitious and mature poetry" (40), including "Bilingual Sestina," as part of a desire to "[invent] an adaptable, surviving self" (33). Umpierre's work is a feminist approach to sexuality and metapoetry in the final four sonnets of "33," a sonnet sequence in *Homecoming* (1984 edition).

8. Among the novels, the surprising reverse chronological arrangement of *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* is an oft-noted technical feature. *In the Time of the Butterflies* exhibits a similar interest in chronological structure. Each of the three sections begins in 1994, the present moment in which the story is written; subsequent chapters develop sequentially from 1938 to 1960, ending in 1994 with an epilogue to frame the novel. The structural unity of *¡Yo!* revolves around the genres, modes, and techniques that designate each chapter's unique perspective on the eponymous protagonist. For example, each chapter title pairs the featured character or characters with a metaliterary allusion, as in "The Sisters—Fiction" (3-18), "The Mother—Nonfiction" (21-35), "The Student—Variation" (170-86), and "The Third Husband—Characterization" (258-76). *In the Name of Salomé*, the *pièce de résistance* of Alvarez's masterful experimentation with narrative structure, incorporates a complex arrangement of parallel chapters that alternate between Spanish and English titles, between two chronologies, and between the biographies of mother and daughter (Salomé Ureña and Camila Henríquez Ureña) until the stories converge at the same point in time. Alvarez does not sacrifice creative composition in her non-fiction writing or her poetry. The twenty-four essays of *Something to Declare* are divided quite pointedly in equal parts between the family-focused ("Customs") and the writing-centered ("Declarations"), a detail punctuated and anchored by a final essay in each section ("Family Matters" and "Writing Matters"). The revisions of existing poems and the additions to the collection in the second version of *Homecoming* underscore Alvarez's vision that the new book's structure reflect her emerging Latina persona, as distinct from the original feminist voice ("Coming Home" 119-20). Even *Seven Trees* (1998), a luxury edition limited to only fifty publicly available copies, elaborates a similarly intricate structure, its seven autobiographical poems chronologically built around a tree metaphor based on the lithographs of Sara Eichner. Structure, then, is a key compositional element in the books of Julia Alvarez.

9. Two key identity issues in *García Girls* that obviously do not pertain to "Bilingual Sestina" are "struggles with patriarchy" (Barak 161) and "sexual awakening" (Hoffman 23).

10. Alvarez uses a similar model in another sestina, "Charges" (in the 1996 version of the "Housekeeping" poems). Here the end-words are also interrelated within the context of how much the poetic speaker feels she should be paid for helping around the house: "free," "paid"/"pay"/"payment," "job," "fee(s)," "sweep"/"swept"/"swept away," and "house." Again Alvarez challenges the expectations of the sestina by adding a seventh related word to the mix at the end of the envoy: "mother." What Alvarez herself has said about crafting the sonnet could be applied effectively to her approach to the sestina: "By learning to work the sonnet structure and yet remaining true to my own voice, I made myself at home in that form" ("Housekeeping Cages" 18). She certainly has made herself at home in the sestina form, too.

11. See Vela (34-37) for a detailed study of the themes of naming, saying, and creative process in Alvarez's poetry, including "Bilingual Sestina" (35).

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