



New Ways of Telling: Latinas' Narratives of Exile and Return

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## New Ways of Telling: Latinas' Narratives of Exile and Return

In the liminality of this moment in history, when discourses, disciplines, and politics converge and contend with one another, when border-crossing has become a site of resistant and liberatory possibilities, I see Latin American women writing in the United States mapping out paradigmatic shifts in the ways we read and write. The work of Julia Alvarez, Cristina Garcia, Rosario Morales, and Aurora Levins Morales reveals the processes of migrant souls, weaving together the threads of memory, history, and narration at the crossroads of feminisms, postcolonialisms, and socialisms. At the same time, these authors' works highlight the intercultural questions of identity that emerge at these crossroads. Each of these women writers is a world traveler, having emigrated or been exiled from a Latin American country to the United States with the process of return an ever-present, physical and/or textual possibility.<sup>1</sup> These authors use their skills and experiences as world travelers to take us "to places of subjectivity that shift and hyphenate into the worlds of others."<sup>2</sup> As Edward Said reminds us, "exile, immigration and the crossing of boundaries are experiences that can . . . provide us with new narrative forms or, in John Berger's phrase, with other ways of telling."<sup>3</sup>

I propose to read Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*, and Rosario Morales and Aurora Levins Morales's *Getting Home Alive* as new ways of telling. As hybrid selves who cross and recross borders of language and culture, these Latina writers create hybrid texts in order to "survive in diaspora," to use Donna Haraway's term, seeking to heal the fractures and ruptures resulting from exile and dispersal.<sup>4</sup> Polyphonic narration, permeable borders (between genres, among national identifications, in the dialectic of self and other), and negotiation of the gestures of what James Clifford calls "traveling/dwelling" are the attributes that distinguish these texts as new ways of telling.<sup>5</sup> Migration

becomes the means by which memories are narrated in specific historical contexts, infusing the empty/open/silent spaces in history, discourses, and politics with resistant and alternative paradigms.

As migrant souls traveling/dwelling in diverse cultural spaces, Latina writers become embedded within the process of translation, the linguistic border-crossing that necessarily accompanies any other shifts across boundaries. If we consider translation to be an alteration in signification, an act of decentering one's self and playing with language, then to translate may be the Derridean "affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation."<sup>6</sup> Translation enables the author to perceive the occluded fiction of a stable center, the fictive purity of self-presence, while simultaneously enabling her to enter into dialogues with the multiple aspects of self revealed through displacement. As Latinas and feminists, the authors realize, as Haraway has observed, that "releasing the play of writing is deadly serious." Haraway explains that the "poetry and stories of U.S. women of color are repeatedly about writing, about access to the power to signify, but this time that power must be neither phallic nor innocent."<sup>7</sup> Morales and Levins Morales's suggestive title, *Getting Home Alive*, indicates an awareness and negotiation of the messiness of playing with language and of the power of writing as boundary-crossing where the terrain is impure, anomalous, unstable, and potentially hazardous.

Due to the shifting, unstable terrain they inhabit, Latin American (migrant) women writers question and reject the assumption that a unitary, synthesizing narrator is capable of telling the stories they have to disclose, instead opting for a narrative stance that includes multiple voicings. Their utilization of multiple narrators contributes to the critique that "the theory of the subject of consciousness as a unitary and synthesizing agent of knowledge is always already a posture of domination."<sup>8</sup> Polyphonic narration is one mode of crossing the threshold into the anomalous, impure, and unstable. That crossing enables the reader and writer to participate in the breaking down of constructed, pure boundaries and to engage in complex heterogeneous dialogues. Telling the story of three generations of Cuban women and their experiences with revolution and immigration in *Dreaming in Cuban*, Cristina Garcia utilizes a mixture of third person character-specific narrators, first person narrators, and epistolary interjections to convey the rich texture of subject positionalities and the multiple worlds where the subject of consciousness travels. Julia Alvarez explores throughout *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* the effects of heterotopicality upon four sisters traveling/dwelling between the

Dominican Republic and the United States. Third person character-specific narrative pieces engage mobility as the novel progresses backward through time and experience in order to enable first person narrators to emerge and take over the telling of their memories. Similarly, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Alvarez's second novel, is comprised of the first person voices of the four sisters known as Las Mariposas because of their political activism in the Dominican Republic. Yet, Dede, the sister who survives, speaks through a third-person character-specific narrator until the end of the text when, after her sisters' memories have been narrated, her own voice emerges to articulate "I." Explicitly autobiographical, *Getting Home Alive* is the cross-fertilization of two women's voices, Rosario's and Aurora's, mother and daughter respectively, speaking in several tongues and several genres. The polyphony of each of these texts elucidates the subject of consciousness as a weave of multiple sites of identification and contestation.

Underlying the construction of each of these polyphonic narratives there appears to be what Clifford describes as "unresolved historical dialogues between continuity and disruption, essence and positionality, homogeneity and differences (cross-cutting 'us' and 'them') [that] characterize diasporic articulations."<sup>9</sup> Due to the processes of exile and migration, which establish the ambivalent gesture of traveling/dwelling, Alvarez, Garcia, Morales, and Levins Morales write in diaspora, and their texts are expressions of the dialogues generated by their negotiation of such traveling. In an essay on the black women writer's literary tradition, Mae Gwendolyn Henderson explains that "what is at once characteristic and suggestive about black women's writing is its interlocutory, or dialogic character, reflecting not only a relationship with the 'other(s),' but an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of self that constitute the matrix of black female subjectivity."<sup>10</sup> While she is speaking specifically about African American women authors, her insights appear to be quite relevant to the literature being produced by Latinas involved in cultures of displacement, transplantation, and return. The creation of multiple narrators can be considered an integral part of the authors' performance of both their external and internal diasporic dialogues, suggesting that utilizing the multiple voices is a manifestation of the subject of consciousness-shifting among multiple positions. Furthermore, as readers and critics, we must become diasporic in our apprehension and comprehension of their texts and accept Carol Boyce Davies's assertion that African American and Caribbean women's writing "should be read as a series of boundary crossings and not as a fixed geographical, ethnically or nationally bound category of writing."<sup>11</sup> Both the dialogic, diasporic narrative created by

the author and the dialogic, diasporic self expressed via the text can be claimed as hybrids.

*Mestizaje*, the concept of hybridity culturally specific for Latinas, involves the conception of a “multiple subject who is not fragmented.”<sup>12</sup> The cover picture and opening narrative piece of *Getting Home Alive* provide insight into the terrain of *mestizaje* as a site where the discourses and politics of feminisms, postcolonialisms, and socialisms converge in their affiliation and modification of one another and diverge in their contestation and resistance to one another. The cover picture of the quilt introduces us to the recurrent imagery of sewing/weaving as a metaphor for both hybridity and narrative. The activity of sewing/weaving is gender specific with class connotations, implying a space of intersection between feminism and socialism. Like the *mestiza* identity presented in-process autobiographically by the Puerto Rican–Jewish American Morales and Levins Morales, the strengths of the quilt are its lack of homogeneity and the fact that the pieces that compose it cannot be separated from one another without losing their integrity. Furthermore, the image of the quilt illustrates the creative process that stitches diverse elements of different shapes, colors, and textures together to produce a distinct and meaningful whole that is more than the sum of its parts. The process evoked with this image informs our understanding of hybrid selves and hybrid narratives, as it does the hybridization of discourses and politics. As Lourdes Rojas points out, the verb in Spanish for “to knit” is *tejer*, from the Latin *texere*, which has the same root as *texto*, the Spanish word for text.<sup>13</sup> As major contributors to the polyphonic character of hybrid selves and hybrid narratives, interference and interlinguistic play emerge as important facets of Morales and Levins Morales’s writing as traveler/dwellers at the crossroads of feminisms, postcolonialisms, and socialisms. As readers and critics, we must participate in interlinguistic play if we are to apprehend and comprehend their subtle and complex displacements and infusions of discursive meaning.

“Wolf,” the opening narrative piece of *Getting Home Alive*, written by Aurora Levins Morales, picks up a parallel thread in the discussion of hybridity. Levins Morales ends “Wolf” and begins the rest of the text with the emphatic statement, “I must make them see the wolf’s nature. I must tell them this story” (*GHA*, 16). By placing this statement at the end of the opening narrative piece and at the beginning of the rest of the text, Levins Morales allows the wolf, represented as a shape-shifter, to tell the story of multiple transformations as a mode of survival and of resistance. As an emblem for her “true self,” the wolf’s story is also her own (*GHA*, 16). Facing the forces of extinction, encountering racism, sexism, colonization, and elitism, Levins Morales has

acquired the necessary skill of shifting shapes or, in other words connotative of diaspora, she has learned to be a world-traveler in order to survive. By extension, the entire autobiographical text is her story of self, the one she must tell in order to survive. By expanding the story she must tell to include the entire text, Levins Morales calls attention to the text as a shape-shifter as well. We must attune ourselves to the negotiation of her writing's boundary-crossings and metamorphoses. By evoking the oral tradition of storytelling as an endangered species, akin to the wolf in this piece, Levins Morales realizes Rojas's statement that "oral stories are no longer viable testimonies of these women's experiences, for they can no longer endure to bear witness to a reality defined by the constant struggle to survive at the crossroads."<sup>14</sup> Instead, she commits herself to preservation through the written word, narrating the creative and liberatory power of what is multiple, anomalous, and hybrid.

While the viability of oral tradition for the transmission of women's stories can be questioned in these turbulent times, we can acknowledge that patriarchal, colonial, and neocolonial recorded stories have also failed to testify and/or represent women's memory. In praise of Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Sandra Cisneros writes, "All Latinas are indebted to her for resisting the amnesia that has been our history." Although this statement critiques the masculinist, nationalist, and racist biases of historical records, which have resulted in the absence of women of color's voices and stories, the concept of amnesia also has other implications within the context of exile. In her postscript, Alvarez discusses her motivations in producing this novel. First, she identifies herself and her family as "exiles from the tyranny of Trujillo" (*ITB*, 323). Second, she connects her family's politics and their forced escape from the Dominican Republic to the four invented Mirabel sisters, their political activities, and their subsequent deaths four months after their escape. Then, her returns to the Dominican Republic become entwined with stories about the courage of Las Mariposas. Exile, translation, and migration mark profound changes in consciousness, as Benedict Anderson explains: "All profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives . . . Out of this estrangement [of continuity and memory loss] comes a conception of personhood, *identity* which, because it cannot be 'remembered,' must be narrated."<sup>15</sup> Alvarez seems especially conscious that in order to resist amnesia, one must narrate or reinvent both self and history: "For I wanted to immerse my readers in an epoch in the life of the Dominican Republic that I believe can only finally be understood by fiction, only finally be redeemed by the imagination" (*ITB*, 324). As I suggested earlier, the amnesia produced by the diasporic cultures of

Latinas gets negotiated within the text through polyphony. Living at the crossroads, migrating between the United States and the Dominican Republic, establishes a dialogue between the author and the aspects of otherness within herself; between the Mirabel sisters; and between the author, the sisters, and the readers who are specifically English-speaking. The text becomes not only an example of writing as boundary-crossing, but also the vehicle by which the author crosses boundaries, negotiates the estrangement of continuity and memory loss, and traverses the subject of consciousness.

Alvarez's first novel, the loosely autobiographical *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, engages in a similar dynamic between exile and return, narrating what cannot be remembered. Like the *Butterflies*, the four central characters are sisters. The text opens with "Antojos," the story of Yolanda's return to the island as an adult in 1989. Immediately we are placed at the crossroads of inter-reference and interlinguistic play. Several pages into the narrative piece we are given a discussion of the meaning of the word *antojo* that negotiates race, class, gender, and migration:

"What's an *antojo*?" Yolanda asks.

See! Her aunts are right. After so many years away, she is losing her Spanish . . .

"An *antojo* is like a craving for something you have to eat . . ."

An *antojo*, one of the older aunts continues, is a very old Spanish word "from before your United States was even thought of," she adds tartly. "In fact, in the countryside, you'll still find some *campesinos* using the word in the old sense. *Altagracia!* . . ."

The maid obeys. "In my *campo* we say a person has an *antojo* when they are taken over by *un santo* who wants something." (*HGGLTA*, 8)

The conversation between the aunts, Yolanda, and the maid over the meaning of the word *antojo* enables the author to engage in a dialogue that both affirms and contests the multiple aspects of herself. Yolanda attempts to resolve the ambivalence inherent to such a dialogue by re-inventing the word to convey her desire for home.

Yolanda has returned to the Dominican Republic seeking to remedy her feelings of displacement, which she believes are the reason "she and her sisters have led such turbulent lives—so many husbands, homes, jobs, wrong turns among them" (*HGGLTA*, 11). Yet, the tone of nostalgia expressed in regard to finding an unspoiled home in the landscape of the Dominican countryside with its rural *campesinos* is countered by the author's attention to details of cross-cultural permeability and interaction: "In the glow of the headlights, Yolanda makes out the figure of the old woman in the black square of her doorway,

waving good-bye. And above the picnic table on a near post, the Palmolive woman's skin gleams a rich white; her head is still thrown back, her mouth still opened as if she is calling someone over a great distance" (*HGGLTA*, 23). The contrast between distance and proximity, the incongruity of the old woman and the Palmolive woman, the difference in skin color, privilege, and commodification heightens our awareness of the imperialistic invasion of United States commercialism into the Dominican Republic after the island was liberated from Trujillo. Within this neocolonial-colonial context, the third person character-specific narrator destabilizes Yolanda's return to the island, allowing us to question the totalizing boundaries of what Benedict R. Anderson calls the "imagined community," as well as Yolanda's desire for origin.<sup>16</sup> She has, after all, lost her accent. On another level, the author may be decentering and questioning her own return to the island via a narrative that moves backward in time and place to the memories of the four sisters before they were forced to leave their home in the Dominican Republic. By purposefully fictionalizing her own historical, autobiographical life story in a polyphonic novel, Alvarez creates a new way of telling that crosses the boundaries between genres, between individual and community, between national identifications, and between continuity and disruption, giving definition to her writing as diasporic articulation. As English-speaking readers, we must be wary of our contributions to the narrative and be prepared to question our willing acceptance and participation in colonizing gestures that attempt to occlude the border-crossings that are occurring.

Cristina Garcia begins *Dreaming in Cuban* with Celia scanning the sea coast of Cuba for signs of U.S. invasion, giving prominence to the issue of borders and their permeability on the first page of her novel. The fishing boats Celia sees, "the Niña, the Pinta and the Santa María," invoke the issue of colonization as they conjure the image of Columbus arriving (*DIC*, 4). The historical events of colonization, revolution, and threatened invasion entwine around the personal issue of family separation and exile. Celia's commitment to protecting her country's boundaries becomes ambivalent with the realization of the costs of exile: "Frustrated El Líder went home, rested his pitching arm, and started a revolution in the mountains. Because of this, Celia thinks, her husband will be buried in stiff, foreign earth. Because of this, their children and their grandchildren are nomads" (*DIC*, 6–7). While "nomads" connotes mobility, there is also the indication of a lack of connection, of home. Celia thinks specifically of her granddaughter Pilar and of the losses of acculturation that accompany immigration. Yet, despite the seemingly inflexible boundaries separating Celia in communist Cuba and Pilar in capitalist New York, there exists a

bond between grandmother and granddaughter that remains tenuously elastic and fluid: "She knows that Pilar keeps a diary in the lining of her winter coat, hidden from her mother's scouring eyes. In it, Pilar records everything. This pleases Celia. She closes her eyes and speaks to her granddaughter, imagines her words as slivers of light piercing the murky night" (*DIC*, 7). Significantly, the telepathic thread connecting Celia to Pilar is conceived as textuality and creativity.

Pilar, speaking in the first person, reinforces our awareness of the connection between her and Celia. Narrating a memory of herself as a baby with nannies in Cuba, she says, "They called me *brujita*, little witch. I stared at them, tried to make them go away. I remember thinking, Okay, I'll start with their hair, make it fall out strand by strand. They always left wearing kerchiefs to cover their bald patches" (*DIC*, 28). *La bruja* is a powerful figure within Latino cultures who is often hated and feared because of her creative abilities to conjure and conceive by playing with language. If we identify Celia and Pilar as brujas, then we realize that Celia fears acculturation because of the losses of language, traditions, and knowledges, which are neither phallic nor innocent, that are the fund of the bruja's powers to conjure with alternative paradigms and activate change with active interpretations of language. Yet, Pilar demonstrates her memory as a bruja when she critiques the biases of history and suggests she knows other(s) stories that have been silenced: "If it were up to me, I'd record other things. Like the time there was a freak hailstorm in the Congo and the women took it as a sign that they should rule. Or the life stories of prostitutes in Bombay" (*DIC*, 28). This knowledge appears to be part of Pilar's inheritance from her grandmother, an inheritance that has significant implications for narrating memory, resisting amnesia, and constructing polyphonic texts. As brujas, Celia and Pilar share knowledges that have the power to imagine community in alternative, transnational ways, thus permeating boundaries and allowing us to question the construction of borders as pure and inflexible.

In two separate but related poems, Aurora Levins Morales and Rosario Morales speak directly to issues of borders and identification. In the confrontational "I Am What I Am," Rosario defiantly asserts her acceptance of all the pieces of herself without the need for external approval: "I am what I am and you can't take it away with all the words and sneers at your command" (*GHA*, 138). She rejects society's fragmentation of her into pure parts, seeing this as an exercise in domination. Yet, she has had to struggle in order to achieve this straddling stance and precarious balance: "I am what I am and I am U.S. American I haven't wanted to say it because if I did you'd take away the Puerto Rican" (*GHA*, 138). Never having believed in or experienced as her reality the

inflexible, unquestionable boundaries of “separation as purity,” to use Lugones's phrase, has enabled Rosario to make the conceptual leap out of dichotomous patterns of thinking.<sup>17</sup> Forcing the reader to rethink the meaning of several “national” identifications in her terms, she helps us to move out of the binary mode of classification toward hybrid, both/and conceptualizations as well. Puerto Rican identity is a piece in the mosaic of herself that has been altered, made new by her experiences: “I am Boricua as Boricuas come from the isle of Manhattan and I croon sentimental tangos in my sleep and Afro-Cuban beats in my blood” (*GHA*, 138). The multiplicity of her identifications establishes Morales on the hyphen, shifting among the many worlds that she inhabits and altering them in the process. The text she creates to express her hybrid identity and its creative alterations is the instrument of her agency in healing the fractures and splits caused by diasporic dispersal within the context of U.S. imperialism, racism, sexism, and elitism.

Similarly, Aurora Levins Morales expresses a hybridity of self in “Child of the Americas.” She identifies herself as a “light-skinned mestiza of the Caribbean, / a child of many diaspora, born into this continent at a crossroads” (*GHA*, 50). While diaspora connotes displacement, crossroads connote confluence. Together, these two gestures situate Aurora as a traveler/dweller within a specific historical context. Although she claims her history—African, Taina, European—and acknowledges that her history has shaped her, she also asserts that she is something new, as Gloria Anzaldúa described it, as “something more than mere duality or a synthesis of duality.”<sup>18</sup> Levins Morales expands our ethnocentric definition of America by stressing the multiplicity and heterotopicality of the spaces she travels/dwells in: “I am a U.S. Puerto Rican Jew, / a product of the ghettos of New York I have never known. / . . . I am of Latinoamerica, rooted in the history of my continent: / I speak from that body” (*GHA*, 50). Like her mother, Levins Morales has engaged textuality in order to express her hybridity and testify to the imaginative ambiguity of the mestiza subject of consciousness.

Both Morales and Levins Morales convey the power of performing *mestizaje* through polyphonic speaking and writing. Morales speaks from the crossroads of “yiddish, and spanish and fine refined college educated english and irish,” finding poetic inspiration and an empowering strength in the confluence (*GHA*, 138). Levins Morales's poetic voice gains similar sustenance from her bilingualism: “I speak English with passion: it's the tongue of my consciousness, / a flashing knife blade of crystal, my tool, my craft. / . . . Spanish is in my flesh, / ripples from my tongue, lodges in my hips: / the language of garlic and mangoes, / the singing in my poetry” (*GHA*, 50). Each strain contributes

something distinctive to her voice, and she refuses to deny either influence. Furthermore, she asserts the hybridity of her voice, the inseparability of her bilingualism: "My first language was spanglish" (*GHA*, 50). For both Morales and Levins Morales, heterogeneity, interpenetration, and the creative power of imagining borders as porous facilitate new ways of telling self and constructing community. The subject of consciousness, which emerges from the rich and complex texture of their work, is not unitary and synthesizing, but is rather mobile, or in Kathy Ferguson's words, "temporal, moving across and along axes of power (which are themselves in motion) without fully residing in them . . . relational, produced through shifting yet enduring encounters and connections, never fully captured by them . . . ambiguous: messy and multiple, unstable but perservering."<sup>19</sup> As Morales and Levins Morales attempt to "get home alive," they engage mobility when difference denies any easy, stable resting place of identification.

Yolanda, the first sister to engage in first person narration in Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, also demonstrates the mobility of the subject of consciousness. The transition from third person, character-specific narration to first person voice occurs after the narrative piece in which Yolanda is shown negotiating issues of language, specifically the border-crossing of translation and bilingualism. Within this context, the issue of naming as a process of identity starts the piece: "Yolanda, nicknamed *Yo* in Spanish, misunderstood *Joe* in English, doubled and pronounced like the toy, *Yoyo*—or when forced to select from a rack of personalized key chains, *Joey*" (*HGGLTA*, 68). As Yolanda's names proliferate on the page, we begin to see the multiplicity of her identity. We must also reckon with the ethnocentric irony of "personalized" when one is Latino and not Anglo. And as the passage continues, we realize the struggle Yolanda must engage in to not be fragmented in a society that marginalizes her. Involved in a dialogue with her Anglo-American lover, Yolanda is forced into an act of translation in order to place herself:

"Sky, I want to be the sky."

"That's not allowed . . . Your own rules: you've got to rhyme with your name."

"I"—she pointed to herself—"rhymes with the sky!"

"But not with Joe!" . . .

"*Yo* rhymes with *cielo* in Spanish." Yo's words fell into the dark, mute cavern of John's mouth. *Cielo, cielo*, the word echoed. And Yo was running, like the mad, into the safety of her first tongue, where the proudly monolingual John could not catch her, even if he tried. (*HGGLTA*, 72)

The bilingualism of Yolanda's chosen name rhyme and her migration into her (m)other tongue demonstrate her abilities as a border-crosser. Implicitly, the author appears to be asking us to critique the practices of domination that maintain the arrogant and fictional purity of monolingualism as the respectable norm via the censure of the ambiguity and creativity of bilingualism as madness.

Yolanda's transversal of language results in John's condemnation of her as crazy. Their difference and his power as a white Anglo-American male threatens to split Yolanda. As the narrative piece ends, Yolanda and John are in the process of separating, and Yolanda gives us an expression of the pain of fragmentation: "When she left her husband, Yo wrote a note, *I'm going to my folks till my head-slash-heart clear. She revised the note: I'm needing some space, some time, until my head-slash-heart-slash-soul*—No, no, no, she didn't want to divide herself anymore, three persons in one Yo" (*HGGLTA*, 78). Significantly, *Yo* is the Spanish word for the first person pronoun "I." Interjecting this odd epistolary first person discourse within a third person narrative piece, the author appears to be signaling the performance of curdling, where the subject of consciousness asserts the many in the indivisible. Lugones theorizes curdling to be an impure separation, one that has the resistant and liberatory power to assert the multiple and reject fragmentation into pure parts.<sup>20</sup> Presenting Yolanda as a curdled being, as an example of *mestizaje*, the author suggests a continuum relationship between "she," the third person, and "I," the first person, where subject positions are not split-separated. Within this presentation of the alteration of the self/other dialectic, Lugones says "there is the distance of metacomment, autoreflection, looking at oneself in someone else's mirror and back in one's own, of self-aware experimentation."<sup>21</sup> Through the creative medium of language, the active interpretation of translation, Yolanda is established on the hyphen where she can shift among subject positions and worlds. Consequently, she gains the self-reflexivity necessary to emerge fully as a first person narrator and enter into dialogues with the multiple aspects of her Yo.

As a diasporic interlocutor, Yolanda is located in the midst of the interaction and contradiction between the autoreflection of homogeneity and difference. Coming to feminist consciousness during her teenage years in the United States, Yolanda, along with her sisters, negotiates the specific Latino cultural paradigms of patriarchy and the specific American strains of racism. Class combines with gender and ethnicity so that when Fifi, the youngest sister, is sent to live on the island, the three older sisters fear "that Fifi was caving in to family pressure and regressing into some nice third world girl" (*HGGLTA*, 118). They see Fifi losing her streak of independence, her strong-willed rebelliousness, which they associate with their "American" identities, in contrast to the island's

prescribed gender roles, which they assume conform to the marianismo/machismo dialectic. Carla, Sandi, and Yolanda forge a feminist bond of solidarity to battle machismo and the patriarchal indoctrination of their sister. Conceptualizing their actions as a revolution, they liberate Sofia from the allure and seeming safety of class-defined traditions: "We look at each other as if to say, 'She'll get over it.' Meaning Manuel, meaning her fury at us, meaning her fear of her own life. Like ours, it lies ahead of her like a wilderness just before the first explorer sets foot on the virgin sand" (*HGGLTA*, 132). In this narrative piece, we can see unresolved historical dialogues at work. As first world feminists, the sisters refuse to allow Sofia to submit to the self-abnegation of docility. They demand that she act as a full subject, with the power to determine her own desires. Yet, the metaphor of life as a female landscape to be penetrated by the "exploring" first-world feminist explicitly invokes the history of Conquistadors and imperialism. The girls' return to the island is destabilized and their feminist practices become problematically associated with the gestures of colonization. The homogeneous, essential "nice third world girl" is placed in juxtaposition to the positionality of the liberated first world feminist, and difference is used to split "us" and "them." By making her metaphor so conspicuous, the author compels us to question our involvement in accepting the assumption that first world women are more liberated than third world women, that is, to question our own investment and participation in the processes of colonization.

Offering her readers textual instruction in what Lugones calls "loving perception" (as opposed to "arrogant perception" and its colonizing force), Alvarez details the development of feminist-socialist consciousnesses and practices in four sisters in the Dominican Republic in her second novel, *In the Time of the Butterflies*.<sup>22</sup> As Alvarez writes in her postscript: "I would hope that through this fictionalized story I will bring acquaintance of these famous sisters to English-speaking readers. November 25th, the day of their murder, is observed in many Latin American countries as the International Day Against Violence Towards Women. Obviously, these sisters, who fought one tyrant, have served as models for women fighting against injustices of all kinds" (*ITB*, 324). Patria, Minerva, Mate, and Dede come alive in first person narrative pieces to resist amnesia and colonization. The author explicitly constructs their narrative in order to present her English-speaking audience with an alternative paradigm of feminist-socialism informed by postcolonial discourse, which may act as a bridge connecting women without denying differences.

Dede begins the novel in third person, character-specific narration, awaiting the arrival of a *gringa dominicana* who wants to question her about her sisters. If Alvarez is representing herself through this hybrid designation, she

distances herself by several layers from the telling, perhaps to avoid the gestures of colonization that say, "they cannot represent themselves so they must be represented." Furthermore, as the hybrid gringa dominicana, she blurs the boundaries between "us" and "them" in the performance of her own subject status and locates herself, as Ferguson explains, "in relation to the moving trajectories of power and resistance via circumstances of proximity and distance, restlessness and rootedness, separation and connection."<sup>23</sup> As we shall see, each of the sisters are mobile subjects as well.

Dede's narrator, anticipating the questions of the gringa dominicana, utilizes the collective ghost voices of past interviewers to articulate a central question of the novel: "Usually they leave, satisfied, without asking the prickly questions that have left Dede lost in her memories for weeks at a time, searching for the answer. Why, they inevitably ask in one form or another, why are you the one who survived?" (*ITB*, 5). The answer lies in the negotiation of personal and collective history because by surviving, Dede enables memory, the narration of the stories of Las Mariposas. Remembering is explicitly characterized as narration as Dede constructs her sisters as if they are characters in a play and describes memory as a movie she can watch in her mind's eye. Continuing the metaphor, the woman interviewer asks Dede to recount a mini-narrative, and Dede rewinds her memory like a video tape to time "zero" (*ITB*, 7). Ground zero is characterized as a moment "before the future began," and we are placed in the site of estrangement between continuity and memory loss (*ITB*, 8). As the scene ends, "A chill goes through her, for she feels it in her bones, the future is now beginning. By the time it is over, it will be the past, and she doesn't want to be the only one left to tell their story" (*ITB*, 10). The prophetic tone and the confusion of time signals a shift, as if the actors are about to come onto the stage.

Minerva's voice is the first to emerge from oblivion, and her opening paragraphs set the tone for the feminist-socialist consciousness of the Mirabel sisters. The girls' privilege of being allowed, by their father, access to education is envisioned as a blessing in a religious metaphor that invokes the enmeshed patriarchal institutions of the family and the church. Minerva details the restrictions placed upon girls and expresses desire for autonomy, freedom, and self-determination. Unlike the rabbit she attempts to force into freedom, she refuses to become accustomed to the confines of prescribed gender roles. A specific kind of education becomes the site of emancipation: "And that's how I got free. I don't mean just going to sleepaway school on a train with a trunkful of new things. I mean in my head after I got to Inmaculada and met Sinita and saw what happened to Lina and realized that I'd just left a small cage to go into a

bigger one, the size of our whole country" (*ITB*, 13). Thus, the patriarchal confines of the family and the church are placed in direct connection to the patriarchal and totalitarian functioning of the state, establishing a relationship between feminism and socialism.

The knowledge Minerva gains while at school is the result of her relationship with two women. Realizing the occlusions and obfuscations of history will deny her/story, Sinita tells Minerva the secret of Trujillo—his violent rise to power, his practices of terrorism and tyranny over those who oppose him—and narrates her personal memories of murder. Utilizing the oral tradition of testimonial to fill in the silences of history, Sinita provides Minerva instruction in the alternative paradigms of feminist-socialism. After hearing Sinita's story, Minerva says, "sure enough, my complications had started" (*ITB*, 20). While "complications" is clearly a euphemism for female menstruation, the coincidence of Minerva's physical awareness and political awareness invokes the complications of knowledge and power within the context of Trujillo's repressive regime. Minerva, as a mobile subject of consciousness, will negotiate the moving trajectories of power and resistance throughout the novel.

Lina's story continues Minerva's education about Trujillo. The beautiful, physically mature and adored Lina is spotted by Trujillo and chosen by him to become one of his many mistresses. Used and abandoned, Lina ends up locked away in a mansion behind high iron gates, designated *pobrecita* by her friends (*ITB*, 23). Lina's story reinforces the enmeshing of sexuality with issues of knowledge, power, and politics, thus securing a foundation for Minerva's feminist-socialism. She attempts to protect herself from the possibility of sexual exploitation by hiding the development of her breasts so that "what happened to Lina Lovatón would never happen" to her (*ITB*, 23). She also begins to engage in a critique of the government and the record of history that seeks to deny her memories of herstory. This critique quickly leads to her involvement in politically subversive activities.

Maria Teresa, or Mate, as she is known throughout most of the text, is the second sister to speak in first person. Her narrative pieces are presented as journal entries in a series of diaries given to her by Minerva. Alvarez intensifies the power of her polyphonic novel by utilizing multiple narrators as well as multiple narrative forms. The diary form enables her to heighten the sense of auto-reflection. Aptly, the initial diary is a present for Mate's first communion, and she writes: "Minerva says keeping a diary is also a way to reflect and reflection deepens one's soul. It sounds so serious. I suppose now that I've got one I'm responsible for, I have to expect some changes" (*ITB*, 30). Within the context of the church, we are once again made aware of subtle subversions of patriarchy,

for the deepening of the soul toward which Mate is religiously instructed is quite different than the consciousness she attains. While Mate's narrated memories seem superficial at first, the evolution of her political awareness becomes evident via the process of writing. Gaining knowledge of sexuality and political power, Mate loses her naïveté along with her first diary and writes: "Minerva was right. My soul has gotten deeper since I started writing in you. But this is what I want to know that not even Minerva knows. What do I do now to fill up that hole?" (*ITB*, 43). Political activism and the collective struggle against tyranny, although motivated by romance for Mate, seem to supply the sustenance she seeks.

Patria, the third Mariposa to emerge in telling, is guided by a passion for God and an altruistic faith, as well as by the different passion of sexual desire. The teachings of the church direct Patria toward the appropriate spheres of marriage and religious service. Her patriarchal indoctrination causes her, at first, to accept the belief that women should not be involved in the public affairs of politics. Yet, after she miscarries, Patria suffers a crisis in faith and her feminist-socialist consciousness begins to grow:

That moment, I understood [Minerva's] hatred. My family had not been personally hurt by Trujillo, just as before losing my baby, Jesus had not taken anything away from me. But others had been suffering great losses. There were the Perozos, not a man left in that family. And Martínez Reyna and his wife murdered in their bed, and thousands of Haitians massacred at the border, making the river, they say, still run red— *i Ay Dios santo!* I had heard, but I had not believed . . . How could our loving, all-powerful Father allow us to suffer so? I looked up, challenging Him. And the two faces [of the Good Shepherd and El Jefe] had merged! (*ITB*, 53)

While on a pilgrimage to Virgencita, Patria asks for guidance and a sign that will renew her faith. Looking back at the "hundreds of weary, upturned faces" who have packed the church to pray, Patria finds resolution to her spiritual crisis as she reorients her faith toward the masses and realizes that the people's liberty is sacred, worthy of devotion and imbued with the divine. Thus, a third sister's political consciousness is born of subversions of patriarchy.

Although Dede similarly experiences the growth of consciousness, she chooses to remain loyal to tradition, standing by her husband and his decision to remain disengaged from the political sedition. When Minerva, Mate, their husbands, and Patria's husband are imprisoned and tortured, Dede realizes that "whether she joined their underground or not, her fate was bound up with the fates of her sisters" (*ITB*, 193). She also acknowledges that her fate will be different and that "if they died, she would not want to go on living without

them,” but would have to (Alvarez 193). After the release of Minerva and Mate, and the subsequent murder of Minerva, Mate, and Patria as they return from visiting their husbands in prison, Dede questions her choices, believing she lacked the courage to join her sisters in their struggle. Yet, at the end of the novel, Dede recognizes courage as her responsibility to narrate and renew the story of Las Mariposas. The story she enables embodies the feminist-socialist paradigms her sisters generated in their politically subversive activities, thus establishing the resistant and liberatory power of narrative. Coming full circle to the future prophesied at the beginning, Dede looks around her for evidence of the revolution her sisters fought and died for. Seeing only reform, neocolonialism, and the losses of her country's collective memory, Dede asks, “was it for this, the sacrifice of the butterflies?” (*ITB*, 318). As English-speaking readers, as first-world feminists, we must examine our responsibility in failing to connect with the rest of the hemisphere in the coalitional politics that could provide the means for more effective change. Yet, I believe, as Alvarez appears to, that the sacrifice of the butterflies has affected some real and important changes in the world and, at the very least, has resulted in this novel's resistance to amnesia.

For the characters of Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*, the costs and failings of revolution are equally important for acknowledging the power of narration. Exiled from Cuba as a small child, Pilar finds herself feeling connected to other exiles, the Jews who surround her in Brooklyn. As Amy Kaminsky theorizes in *Reading the Body Politic*, “language tells us that exile is its own location: people living out of their homeland are 'in exile' . . . the place of exile is defined by what is missing, not by what it contains.”<sup>24</sup> As a condition of her displacement, Pilar does not feel at home in New York because she experiences this sense of absence in the missing presence of her grandmother Celia. Separated from Cuba and her grandmother by the “politicians and the generals who force events on us that structure our lives, that dictate the memories we'll have when we're old,” Pilar's telepathic connection with Celia grows silent, and she is forced to engage in a quest to resolve her displacement (*DIC*, 138). As the first step in her journey, Pilar conceptualizes a special, almost tropical, light favored by her for painting as a “matrix light, a recombinant light that disintegrates hard lines and planes, rearranging objects to their essences” (*DIC*, 178). This conceptualization appears to participate in the unresolved historical dialogues characteristic of diasporic articulations as it negotiates between the impurity and fluidity of borders and the stability of essences. Pilar finds herself guided by this light to a botanica where she reconnects with her Afro-Cuban heritage and

her patron spirit, Chango, the god of fire and lightening. Guided by Chango, Pilar begins to recuperate her telepathic powers: "I can hear fragments of people's thoughts, glimpse scraps of the future . . . erratic as lightening" (*DIC*, 216). No longer a spiritual exile, she has the power to cross the boundaries separating her from Cuba and her grandmother. Without any explanation of the logistics of traveling to Cuba, Pilar and her mother arrive as if by magic and ritually bathe Celia, thus healing the rupture in communication: "I pull the covers over Abuela's shoulders, searching her face for a hint of my own . . . I know what my grandmother dreams. Of massacres in distant countries, pregnant women dismembered in the squares. Abuela Celia walks among them mute and invisible. The thatched roofs steam in the morning air" (*DIC*, 218). In Pilar's narration of Celia's dreams, we are not allowed to forget the harshest conditions, what Clifford describes as the "strong cultural, political and economic compulsions" that force people to travel and emerge as diasporic cultures.<sup>25</sup> We can also begin to see the creative discursive transformations emerging from the enmeshing of feminism, socialism, and postcolonial discourse as an implicit counterinsurgent force.

The violations and ruptures of exile entwine with the regenerative powers of the bruja, creating the complex weave of the text. Ending *Dreaming in Cuban* with a final epistolary interjection dated January 11, 1959, Celia writes to her long lost lover Gustavo, "The revolution is eleven days old. My granddaughter, Pilar Puente del Pino, was born today. It is also my birthday. I am fifty years old. I will no longer write to you, mi amor. She will remember everything" (*DIC*, 245). Such an ending emphasizes cyclicity as opposed to closure. At the age of fifty, Celia passes the torch of "knowledge like the first fire" to her granddaughter (*DIC*, 222). She knows Pilar will be the next bruja, the next storyteller who will continue the narration of memory by filling in the silences and constructing alternative paradigms capable of generating resistant and liberatory possibilities. Celia's last gift to Pilar is a "box of letters she wrote to her onetime lover in Spain, but never sent" and "a book of poems she's had since 1930, when she heard García Lorca read" (*ITB*, 235). The textuality of Pilar's entire inheritance from Celia implicitly enables her to construct the polyphonic narrative of the novel, continuing the cycle. Together the implicit author status of the character Pilar and the loose autobiographical threads that connect her to the author Garcia suggest that narrative is the vehicle by which the ruptures of exile can be healed and that the gesture of traveling/dwelling can be negotiated via the text.

Similarly, Alvarez ends *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* with Yolanda's voice emerging as implicit author, telescoping time and events into a

thread of exile and return, traveling/dwelling. She writes: "At that hour and in that loneliness, I hear her, a black furred thing lurking in the corners of my life, her magenta mouth opening, wailing over some violation that lies at the center of my art" (*HGGLTA*, 290). The reference to the kitten conjures the image of Yolanda as a child ripping a kitten from its mother, just as she was ripped from her mother-land, mother-tongue. If we see, as Kaminsky does, in the writing of exile "a discourse of desire, a desire to recuperate, repair and return," then we must also accept the violation, the rupture, the dispersal, and negotiate each gesture of traveling/dwelling in narrative simultaneously.<sup>26</sup>

The works of Julia Alvarez, Cristina Garcia, Rosario Morales, and Aurora Levins Morales highlight the intercultural questions of identity that evolve from being "in-between," from the condition of hybridity. Needing to survive at the crossroads, "where one never belongs totally to one place, yet where one is able to feel an integral part of many places," they construct hybrid narratives capable of engaging the mobility of their subject of consciousness, textually negotiating the spiral of exile and return.<sup>27</sup> The process of autobiographical writing becomes the site and tongue of Levins Morales and Morales's struggle to get home alive, to be immigrants and inventors of countries, to enunciate *jibaro*, "meaning one who runs away to be free" (*GHA*, 54). Their coauthored narrative demonstrates the resistant and liberatory power of the mestiza subject of consciousness, utilizing the tools of feminism, socialism, and postcolonial discourse, and speaks from within their hybridization. When Pilar returns to Cuba in *Dreaming in Cuban* and for the first time dreams in Spanish, she realizes that Cuba, although it cannot be her home, will always be a part of her consciousness. She perceives Cuba and her cultural memory to be a place she can continually renew and re-invent through narrative, with her imagination. The spirits of the Mirabel sisters in Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* can finally come to rest long after their deaths because Dede, the sister who survived, acts as a medium through which their voices transcend death and oblivion to enact narrative. Each of these texts attempts to facilitate a return and a recovery from exile, not by recuperating an essential origin, although nostalgia is tempting, but by inventing through an active and imaginative interpretation a narrative of home, history, and memory. As new ways of telling that both displace and converge multiple voices, multiple genres, and multiple gestures, these texts by Latinas writing in the United States offer exciting opportunities for the continued development of the fertile interlocking of discourses, disciplines, and politics.

## Notes

1. I use the term "world traveler" in the sense used by Maria C. Lugones in "Playfulness, 'World-travelling,' and Loving Perception," in *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1990), 390.
2. Christine Sylvester, "African and Western Feminisms: World-Traveling the Tendencies and Possibilities," *Signs* 20:4 (1995): 946.
3. Edward Said, "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors," *Critical Inquiry* 15 (1989): 225.
4. Julia Alvarez, *In the Time of the Butterflies* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 1994), and *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (New York: Plume, 1994); Cristina Garcia, *Dreaming in Cuban* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992); and Rosario Morales and Aurora Levins Morales, *Getting Home Alive* (Ithica: Firebrand Books, 1986). Hereafter, all references to these works will be cited parenthetically in the text. Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980's," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990), 212.
5. James Clifford, "Traveling Cultures," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 108.
6. Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 121.
7. Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," 217.
8. Norma Alarcón, "The Theoretical Subject(s) of *This Bridge Called My Back* and Anglo-American Feminism," in Anzaldúa, *Making Face, Making Soul*, 364.
9. Clifford, "Traveling Cultures," 108.
10. Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 145.
11. Carol Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing, and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 4.
12. Maria C. Lugones, "Purity, Impurity, and Separation," *Signs* 19:2 (1995): 473.
13. Lourdes Rojas, "Latinas at the Crossroads," in *Breaking Boundaries*, ed. Asunción Horno-Delgado (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), 171.
14. Rojas, "Latinas at the Crossroads," 166.
15. Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983), 204.
16. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.
17. Lugones, "Purity, Impurity, and Separation," 462.
18. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 46.

19. Kathy E. Ferguson, *The Man Question: Visions of Subjectivity in Feminist Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 154.
20. Lugones, "Purity, Impurity, and Separation," 460.
21. Lugones, "Purity, Impurity, and Separation," 478.
22. Lugones, "Playfulness, 'World-Travelling,' and Loving Perception," 391.
23. Ferguson, *The Man Question*, 161.
24. Amy Kaminsky, *Reading the Body Politic: Feminist Criticism and Latin American Women Writers* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 30.
25. Clifford, "Traveling Cultures," 108.
26. Kaminsky, *Reading the Body Politic*, 33.
27. Rojas, "Latinas at the Crossroads," 172.