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Bridges Instead of Borders: A Look Into Hispanic-American Literature and its Effect on Hyphenated Youth

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BY

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I am what I like to call a hyphenated-youth. My life has always been defined by the little em dash between the Mexican part of my identity and the American part. This small mark has acted as a giant border between what tradition expects of me and what society demands of me. Using literature from the late 20th and early 21st centuries, my discussion will analyze how these novels allow for a representation of identity that challenges the dominant ideas of what it means to be an “American” for those who find the em dash to be the prominent marker of who they are.

Growing up the daughter of two immigrants, my life was centered upon tradition and culture during my young formative years. Until I entered the public school system, I spoke Spanish almost exclusively at home and was only exposed to “traditional” American culture by what my older brothers brought home from school. As I entered kindergarten, I was immersed in completely new experiences. For the first time in my life, I was struggling to be understood and to understand. While I knew English, I had nowhere near a mastery of the language, much less so than the other children. While every school year is supposed to grow in academic difficulty, they also grew in contribution to an identity confusion.

At home, I was being taught how to cook, clean, and raise children. As is traditional in my family, my brothers were free to go out and spend time with their friends while my time was restricted to my home and school activities. At school, I was learning the reality of a modern woman. The thought of being a successful workingwoman crept into my mind and began struggling against the ideal mother figure I had been raised to strive for. While living both of these lives is a completely doable job, the idea of trying to balance my dreams seemed a betrayal to both.

The question for me since I discovered that I straddled the fence of two distinct cultures has been to “which do I truly belong?” Am I a product of the culture in which my parents were born and raised or of the one I was thrown into without warning or preparation? As of before my years at university, I was the proper Mexican daughter when inside the walls that saw my first baby tooth fall out and my first bad haircut but when surrounded by books and chalk I was a businesswoman in the making. Now, my education in literature and my experiences as an adult living on my own has allowed me to see that there is no right or wrong answer to who I am. Both sides of my life have helped to bring me to where I am now. My family gave me the drive to work for my dreams and my schooling gave me the ambition to aim for more than what has preceded me.

The university setting has brought me closer to a peaceful hyphenated identity than I have ever been before. Through my study of literature, I learn more about myself every day. Writers such as Sandra Cisneros and Julia Alvarez, the first authors to ever make me pay attention to how my struggles matter, give me the strength to accept every side of my identity and petition for a society where others like me can strive for the same peace of mind. It is authors like these that rationalize my experiences and make them a part of a singular identity. Until I learned to mesh both my cultures together, the duality in my mind kept me from reaching for the best opportunities offered to me.

I still struggle with the reality of living a hyphenated life in a world obsessed with enforcing borders but the books I have learned to look for and cherish ease the process and unite me with entire generations of people just like me. Through our literary connection, we bond together and stand united to support and encourage those whom have yet to find their voices.

My life before the American education system was filled with traditional recipes prepared for family get-togethers, the sounds of accordions wailing through the radio waves as my mom sang along to her favorite *norteña* songs, and the ever so prominent “*en el nombre del padre, el hijo, y el espíritu santos*” every time we rode in the car, passed a church, or attended mass. Entering kindergarten put a tight stopper on those experiences. While my mother was still engrossed in her love for the food, music, and spirituality she grew up with, I was much more concerned with the ideas of Saturday morning cartoons, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and how well the wheels on the bus captured my everyday life. From my first day of school until the middle of high school, I was mainly worried about keeping up with my classmates and the pop culture that defined us as a generation.

Doing her best to instill in me a sense of appreciation for the homeland from which we came and the new home which she had created for me, my mother continued to surround me with tidbits of Mexican culture. My stomach was always filled *tamales, caldo de pollo, arroz y frijoles*, and the like. I didn't go a day without hearing Spanish, even if I had almost completely traded it in for English myself. Photos and figurines of important Catholic figures and scenes (the Virgin Mary, Jesus, the Pope, the last supper, the crucifixion of Christ) greeted me around every corner. While I did my best to assimilate, I could not forget how important my mother's culture was to my identity. I struggled to fit in with classmates who didn't understand my words, didn't appreciate my packed lunches, and didn't contemplate the importance of my culture. Maybe that was a lot to ask of children, but the difficulties have not subsided as I have matured.

It wasn't until I was entering my sophomore year of high school that I saw that there was a valid opportunity to mix my home life with my academic one. On a list of five or so books that were deemed appropriate choices for all sophomores to read before they began school in the fall

was Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents*. For the first time, I saw a familiar name and heard a familiar dialect outside of a roster and inside of a curriculum. Drawn to a simultaneously comforting (due to its similarities to the language I hear at home) but odd (out of place within the walls of my academic asylum) choice, I purchased the book from my school book store and devoured it in a single sitting.

I saw my struggles in the lives Yolanda, Carla, Sandra, and Sofia. I recognized all their italicized words. I visualized my journey to balance on the pages of Alvarez's book. My experiences didn't seem peculiar anymore. I was no longer alone. The Garcia Girls were friends (albeit fictional ones) with whom I could relate on almost all counts. It did not matter that they migrated but I was only the child of two immigrants or that they came from a warring island in the Caribbean but I from a land mass separated from my current home by fences with barbed wire. On my couch at home and in my desk at school, *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents* was the anchor between two cultures I didn't know I had been searching for.

The Non-Traditional Narrative

As I entered high school, I was thrown into a large mixing bowl of cultures and ethnicities. Because I had been surrounded by only one kind of culture at a time, it was a confusing time to learn about who I would grow into over the next four years of my life. For the first time, I had the opportunity to mix the separate aspects of my life but I had no idea how. I had never had the opportunity to present myself in a way that reflected all sides of me and when the opportunity arrived, I was faced with questions that stereotyped my family and me.

My freshman year of high school I made a friend who has been with me for years now. The first time I ever spent time at his house and met his parents they invited me to stay for

dinner. While I was excited to be making new friends at my new school, I wasn't prepared for the clashes that would come from trying to mesh together the different aspects of who I am. As we sat, my friend's father proceeded to ask me basic questions about my life: how many siblings do you have? How old are they? Do you have a big family?

As the questions continued, they became more intrusive: when did your parents come here? Did they come here legally? When did they get their papers? Every question was more offensive than the last and all I could do was smile and pretend I wasn't offended. I didn't know what to do besides mutter the truth under my breath. In my search to fit in, I didn't know how to stand out and stand up for myself, for my relatives, or for the thousands of people affected by the stereotypes being enforced on me. A moment looking for acceptance from one society led me to forego defending the other. Before I knew how to balance pride in both my cultures, I felt the need to shy away from one in the face of the other.

It wasn't until I learned that there were others with stories similar to mine that I realized that my experiences were worth defending; I had the right to stand up for my family and to not know what to say all of the time. I have the right to not know all the answers but I also have the right to search for them in books, poems, and short stories written by people like me for people like me.

Telling our stories requires finesse. On the one hand, we want to connect with each other; we want to make it understood that we are not alone. On the other hand, we want to be understood; we want those identifying with other cultures, mainly dominant cultures, to see us as valuable participants in this world. To send these intertwined messages, Hispanic-American writers must create non-traditional narrative styles that align with a seemingly non-traditional

story. For this reason, many stories concerning the Hispanic-American perspective are written in a timeline different than merely chronological, in short stories, in vignettes, or other seemingly odd styles.

In *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents*, Julia Alvarez depicts four women torn away from their childhood home in an attempt to escape a war. Alvarez's use of a reverse chronological timeline shows how all of the experiences the Garcia Girls have internalized combine to make a single, confused identity.

In the opening chapter of the book, we see Yolanda returning to the Dominican Republic decades after she had been there last. She finds herself craving parts of her culture of which she has been deprived in her time in the United States. These *antojos* are her way of reconnecting with a seemingly forgotten part of her history. Once she is fully immersed in her native culture again, it is hard for her to connect with the American culture she has assimilated to throughout the years: "when she returns to the States, she'll find herself suddenly going blank over some word in English or, like her mother, mixing up some common phrase. This time, however, Yolanda is not so sure she'll be going back," (Alvarez 7). In her search to find the identity she left behind on the island, Yolanda knows that she will have to trade in aspects of her American self to find what she is looking for, as displayed in her foresight on losing her control of English words and phrases.

As Alvarez continues the story of the Garcia Girls, we as readers are taken back step by step in the lives of the four Garcia Girls. As we move backwards towards their initial move to the United States, the battle of cultures that leads Yolanda to choosing between the Dominican Republic and the United States becomes clear. In fact, it is often Yolanda who vocalizes her

separation from the values that were ingrained in her as a child: “When I went away to college, it was the late sixties... By then, I was a lapsed Catholic; my sisters and I had been pretty well Americanized since our arrival in this country a decade before, so really, I didn’t have a good excuse,” (Alvarez 87). Yolanda thinks that she needs a better excuse than her own morals and values to continue her young adult life as a virgin. In this case, Yolanda’s sexuality acts as a vehicle for her cultural identity: “Adultery (whether actual or metaphorical) becomes the space to explore a possible transnational identity,” (Cutter 7). To refrain from sexual acts is to reject the American culture of the sixties but to engage in them is to abandon her upbringing on the island which seems to have been heavily influenced by faith indicated by her reference to her lapsed Catholicism. Ultimately, Yolanda does not allow her first love to derail her from her values and continue as a virgin for a short while until her value on sexuality adjusts to more closely align with the American culture within which she is immersed.

Going further into their past, sexuality is still prevalent to the Garcia Girls, even as young girls. In a time of adjustment and attempted assimilation by an entire family, the girls are quite literally exposed to the dangers of their new home:

This grownup American man about her parents age beckoned for her to come up to the window. Carla dreaded being asked directions since she had just moved into this area right before school started, and all she knew for sure was the route home from the bus stop. Besides, her English was still just classroom English, a foreign language... Something caught her eye. She looked down and stared aghast... As Carla watched, his big blunt-headed thing grew so that it filled... He cupped his hand over his thing as if it were a flame that might blow out. (Alvarez 156-157)

Without words to be her guide, Carla dreads even being asked for directions. In an already vulnerable state, she is accosted by someone who she can only identify by his ties to her new nation and his similarity to her parents' age. These factors should have made her comfortable. These factors should have kept her safe. Instead, Carla now lives her life with precaution when it comes to her assimilation to the United States.

The Garcia Girls did not ask to be brought to the United States. It was their family's attempt to run away from the danger of the revolution in the Dominican Republic that tore the girls from their home. In their minds, the United States was no less dangerous than the Dominican. In fact, Carla mentions that the girls were as afraid of the American police as they were of the SIM, the major taskforce for the Dominican dictator Trujillo (Alvarez 158). The girls did not want to be there; they never wanted to be there.

You can believe we sisters wailed and paled, whining to go home. We didn't feel we had the best the United States had to offer. We had only second-hand stuff, rental houses in one redneck Catholic neighborhood after another, clothes at Round Robin, a black and white TV afflicted with wavy lines. Cooped up in those little suburban houses, the rules were as strict as for Island girls, but there was no island to make up the difference. (Alvarez 107)

On the island, the girls were privileged. Even in a war-ravaged society, the Garcia's were of a higher class and were used to nice things. Once they moved to the United States, they were unable to keep this same kind of life-style.

As Eithne Luibheid puts it, "settlement is the idea that migrants shift their interpersonal, institutional, and economic ties from their communities of origin to the new community," ("Heteronormativity" 229). As young girls, Carla, Yolanda, Sandra, and Sofia were under the

impression that their family was going to settle in the United States. Instead, they were forced to live life as second-hand citizens of a country to which they had fled to for protection. “For immigrants, desire often is embodied in terms of figuration of the new utopian land in which they hope to flourish or the white American identity they wish to obtain,” (Cutter 5). The Garcia Girls live their lives in an attempt to juggle the traditions that they have engrained in them since birth with the culture they learn year by year in the United States. It is this imbalance that leads to many of the psychological problems that they encounter in their lives.

Yolanda once again articulates her inability to mesh with the culture when we are introduced to her crumbling marriage. Now being nicknamed Yo, she has lost the ability to accurately communicate with those around her. She no longer understood what her husband was trying to say to her, hearing much of it as “babble” and the only words she could find for her family were those that were already written, and even those she couldn’t always get right.

How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents begins with Yolanda’s inner debate over to which country she belongs. Having been gone for so long, the Dominican Republic quickly reemerges as her idea of home. Throughout the novel, Yolanda is a constant that we can follow as we map the Garcia Girls’ journey backwards to the disruption of their lives with their move to the United States. It is only fitting that the novel ends with a moment that for young Yolanda acts as foreshadowing for her imbalanced future. “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,” (Alvarez 290). Breaking the cycle of reverse chronology, present day Yolanda narrates how an injured kitten from her past still haunts her. Much like the Garcia Girls, the kitten is ripped away from the nurturing she needs before she is ready. Believing that what she wanted was best, Yolanda removed the kitten from her mother and stuffed her away in a drum,

which coincidentally came as a gift from New York. In an attempt to ignore the kittens calls for her mother, Yolanda bangs the drum with the kitten still inside.

This moment is reflected throughout the novel in all Yolanda and her sisters' attempts to communicate, to assimilate, and to survive. They were torn from their motherland. They were torn from their traditions. They were torn from themselves. Their past hiccups with combining cultures haunts their present-day identities and creates a sense of ostracization that is common among Hispanic-Americans of all ethnicities.

In her introduction to the 25th anniversary edition of *The House on Mango Street*, Sandra Cisneros briefly describes how her humble beginnings inspired her work. She describes her past self as "modelling her book-in-progress after...story fragments that ring like Hans Christian Anderson, or Ovid, or entries from the encyclopedia," (Cisneros xvi). What comes from her attempt to make bite-sized, readable stories is a compilation of vignettes that follow the character of Esperanza as she maneuvers her way through the confusion and elation that comes with growing into one's own identity.

Each section of Cisneros's book ranges from two paragraphs to four pages. As the audience walks through a year in Esperanza's life, she gives a realistic description of what it means to be a young, Mexican-American woman. The first story, "The House on Mango Street," describes the necessity that is felt by many low-income ethnic families. The constant naming of previous homes and the descriptions of their quick departures lay the ground work for the back-and-forth that plagues Esperanza's efforts to grow into her own identity.

The most important narrative choice that Cisneros makes in regards to Esperanza's experiences is to constantly have her refer back to the house within which she currently resides. From the beginning, Esperanza marks the house on Mango Street as the pivotal center for her

grasp on who she is and who she would become: “The house on Mango Street is ours... But even so, it’s not the house we’d thought we’d get,” (Cisneros 3). It is against this house, and houses in general, that Esperanza places the images of what is expected of her and how she and the youths around her lash out away from the traditions passed down to them from their elders and towards a more Americanized life which they desire.

Cisneros takes the different characteristics of the house, whether it be specific rooms, additions, or location, and uses them as symbols for Esperanza’s interpretation of her clashing cultures:

The imagery in this text functions on three levels, in the manner of prose poems. Images in this text are effective because they function at the level of form, of plot, and of symbolic significance. Each of these images serves, first, to establish the identity of the enunciating voice; this is primarily a poetic function of creating the lyric presence who experiences and speaks. But, the images also have a narrative function as a part of the plot line which is the search for the promised house. And, finally, each image takes on symbolic proportions because it participates in the rich intertextuality of literature. (De Valdes)

The clearest marker of the prison-like identity Esperanza places on her traditional household is the image of women looking out the windows. When referencing her great-grandmother, from whom she received her name, in “My Name,” she describes that “she looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow,” (Cisneros 11). While windows are often used in literature to act as a portal between what is and what will be or what is desired, the women in Esperanza’s life are trapped on one side of the window by their husbands and duties as wives and mothers. Esperanza herself declares her desire to break from this

particular tradition of window sitting (11) but that does not stop other young women of her age from claiming their seats on the window sill. For some, like Esperanza's friend Sally, even the possibility of imagining life away from her duties is too much freedom away from her duties: "And he doesn't let her look out the window. And he doesn't like her friends, so nobody visits her unless he is working," (Cisneros 102).

Many vignettes within *The House on Mango Street* detail Esperanza's inability to conform to culture norms by describing her observations of the people around her and her actions to distance herself from them. Other vignettes, such as "Hair," "Darius & the Clouds," and several others act as Esperanza's own poetic description of herself and her loved ones. The critical difference between the two genres of vignettes is how the audience receives information.

The first person moves effortlessly from observer to lyrical introspection about her place in the world. The language is basic, idiomatic English with a touch of colloquial speech and a few Spanish words. The deceptively simple structure of sentences and paragraphs has a conceptual juxtaposition of action and reaction where the movement itself is the central topic. (De Valdes)

In her poetic descriptions, Esperanza treats her culture as a space for growth, for uniqueness, and for solidarity. In the short, three-paragraph "Those Who Don't," she flips the script on non-minority readers. Her description of the reactions of "those who don't know any better," (Cisneros 28). All the characteristics of a neighborhood on the wrong side of town to those who don't belong are explained away by the people who live with them on a daily basis. But the fear that is felt by "those who don't know any better" is reversed in similar times of unfamiliarity: "All brown all around, we are safe. But watch us drive into a neighborhood of another color and our knees go shakity-shake and our car windows get rolled up tight and our eyes look straight.

Yeah. That is how it goes and goes,” (Cisneros 28). Instead of the everyday events of a poor neighborhood, the readers are exposed to the extraordinary deductions of a young woman on the verge of making a choice about her identity.

Both Alvarez and Cisneros are writing from the perspective of Hispanic women, but that does not mean that they intend to exclude anyone outside of those parameters. In order to best spread the sense of unity to hyphenated individuals as well as understanding to those not necessarily characterized within the narratives themselves, Hispanic-American authors have created non-traditional methods of narration. These narrative styles, while unfamiliar, are effective in portraying an in-between culture struggling to create its own storyline within reality.

Language as a Cultural Bridge

My own experiences with language barriers begin to resonate once education became the prevalent pastime of my life. Elementary school isn't typically filled with difficult words so faking my way through didn't faze me much but it was the simplest of concepts that made me feel like I didn't belong, that made me feel othered for the first time.

I was in the third grade when I found that my friends couldn't always understand me. We were chatting away about all the travesties that bother most seven year olds when we began to discuss how much trouble we get into when we don't make our beds. We went off listing every article of bed dressings that we had to lug onto the beds three times our size. My turn came and I started my list:

“pillows, stuffed animals, *colcha*...”

Colcha? My friends didn't understand. What in the world was a colcha? But to me, I couldn't see how they couldn't understand. A colcha: a big, warm piece of fabric that you cover yourself with at night.

A blanket.

What's a blanket? I've never heard that word before. It's a colcha. It goes on my bed. But no one else understands. I go home that night and ask my brothers about this weird new word I learned and they confirm what I could not accept. There are words that I don't know, words that mean what I'm trying to say, and words that I have never heard. I thought I had all the words I needed when I entered school for the first time but at this moment I knew that in reality I had very few words. I might as well have had no words. Words are what connects us with the world but in that moment I lost my voice and I would spend the next decade of my life finding it once again.

Throughout my 15ish years of education since my initial realization that language was a barrier that I would need to find a way to overcome, I have devoted myself to mastering the English language. From the time I could read, I have devoured all the literature I could get my hands on and grew a thirst for narratives of all kinds. Along the way, I explored how to use the words I was learning to craft my own tales. With these words, I could render emotion and passion; I could change the way my friends experienced a day with simple marks on a screen. I grew to wonder, if I could do this in singular instances, what impact is the literature I read having on the world with every person who picks it up?

Being able to read and write has molded me into the student and the overall person I am. As an English major, my life revolves around these basic abilities and how they help me interpret the world. In today's society, it is hard to imagine that there are still people who don't have the

skills to take in much of the vast amounts of information available, but it is a real obstacle that many still face. Various circumstances crossing generational borders contribute to the illiteracy problem across the world. For some, education at any level is not required and so they leave school at an early age. This was the case with my maternal grandmother who left the Mexican school system in the fifth grade to start working. Five years later, she was single-handedly raising a family while my grandfather was across the border searching for jobs to keep the ever-growing family afloat. Years and opportunities passed without my grandmother utilizing the few skills she had learned and her literacy fell to the wayside.

Now, as a 69-year-old woman, my grandmother has never read a bed-time story to any of her plethora of grandchildren. Due to medical situations, my aunts, uncle, and mother have had to teach her to sign her name, a task which takes her about ten minutes to complete. A woman who has had such a heavy hand in my upbringing, one that has led me to my path revolving around language, doesn't know how to read or write her own, let alone the other language that her family members have immersed themselves in. She will never read my favorite novel or even these words I myself am writing. There is a whole world that I have dedicated my life to exploring that we can never truly share with one another.

My mother, on the other hand, has acted as a stepping stone in the languages that we live with. Growing up in Mexico, she completed her primary education while simultaneously working since the age of eleven to support her six siblings. From what I hear, she had a wonderful grasp of Spanish (both reading and writing), so much so that she was offered the opportunity to continue her education at no expense to her. One of her teachers saw her potential and offered to pay my mother's way through her secondary education, but because of our family's financial situation, my mother was forced to turn it down and deny herself the

opportunities to learn and grow within her own culture.

After immigrating to the United States, my mother threw herself into the workforce and learned a new language in order to survive. Through her job and her children, she adapted as best she could. In her current job, my mother uses the English language every day. From reading labels to marking product, she is constantly putting forth the effort needed to do her job and do it well. Many of her friends face the same barriers that she does and work to establish a working knowledge of English in order to keep their jobs, an issue that their English-speaking colleagues do not seem to appreciate.

While utilizing English constantly throughout their shifts, my mother and her friends use their personal time to interact and communicate in the language that they feel most comfortable and confident in: Spanish. These conversations revolve around their personal lives and in no way affect how they or those around them do their jobs, but when faced with the inability to understand, their non-Spanish speaking colleagues have constantly demanded that they speak English so that everyone can understand. This demand seems to be a common one made in a nation that claims no official language. Many faced with this situation react with embarrassment at being rejected and othered for holding onto a piece of their culture. While that is an understandable reaction, I am proud to say my mother steps away from the crowd with hers. When her coworkers request that only English be spoken within working hours so that all can understand, my mother proudly denies them proclaiming that she and her friends had learned English in order to do their job; if understanding all their conversations was so important to everyone, it is now their turn to learn Spanish.

With my mother's determination guiding me, I find myself the youngest of three siblings on the fast track of being the first to graduate from a university with a degree in English. My

passion for language and deeper understanding have moved me from a little girl who was at a loss for words to a young woman in search of how words change the world.

Language is an important part of every narrative. Without language, there would be no books, no poems, no scripts; in fact, without language, there would be no communication at all. The importance of language exponentially grows in literature such as Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls lost their Accents* and Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* that focuses on characters and cultures that exist in multiple languages.

In my initial readings of these novels, I was not bothered by the mixing of languages. In fact, the casual flow between English and Spanish mimicked my own thought process almost exactly. It wasn't until I read through them again that I noticed how the languages were separated by italicization and romanization causing a jarring pause in the page. The differences were highlighted by the distinct changes in typography giving the reader a recognition of the dissonance occurring without having to read a single word on the page. This stylistic choice of integrating two languages acts as a unique tool for both English and Spanish understanding readers as well as for English only speakers.

For readers like me who live their daily life in two languages, the seamless use of English and Spanish reassures me that the novel I am reading is aimed towards me. The dual languages make the characters and situations more realistic and more relatable.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, language is defined as "the system of words or signs that people use to express thoughts and feelings to each other" (Language). While this is true of all languages, communication is especially effective when two or more languages

are used to convey a single message due to the cultural pocket within which the mixture can be and is used.

In *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, the use of both English and Spanish show the fluctuating relationship that the girls have with the United States as well as with the Dominican Republic. Even though the majority of the novel is written in English, the instances of Spanish vocabulary add a layer of cultural discussion that may be lacking with the use of only one language. Furthermore, moments of discussion on how language (English and Spanish) is lacking in effectiveness become almost their own language, reaching an understanding with another sector of people apart from simply those who speak one language or two.

As the novel progresses, readers approach the narrative of the Garcia Girls in a way that uses language as a series of guideposts with which to navigate the reverse chronology of the novel. As the Garcia Girls travel backwards in time, their relationship with English dissipates while the inverse is true for Spanish.

At the forefront of the novel when celebrating her return to the Dominican Republic, Yolanda answers many questions about how she and her family have been in the five years she has been absent from the island: “in halting Spanish, Yolanda reports on her sisters. When she reverts back to English, she is scolded, ‘¡En español!’” (Alvarez, 1991, p. 7). Alvarez goes on to mention Yolanda’s aunts’ insistence on practicing in order to regain control of her native tongue while Yolanda worries that she will “suddenly [go] blank over some word in English.” This lack of comfort with sticking to the Spanish language when conversing with her relatives on the island demonstrates Yolanda’s separation from the culture there. She feels uncomfortable and unconfident in communicating with a language that was once a major contributor to her identity. Now that she has been Americanized, she worries about how reverting to a reliance on Spanish

will affect her ability to communicate in the United States, though, as she points out a few lines later, she isn't sure if she will be returning.

Going further into Yolanda's past, a time of personal unhappiness is shown through Yo's inability to communicate in any language. In her relationship with a man named John, she feels her identity slipping away from her. Even her name is not hers anymore: "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*," (Alvarez 68). The italicization—usually reserved for foreign vocabulary in an English novel utilizing other languages—of the different bastardizations of her name show how every transformation strips away her connection with her language and her identity. This decomposition of self is characterized by her inability to understand others and vice-versa. In the chapter "Joe," Yo begins rambling off words that have no meaning to John or eventually to her "shrink" and ineffectively uses quotes in an attempt to communicate what feels to her to be original thought.

At the peak of their dysfunction, after having found a pro-con list for marriage and an ill-timed attempt on John's part for sex, Yo cannot even recognize that John is using words. All she hears is "babble" (Alvarez 78). In an attempt to reconcile her love, her future, and her identity, she pretends to understand him even though "she could not make out his words. They were clean, bright sounds, but they meant nothing to her," (Alvarez, 1991, p. 77). Having already been accused of being crazy, Yo spirals into an unstable mindset due to an inability to communicate how her loss of identity affects her. While Yo spends her time in a psychiatric ward to help her regain her sense of mental stability tied to her ability, her mother questions why Yo's relationship to John ended when they had seemed so happy. Yo's response was simply that they

no longer spoke the same language (Alvarez 81). As Ellen Maycock explains in her article "The Bicultural Construction of Self in Cisneros, Álvarez, And Santiago,"

The protagonist is obviously not referring to basic communication problems in English, but to broader, deeper problems in their relationship. Yolanda later narrates: ‘. . .so many words. There is no end to what can be said about the world’ (Alvarez 85). Through her writing, Yolanda is slowly coming to terms with difficulties of expression and style and how, despite ‘all that can be said about the world,’ there are still always innumerable barriers to real comprehension between one's inner world and the outside world one confronts on a daily basis. (Mayock 227).

Though literal language may not have been the difficulty for Yo, it was the metaphorical language of mutual understanding that caused a break in her solid identity. Once content in her life as Joe, the complete erasure of the other side of her hyphen leads to her mental dissolution.

The issue with communication did not stem from or stop with the four Garcia Girls. As an immigrant, their mother Laura also had to adapt to a new lifestyle and language. Her way of doing so was to learn through common phrases she heard around her:

She spoke in English when she argued with them. And her English was a mishmash of it.

If her husband insisted she speak English to the girls so they wouldn't forget their native tongue, she'd snap, "When in Rome, do unto the Romans." (Alvarez 135)

When emotions dominate the mind, it is logical to revert to the language with which communication was first described. There is rarely time for thought of translation. There is only feeling and immediate vocalization. Laura, on the other hand, takes the time to argue with her daughters in English. In her dedication to assimilation, she forces herself to take her thoughts of anger and/or frustration and translate them to the language which she is attempting to learn and

apply to her daily life. Laura went so far with her language to lose her temper with her husband, a monumental infraction against traditional Hispanic culture, when Carlos insisted that the girls do not forget their Spanish.

Though Laura craved full assimilation through language, she understood how her daughters' use of English towards her and her husband had a double meaning: "Her daughters never called her *Mom* except when they wanted her to feel how much she had failed them in this country. She was a good enough Mami, fussing and schooling and giving advice, but a terrible girlfriend parent, a real failure of a Mom," (135-136). In her discovery of a welcoming language, Laura did not necessarily find a cultural parenting style she could easily adjust to. In her daughters' eyes, she was not the mother that they had learned comes with the American lifestyle. She did not gossip, she scolded. She was always a mother, never a friend and while this was an acceptable way to raise children in the Dominican Republic, it was an outdated concept in the United States. The Garcia Girls use of the word "*Mom*" (again italicized to convey its foreign meaning) is an attack on "Mami's" inability to adapt.

Laura acts as an interesting foil to her daughters' assimilation to the United States. While the girls were hesitant to accept their fate as lower class citizens of a new country, they adapted quickly and lost touch with their roots, forcing their parents to continuously send them back to the Dominican Republic throughout their lives in order to remember the traditions and values that their parents hoped to keep after immigrating. Laura on the other hand, never quite mastered the art of being an American even though she was one half of the decision making team that moved them away from danger and towards opportunity. Her desire to immigrate, though, never erased her ties to her culture: "Laura sat across the table, the only one who seemed to be listening to him. Yoyo and her sisters were forgetting a lot of their Spanish, and their father's formal,

florid diction was hard to understand,” (Alvarez 142). As the girls moved farther away from their childhood on the island, they lost a major part of their identity: their language. Even though their parents, particularly their father, attempted to keep them immersed in Dominican culture, as they immersed themselves in their new American surroundings, they lost the ability to communicate with their own pasts as well as with their parents in the present.

In the quotation above, it is unclear if their inability to understand Carlos is due to the formality of the valedictorian speech he is demonstrating or if they have lost all sense of the dialect of the island. If they have lost their attachment to the language as a whole, it is due to the lack of cultural dedication. The girls no longer see Spanish as a necessity to their physical or their mental survival through the means of identity. If, in fact, the lack of understanding stemmed from the proper grammar that Carlos’s valedictorian speech would have had, the girls were in this moment in a middle point between their childhood identities as Dominicans and their (young) adult identities as Americans. Perhaps if Carlos and Laura were speaking to the girls in the colloquial dialect of their home, the girls would still be able to understand. It is unclear if that would have been the case, but that would have meant a shift in the educational foundation of how the girls form their public and, in the case of a speech Yo writes for a school assembly, professional identities. This would then be a critical time to continue nurturing the Spanish background I to ensure that the girls continue to identify with the past which happened almost exclusively in Spanish.

While Laura and Carlos do send their daughters back to the Dominican Republic to reconnect as they grow older and more rebellious, it is in this time of uncertainty that Yo finds her American roots in words. As she describes it, “she needed to settle somewhere, and since the natives were unfriendly, and the country inhospitable, she took root in the language,” (Alvarez

141). Like her mother, Yo clings to the one aspect of America that she can control. In her studies, she could and did master (at least until her psychotic break) a facet of her new home in order to gain control of her day-to-day life and her identity. Ellen Maycock makes this observation about Yo and two other Hispanic, female protagonists:

Indeed, all three narrator-protagonists are survivors and inventors, a combination that helps them move with more ease between present and past, English and Spanish, desire and reality, and narration and action. The treasure of nostalgia and memory combines with the pleasure of word play in two languages to create a narration that reinforces the flow of biculturalism. (Maycock 229)

Yo's ability to communicate effectively in the United States blossoms into her passion for poetry and eventually becomes her life's work. The safety and comfort provided to her by a built affinity for the language allowed Yo to make the United States her home.

Interestingly enough, Yolanda's comfort with words was not immediate. In the brief chapter "Snow," Alvarez describes how language was akin to war for these girls. Yolanda had a strong connection with her school in her first year as a resident of the United States, mainly due to her fourth grade teacher Sister Zoe who took the time to tutor Yo without bringing attention or embarrassment to her from the other students. The majority of this tutoring revolved around the proper pronunciation of words that would be helpful to Yo, such as *laundromat*, *corn flakes*, *subway*, and *snow* (Alvarez 166). As she was learning these terms, the class was learning about and preparing for the Cold War. As Yo pieced together a language, she was also piecing together the images of destruction and death my means nuclear bombing. Sister Zoe went as far as to sketch a picture of what an explosion would look like, complete with dust flurries made of chalk.

When Winter came, Yo had no words to match with the white flurries she saw for the first time outside her classroom window except for bomb. After a few moments of panic,

“Sister Zoe’s shocked look faded. ‘Why, Yolanda dear, that’s snow!’ she laughed.

‘Snow.’

‘Snow,’ I repeated. I looked out the window warily. All my life I had heard about the white crystals that fell out of American skies in the winter.” (Alvarez 167)

Though she had heard of snow before, Yolanda didn’t have the image paired with the proper vocabulary. Instead of the wonder that would eventually grow from her first experience with snow, Yo’s initial response was one of fear that aligned with war-like expectations. Her language mirrored the emotion behind a pending bomb-drop. This error in word choice reflected how the Garcia family perceived their move to the United States: with fear, worry, and uncertainty.

Where Julia Alvarez heavily implements use of Spanish words within her novel which are easily identifiable by the use of italics, Sandra Cisneros rarely uses Spanish beyond the names of the characters in *The House on Mango Street*. What makes the language within distinct is the colloquial aspect of it. But the language used by Esperanza goes beyond the common usage of the masses. The first person narration of the vignettes allows for a use of language that is distinct in neighborhoods and subcultures that mix languages. Maria de Valdes explains the importance of the intertwined identity of a character and his or her language in her article "In Search of Identity in Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*:"

The poetic text cannot operate if we separate the speaker from her language; they are the inseparable unity of personal identity. There is no utterance before enunciation. There is a fictional persona, Esperanza Cordero, who will speak, and there is the implicit continued

use of idiomatic American English. But the enunciation that we read is at once the speaker and the spoken which discloses the subject, her subjectivity, and ours. (De Valdes)

Esperanza's narration is indicative of her cultural background and age. Her use of incomplete or improper English makes the audience acutely aware of her age and social standing. The constant disruption in thought and use of short sentences allows the book to read more like a conversation than a novel. The reminders of Esperanza's youth create an enormous impact on the mindset of the readers. It allows for an instant connection to youthful distress for those who have endured similar situations or emotions while also leaving room for sympathy from those who may not be familiar with life on Mango Street or the myriad of similar streets across the country.

The House on Mango Street acts as an artistic release for both Esperanza and her creator Cisneros. Both hailing from Chicago, they are plagued with the poor circumstances surrounding themselves and those who fill the houses surrounding their experiences on Mango Street. "I write about [them] because I don't know what else to do with their stories. Writing them down allows me to sleep," (Cisneros xix). Similar to Cisneros herself, Esperanza writes down her thoughts and observations in order to make sense of a confusing time for her identity:

This was the year of the passage from preadolescence to adolescence when she discovered the meaning of being female and Mexican living in Chicago. but, most of all, this was the year she discovered herself through writing. The girl who did not want to belong to her social reality learns that she belongs to herself, to others, and not to a place. (De Valdes)

Constantly searching for a place within which to ground her identity that is not the house on Mango Street, Esperanza creates a new home in her mind. She looks forward to the future, to the

house that is everything her family has promised, to the home that is permanent and embodies every aspect of her dreams and her roots: “One day I’ll own my own house, but I won’t forget who I am or where I came from. Passing bums will ask, Can I come in? I’ll offer them the attic, ask them to stay, because I know how it is to be without a house,” (Cisneros 87). In an effort to stay true to this promise to herself, she writes everything down. She immortalizes her youth so that she may return to Mango Street while living in her house with the bums in the attic.

A part of what grounds Esperanza to her future and past is her name. The first time we encounter her name it is in an effort to understand her reasons for jotting down life on Mango Street and her imbalance of identity. “In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting,” (Cisneros 10). Inheriting her name from her great-grandmother, Esperanza places great disdain for it and allows her native language to cause uneasiness to the most public aspect of her identity due to all the negative connotation that comes with settling for a life that her namesake was forced into. While her name is in Spanish no matter what (at no point is she ever referenced to by Hope), she chooses to believe that an English translation of her name, therefore herself and her culture, is the best perception of herself. While Esperanza never makes outright comments to condemn the people around her, she does often reference her own feelings as falling short of conformity to the misogynistic traditions of Mango Street and its culture. Her inability to appreciate her name in its original language is not the first nor the last occurrence of this throughout the book.

As we open *The House on Mango Street*, our eyes are met with the transitional introduction of “We didn’t always live on Mango Street. Before that we lived on Loomis on the third floor, and before that we lived on Keeler. Before Keeler it was Paulina, and before that I can’t remember,” (Cisneros 3). Throughout the duration of the book, we are taken on a written

tour of the neighborhood; we meet the neighbors; we befriend Esperanza. By the end of the book, we are ready to leave Mango Street and move into a house of our own with Esperanza and the bums in the attic. We expect Mango Street to become another address in the list of residences that Esperanza has moved to. What we do not expect is for Esperanza to repeat the first line of the book but with a minor adjustment to the lineup: “Before Keeler it was Paulina, but what I remember most is Mango Street, sad red house, the house I belong but do not belong to.” (Cisneros 109-110). Of all the homes, all the rooms, it was the sad red house that was not what they had been promised in a house of their own that made the biggest impact on Esperanza. The slight change in the structure of the sentence makes an important impact in the consideration that Esperanza and the readers have for Mango Street. This house, this neighborhood has impacted Esperanza like no other home has. She has every intention of leaving and the whole neighborhood knows it but what they don't know is that she also promises to come back: “They will not know. I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out.” (Cisneros 110). Her constant criticism of her community has inspired her to change her own life but it has also inspired her to change the traditions. She hopes to reach out to those in need in her community, those who unwillingly participate in the continuation of everything she dislikes about her culture—the window sitting, the abandonment, the misogyny.

It was at the beginning of my collegiate career that the resurgence of the civil rights movement started. The killings of Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, and many more colored individuals sparked the Black Lives Matter movement. While this movement vocalizes the importance of the black community, it shows support for and from other ethnic groups who feel similarly marginalized and oppressed by the dominantly white culture that exists in the United

States. The more I learned about my people and our shared experiences, the more I could connect with the Black Lives Matter movement and the shared goal of fighting systematic racism. As I grow more confident in my bridged identity as a Mexican-American, I build my voice that I hope to use as a tool for movements such as the civil rights movement, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the inevitable movements that will follow. Authors such as Julia Alvarez and Sandra Cisneros are tasked with writing literature that connects people from all kinds of cultures. Audience members who identify with their characters use novels such as *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents* and *The House on Mango Street* to create a community among Hispanic-American readers who often times feel as though they are experiencing a singular crisis in identity. This literary-based community comes together to support one another as well as other groups of people who are in need of the support that once lacked among us. The more literature that is released with the intention of forming bonds, the easier it is to understand social movements such as Black Lives Matter. For non-minority readers, or even readers of different minority groups, Hispanic-American literature serves as an exploratory journey into the minds of immigrants, children of immigrants, and community members across the country.

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