
‘The Violation at the Center of my Art’: Collective Traumas and Individual Agency in Julia Alvarez’s Dominican American Short-Story Cycles

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Abstract

Julia Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) has been rightly celebrated as a landmark publication in the literature of the Dominican diaspora, given its sustained exploration of the effects of cultural displacement on its young female protagonists. In unfolding her narrative in reverse chronological order, Alvarez foregrounds the migrant’s obsession with the past, at the same time gradually exposing the legacy of colonialism in the Caribbean and of Trujillo’s regime in the DR. While these sources of national, and personal, trauma needed to be spelled out, especially twenty-five years ago, Alvarez’s teleological narrative appears to cast characters as the inescapable victims of history – a history which, marked by sexual violations and racial crimes, is seemingly destined to repeat itself. Having highlighted the problematic implications of the etiological quest inherent in Alvarez’s “reverse Bildungsroman”, this paper argues that its sequel *¡Yo!* (1997) is an attempt to provide a corrective to the earlier short-story cycle’s jettisoning of the dimension of personal responsibility and individual agency. Drawing attention to Alvarez’s imaginative variations on the short-story cycle (a genre whose appeal to contemporary minority writers is well documented), my reading of the two texts is also framed by wider considerations about recent development in Dominican American literature, as exemplified, most notably, by Junot Díaz’s outspoken critique of the racism and misogyny that inform national codes of Dominicanness.

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