



2014

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### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Read, Madeleine (2014) "Lenguaje y Memoria," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol7/iss1/6>

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# Lenguaje y Memoria

## *Bilingual Constructions of Self in Julia Alvarez's ¡Yo!*

*Madeleine Read*

"Some things I have to say aren't getting said," begins Julia Alvarez's poem "Bilingual Sestina," a title that reflects both the subject material and the literal linguistic content of the piece (824). It is a poem whose Latin-American speaker muses over her inadequate grasp of English and the complexity and fluidity of the language barrier between her and assimilation into American culture. For her, this barrier is neither rigid nor unyielding; rather, her partial knowledge of the English language reshapes its contours and breaches it in places, allowing her to glimpse the other side, but not to fully immerse herself in it. Some things she has to say are not getting said because she lacks the ability to convey her feelings in the language of the culture around her. Even if she has the appropriate vocabulary, the foreignness of the words makes her own thoughts seem alien to her.

This tension between languages is a theme woven throughout most of Alvarez's works—novels, essays, and poetry alike. "Bilingual Sestina" distills and encapsulates the essence of the linguistic tug-of-war, emphasizing through repetition of the word "closed" that an imperfect understanding of the language prevents a hyphenated American, like Alvarez herself, from becoming fully American. The power of language to dictate where the speaker stands within (or without) a culture endows it with a significant role in the formation of identities, both those imposed by others and those constructed by the self.

Alvarez's writing tacitly acknowledges language's special power over memory, history, and identity. The eponymous character Yolanda in her 1997 novel *¡Yo!* personifies the way memory and history are fictionalized by their written or spoken representations. As the vehicle of thought and communication, words are inherently positioned to shape a reader's perceptions of and emotions toward the events they attempt to portray. Furthermore, even the very material the words draw from is subjective; memory is never exact, and the mind, whether knowingly or not, fills in the gaps with fictional constructions. If memory were perfect and words could convey exactly what the objective experience was like, the interpretation of events would still be slanted by the influence of the author's own paradigms and past experiences. Every narrative, then, whatever claims it may make to veracity and objectivity, must necessarily contain elements of fiction and myth.

As a Dominican-American author, Alvarez is preoccupied with two important facets of language: first, the influence of bilingualism on the formation of identity; second, the way that history, heritage, and memory shape the identity of hyphenated Americans like Alvarez herself. This focus is particularly evident in the recurring character Yolanda, who serves as the author's own alter ego. Alvarez's works flirt with the blurred boundaries between fact and fiction, as well as memory and myth. As a result, they are haunted by a sense of missing or broken identity. For Alvarez, the joint ambiguities of history and memory (further distorted by the language chosen to represent them) yield an ambiguity of identity, which manifests itself in her fragmented combination of Spanish and English. The wall between languages and the bilingualism that allows some fluidity around it provide a framework through which her characters can navigate the tension between fact and fiction in their memories and, ultimately, formulate constructions of the self.

Alvarez's novel *¡Yo!* is set against the backdrop of Raphael Trujillo's dictatorship in the Dominican Republic, known among Dominicans as the *Trujillato* (Holguín 92). Upon assuming power in 1930, he made his party the only legal party, dispensed with the formalities of voting, closed down emigration from the country, and began changing names of mountains and cities to variations of *Trujillo*. During his thirty-one year reign, he was responsible for the deaths of over fifty thousand people, many through brutal massacres and others at the hands of his secret police, the SIM. Disappearances and murders were common. Terrified, Dominicans lived in oppressed silence, knowing that if they spoke out against the regime's injustices, their lives would be forfeit. In

the vein of Freudian psychoanalysis, Jessica Wells Cantiello argues that this injunction for silence has caused the horrific events of the Trujillato to become a culturally repressed memory for Dominicans (92). She claims that although years of imposed oppression effectively conditioned the nation to remain silent, Yolanda (nicknamed Yo) represents a form of rebellion against the dictatorship in the story about the gun, which is repeated several times throughout Alvarez's oeuvre. Each narrative, crucially, posits a different version of events. In *¡Yo!* the tale is recounted from the perspective of Yolanda's mother. Still living in the Dominican Republic under the thumb of the Trujillato, the mother enters a closet where her husband has hidden an illegal firearm to find that Yo, then a small child, has been rifling through the drawers. She knows that if her daughter saw the gun, she holds the family's life in her hands—should the SIM learn of its existence, they will all be arrested and probably killed. When questioned, Yo says nothing of having found the gun, but her mother senses that she is lying, as if Yo implicitly understands that keeping it a secret gives her an unspoken power over her parents. "I hated being at the mercy of my own child," says the mother, "but in that house we were all at the mercy of her silence from that day on" (28).

It is language that gives Yo this power to influence her future: Ironically, the safety of her entire family hinges on her silence. In one version, it is because she tells her story to a neighbor that the SIM come to arrest her father (Cantiello 93). In *¡Yo!* she is characterized as a compulsive storyteller: "For Yo, talking was like an exercise in what you could make up" (24). This innate characteristic gives the impression that she possesses an inborn power and drive to fight the silence of her culture through language.

That Alvarez has written so many different versions of the story about the gun throughout her works reflects her awareness of the fictitious nature of memory. In her short essay entitled "A Note on the Loosely Autobiographical," Alvarez relates a story about her family in which she asked them to write down what they remembered about the day they left the Dominican Republic:

The arguments began . . . My mother remembered going to a fortune-teller to find out whether or not we would make it out of the island safely. My father said that such a trip would have been impossible because we received word at the last minute, and then had to leave immediately. One sister remembered that we pushed the car down the driveway, afraid to turn it on . . . My older sister laughed when she heard that story. "That's from *The Sound of Music!*" (166)

Although the tone of this passage is lighthearted, it provides a fascinating insight into how fickle memory can be. All family members had experienced the same event, but time and personal emotions distorted the recollection to such a degree that they disagreed on the basic details. This interplay between memory and fiction is one of the prominent themes in the first chapter of *¡Yo!*. The parents, Mami and Papi, struggle to reconcile who they were before—affluent, intelligent, Papi a prominent doctor—with who they are now, penny-pinchers living in a tiny urban apartment. Perhaps the hardest change to swallow is that in their own country, operating under their own customs, laws, and language, they felt capable of protecting their family, while in the United States they are left powerless by their inadequate grasp of English. Haunted by the ever-present fear that their family will be deported, they are terrified that speaking only Spanish will render them defenseless against the implacable force of American bureaucracy. Thus, the language barrier becomes not only a nuisance but also a threat to their very survival. Mami, the narrator, mentions speaking with the social worker in the United States about the horrors that happened back in the Dominican Republic: “I get a little carried away and invent a few tortures of my own,” she admits, but “nothing the SIM hadn’t thought up, I’m sure” (32). Like her daughter Yo, Mami feels compelled to invent stories now that she is in the United States and free from the repressive mandate of silence that had hovered over her in the Dominican Republic. The traumatic memory of the disappearances of friends, the recollection of “nights . . . up to four sleeping pills to numb myself into a few hours of the skimpiest sleep” clearly still haunts her; yet, she does not believe that the truth is sufficient to convey the weight of what she wants to communicate to the social worker (26). The fact that she “can’t find the words in English—or Spanish” reflects her awareness that words in either language cannot do justice to the awfulness of the memory, necessitating a lie to convey its full weight (34). Furthermore, she is speaking in “broken English that usually cuts [her] ideas down to the wrong size” (32); she feels like the use of a language foreign to her hinders the efficacy of the truth and renders it inadequate. Hence, even though she would often “put Tabasco in [Yo’s] mouth to burn away the lies,” she herself is driven to the same sin because memory is insufficient for her purposes (24).

Mami also has a strong sense of the power of language in overriding and reshaping memory and history. This is most keenly felt in her transition from relating events that took place in the Dominican Republic to explaining the

more recent happenings in America. In a chilling paragraph, she reveals her awareness of the fictional nature of any retelling of an event:

Isn't a story a charm? All you have to say is, *And then we came to the United States*, and with that *and then*, you skip over four more years of disappearing friends, sleepless nights, house arrest, narrow escape, *and then*, you've got two adults and four wired-up kids in a small, dark apartment near Columbia University. Yo must have kept her mouth shut or no charm would have worked to get us free of the torture chambers we kept telling the immigration people about so they wouldn't send us back. (28)

The dark undertones in these words effectively convey the dread and terror of four long years skipped casually over by the transitional phrase and then. When the narrator tells her story and uses *and then* to gloss over the horror, her listeners do not hear the repressed memories of all the friends who have disappeared and all the times the family narrowly escaped the prying fingers of Trujillo's secret police. When Alvarez acknowledges the insufficiency of *and then* in her writing, the reader suddenly understands how inadequate mere words are and how far they can strike from the real heart of the story while still purporting to be the truth. The words misrepresent the narrator as well, as *and then* conveys nothing of the emotional and psychological damage Mami has experienced. "How can this lady with her child's eyes and her sweet smile understand who I am and what I have been through?" she asks of the social worker who comes to inspect their house (34). Like this naïve, blond American assigned to evaluate their situation, the reader forms an erroneous image of who Mami really is, with no notion of the scars underlying the formation of her identity. As Cantiello points out, this element of unknowability is also reflected in her choice of the words *must have* (Cantiello 96). The phrase indicates an oxymoronic fusion of conviction and uncertainty, maintaining that something must be true, but simultaneously acknowledging that Mami has no certain proof and therefore can only infer it from the consequences that followed. She is haunted both by what she does remember and by what she does not. As Julie Barak argues, "The stories that spin out from this center are about what they remember and what they invent to survive" (Barak 60).

From the beginning, Mami identifies language as the element of Americanness with which she struggles most. It places a barrier between herself and those with whom she tries to communicate, most specifically the social worker who arrives at the end of the story. Alvarez's choice to compose

the narrative in English, however, heightens the sense of fracture—although the story is being told in English, it is actually happening in Spanish. There is a jolting reminder of this every few paragraphs, when Alvarez slips in an unfamiliar word: *el cuco*, *guayabera* (24), *Papá Dios* (26), which lead the reader to associate fractured language with fractured identity. Evidence of the brokenness of Mami's sense of self emerges throughout the narrative. There are several instances in which she compares her current perception of past and memory to a puzzle: "All those years have mixed together like an old puzzle whose box top is lost. (I don't even know anymore what picture all those little pieces make.)" (24). The reader is left trying to sort out the puzzle, and in doing so he or she is struck by the sense of narrative dislocation caused by the family's transplant from its dark, culturally rich, native soil into "snowy, blonde, blue-eyed, gum-chewing" American ground ("Bilingual Sestina" 824). It is significant that Mami no longer knows what picture the pieces should make; she feels as though her life and her identity have been turned upside down and scattered, but now that she is living in the unfamiliar culture of the United States, she is no longer sure what she should be creating out of the pieces. Mami will not—and cannot—simply cease to be a Dominican, but she seems unable to effectively mix her new nationality with her old one. Thus, she becomes a Dominican American waging an internal war of self-hyphenation, a conflicted binary that she never fully resolves. Her failure to assimilate renders her incompetent in American society, which is exactly what her daughter does not want to be.

There is a sense of the dichotomy between memory and stories in *Yo* as well. Although other Alvarez novels give different accounts, in *¡Yo!*, the reader never finds out whether she really did see the gun, or whether she told anybody that her father had one. Mami thinks she did, but the question is left open-ended. *Yo*, however, even as a small child, somehow understands the power that the ambiguity of the story gives her; since not even her mother knows the truth, *Yo* uses it as her bargaining chip in a deal. *Yo*'s actions imply that she agrees to keep her mouth shut as long as "the bear won't be coming anymore" (28). Mami frequently dons a bear-looking mink coat that her children are convinced is the corporeal manifestation of *el cuco*, the Haitian boogeyman, and that terrifies them into immediate obedience. *Yo* hates it. When she finds that her mother is distressed over her rummaging in the closet, she recognizes that she can use her experience as leverage: She will tell no one about the gun if Mami will stop pretending to be a bear. As soon as Mami breaks that deal by locking her in the closet with the mink coat, *Yo* returns to telling stories about "[k]ids locked in

closets and their mouths burned with lye. Bears mauling little children” (33). Both of these untruths have their roots in Yo’s memory. The use of *lye* contains an interesting play on words: Mami burned Yo’s mouth with Tabasco sauce to rid her of the *lies*, but in her newly-concocted story, it is the *lye* that is burning her mouth. The close tie between memory and language here further highlights how different the reality is from the narrative that eventually emerges—and how telling lies creates for Yo and her mother an entirely different identity, a fictionalized version of themselves that does not reflect the complexity of who they really are. The way Alvarez portrays stories as a “complicated confluence of truth, lies, and memory” manifests itself in Yo’s storytelling (Cantiello 84). Keenly aware of the fracture in her identity and her ability to exploit it with language, Yo yearns for a sense of completeness and belonging. When she returns in other novels, she has forfeited many facets of her Dominican culture and heritage. She even feels uncomfortable speaking Spanish, a clear indication that her facility with English and her ability to communicate were key in forming her adult identity. Ultimately, the character she spins for herself with her stories supplants the character that memory and history had formed for her. For her mother, this assimilation is the ultimate betrayal, but Mami spends the rest of her life trying fruitlessly to finish a puzzle with missing pieces; for Yo, abandoning that part of her heritage is the only way she can find resolution and gain a sense of self that is not torn by language or lies.

Lucía M. Suárez casts the novel as Yo’s—and by extension, Alvarez’s—“struggle to pull the thread of her own identity from a tangle of possibilities” (118). Suárez argues that ambiguity is key: ambiguity of history yields creativity of imagination, and ambiguity of identity yields conflict of situation and heritage (118). This is why the most difficult part of Americanization for Yo is the increase in proximity to her mother. To Yo, Mami represents what she does not want to become: a hyphenated American who is struggling desperately to pick up the pieces of her identity. Suárez, citing an interview with the author herself, explains that Alvarez defines herself first as a writer, and only then as Dominican or American. As her alter ego, Yo follows in the same vein, desiring to rid her name of the hyphen and become fully American. Although this desire is not as evident in this novel, mentions of it in others of Alvarez’s works make it clear. Even the title, *¡Yo!*, defies Yo’s wish to abandon her former heritage. Yo is intended as a nickname for Yolanda, but it has a double meaning. In Spanish, *yo* is the singular first-person pronoun, roughly translated as *I*. Names, of course, are key in self-perception, which means that the title of the novel is



a proclamation of Yo's search for identity. Although unsure how to reconcile herself with her heritage, Yo undoubtedly wanders in search of self-discovery and self-determination. Even in the search for identity that is indicated by such the pronoun she shares for a name, she cannot escape the linguistic elements of her roots. On the other hand, Dominicans pronounce the semi-vowel *y* as Americans would the consonant *j*, meaning that Yo's name is pronounced the same way as the very American "Joe" or "Jo". This remarkable duality in the nature of her nickname also accentuates her double consciousness—her sense that she is at once both Dominican *and* American, even though culture dictates that the two are supposed to be somehow mutually exclusive.

Yo, as a stand-in for Alvarez, represents the autobiographical self. By definition, autobiographies are meant to be objective histories of their subjects, but in light of the argument that there is no such thing as objectivity in representations of events, it is impossible for an autobiography to not contain elements of fiction. Therefore, an autobiographical work is the same as a semi-autobiographical work, which is the same as a non-autobiographical work. Alvarez makes this point in her essay: "All novels are loosely autobiographical, but some novels are more loosely autobiographical than others" ("A Note on the Loosely Autobiographical" 165). Revealing that she accepts both the historicity of text and the textuality of history, Alvarez also highlights the power—the inevitability—of the author's chosen words to mold objective truths (if there is such a thing) into subjective narratives. Yo's ambition is to be a writer, but language often gets in her way. One real Hispanic writer, Esmeralda Santiago, is quoted as saying, speaking of writing Spanish scenes in English, "Nunca me imaginé que el proceso me haría confrontar no solo a mi pasado monolingüístico, sino también a mi presente bilingüe . . . I would get tongue-tied and lose the sense of what I was saying and writing, as if observing that I was translating from one language to the other had made me lose both of them" (Wall 126). This is what it becomes for Yo. She feels that by attempting to reconcile her languages, she will lose both, and it is therefore better to forget one and embrace the other.

The fluidity of language, both in its representation of events and in the bilingualism that characterizes the García family, shapes the narrative and the identities Yo and Mami attempt to construct after their relocation to the United States. As Juan Flores observes in "Broken English Memories,"

Historical memory is an active, creative force, not just a receptacle for the dead weight of times gone by. *Memory* has been associated, since its earliest usages, with the act of inscribing, engraving, or . . . "recording" (*grabar*). It

is not so much the record itself as the putting-on-record, the gathering and sorting of materials from the past in accordance with the needs and interests of the present. Remembering thus always involves selecting and shaping, constituting out of what was something that never was yet now assuredly is, in the imaginary of the present, and in the memory of the future. (381)

This concept of memory being less about the event and more about the process of remembering, with its rethinking of objectivity, memory, and text, is evident throughout *Yo!* and its companion novels. The gaps in history shape memory; memory in turn shapes identity; language, as the means of communication, affects all of the above by the very subjectivity of its nature. Epitomizing the complicated relationship between all these varying elements of identity, Yolanda represents Alvarez herself—noble, frail, complex, and utterly human. One striking feature of Alvarez's prose is the convincing way in which she captures the human experience; through her works, the reader catches a glimpse into the life of a hyphenated American and how bridges and barriers between languages change the nature of identity. The way the author uses a mingling of Spanish and English reflects the currents and fractures in the identities, memory, and heritage of hyphenated Americans.

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