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Telling History Through the Stories of Women: Julia Álvarez's In the Time of the Butterflies and In the Name of Salomé

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RECONSTRUCTING HISTORY THROUGH STORIES: JULIA ALVAREZ’S

IN THE TIME OF THE BUTTERFLIES AND IN THE NAME OF SALOMÈ

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of

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Department of English

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This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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ABSTRACT

RECONSTRUCTING HISTORY THROUGH STORIES: JULIA ALVAREZ’S
IN THE TIME OF THE BUTTERFLIES AND IN THE NAME OF SALOMÉ

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Department of English

Master of Arts

My thesis discusses the ways in which Julia Alvarez’s In the Time of the Butterflies (1994) and In the Name of Salomé (2000) are revolutionary texts contesting traditional, male dominated history and redirecting historical and communal foci to the lives of Dominican women. I employ Walter Benjamin’s theories found in his essays “The Storyteller” (1936) and “On the Concept of History” (1940) to assist my exploration of Alvarez’s questions concerning the power and effect of storytelling, and the importance of reconstructing various historical voices and images, specifically, the importance of reconstructing female voices in male dominated cultures.
I discuss the female-narrated component to Dominican history which Alvarez creates in her reconstruction of the lives of these women. Alvarez confronts the challenge of breaking these women out of their marginalized status by combining fiction with history in her reconstruction of their lives. Alvarez assumes the multifaceted role of mediator, story-teller, and historian as she remembers and re-presents Dominican history through the eyes of women who lived, experienced, and affected change within the Dominican Republic. Without merely act as a reporter of historical “facts,” Alvarez reconstructs the lives of these women fictionally, applying her impressions and ideas about the personalities, feelings, and thoughts of these women, and historically, utilizing first and secondhand accounts and information about the women.

Ultimately, the women are presented as individuals but are also connected to a collective memory and history. As individuals with human characteristics, the women are no longer inaccessible legends. As members of a collective memory and history, the women are redeemed from the isolating effect of their patriarchal society which would have women remain silent. Due to Alvarez’s reconstruction, their stories finally have the potential for further dissemination in the future with the possibility to affect other oppressed peoples. Thus, Alvarez’s reconstruction of the resistance of a few women in Dominican history produces the capacity for additional resistance by Alvarez’s audience to the same forces that these women were combating which continue to exist today – forces such as patriarchy, dictatorial governments, fascism, and economic disparity.
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Reconstructing History through Stories: Julia Alvarez’s

*In the Time of the Butterflies* and *In the Name of Salomé*

Nicole M. Carlson

Introduction

In her acclaimed novels *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994) and *In the Name of Salomé* (2000), Dominican-American writer Julia Alvarez presents historical figures and events from the Dominican Republic. *In the Time of the Butterflies* provides readers with a representation of the Mirabal sisters, detailing and bringing to life each of their journeys toward personal and national discovery as they are awakened to the evils of the dictatorship and the culture of which they are subjects and to which they are subjected.

*In the Name of Salomé* provides readers with a compelling narrative of a daughter’s journey toward personal and national discovery as she encounters knowledge about the life and contributions that her mother, whom she only knew as a toddler, made to her own personal history and to the national history of the Dominican Republic.

Together, *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *In the Name of Salomé* can be read as revolutionary texts which contest traditional, male dominated versions of history in the Dominican Republic, redirecting historical and communal foci to the lives of courageous and passionate Dominican women. Alvarez establishes a female-narrated component to
Dominican history and reconstructs the lives of six historical women - Patria, Minerva, Dede, and Mate in *In the Time of the Butterflies* and Camila and Salomé Ureña in *In the Name of Salomé*. Reconstruction, as I am using the term, is the process of retrieving images of historical oppression and resistance for the purpose of investigating the circumstances surrounding the oppression and/or resistance in order to redefine our conception and understanding of the past. Alvarez’s reconstruction of the lives of these six women is necessary due to their status as “other” within their patriarchal culture and their status as “legends” within that culture.

Alvarez confronts the challenge of breaking these women out of their marginalized status by combining fiction with history in her reconstruction of their lives. Alvarez assumes the multifaceted role of mediator, story-teller, and historian as she remembers and re-presents Dominican history through the eyes of women who lived, experienced, and affected change within the Dominican Republic. Alvarez does not merely act as a reporter of historical “facts.” She reconstructs the lives of these women both fictionally, applying her impressions and ideas about the personalities, feelings, and thoughts of these women, and historically, utilizing first and secondhand accounts, facts, and information about the women.

Ultimately, the women are presented as individuals but are also connected to a collective memory and history as their lives are reconstructed to gain representation within Dominican history. This presentation is revolutionary because as individuals with human characteristics, the women are no longer inaccessible legends. As members of a collective memory and history, the women are redeemed from the isolating effect of their patriarchal society which would have women remain silent. Due to Alvarez’s
reconstruction, their stories finally have the potential for further dissemination in the future with the possibility to affect other oppressed peoples. Thus, Alvarez’s reconstruction of the resistance of a few women in Dominican history produces the capacity for additional resistance by Alvarez’s audience to the same forces that these women were combating which continue to exist today – forces such as patriarchy, dictatorial governments, fascism, and economic disparity.

Alvarez’s reconstructions are particularly compelling when put into conversation with Walter Benjamin’s theories about storytelling and history found in his essays “The Storyteller” (1936) and “On the Concept of History” (1940). Julia Alvarez’s historical storytelling, use of genre, and narrative form in *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *In the Name of Salomé* embody the ideals that Walter Benjamin sets forth about history and storytelling in his two essays. Benjamin’s ideas provide necessary assistance in exploring questions concerning the power and effect of storytelling, and the importance of reconstructing various historical voices and images, specifically, the importance of reconstructing female voices in male dominated cultures.

Alvarez’s novels have received an abundance of critical attention; however, Benjamin’s ideas have not been utilized as a way to read Alvarez’s novels. Instead, much of this critical attention tends to focus on questions about hybridity and identity politics – specifically, what it means to be a Dominican-American caught in-between two countries, two cultures, and two languages. Hybridity and identity are integral issues within Alvarez’s novels which inevitably arise when discussing her work. In fact, Alvarez has acknowledged the hybrid identities found in her writing and in her own life, celebrating hybridity and finding it “empowering” as she “[writes] in English often about
Dominican situations and characters, using Spanish as part of [her] English,” seeing these combinations occurring as “we are becoming these mixtures, we are becoming each other.” Alvarez has said that “by allowing myself to be those mixtures and not having to choose or repress myself or cut myself off from the other, I have become a citizen of the world” (Kevane and Heredia 32). However, the women in her novels often are not as secure in their hybrid positions; they have to examine themselves, their lives, and their cultures, in order to adopt the self-assured view of hybridity that Alvarez possesses. Addressing this theme, Jacqueline Stefanko examines how Latina writers, such as Alvarez, are “hybrid selves who cross and recross borders of language and culture… create hybrid texts in order to ‘survive the diaspora,’… seeking to heal the fractures and ruptures resulting from exile and dispersal” (50-1). The women in Alvarez’s novels all feature “fractures and ruptures” that they attempt to resolve in their lives. *In the Time of the Butterflies* features the Mirabals, who are Dominican and do not have to choose between two countries; however, they are depicted as trying to come to an understanding about their hybrid identities as women, as citizens of a horrible dictator, as wives, as mothers, and as revolutionaries. *In the Name of Salomé* features literal hybridity with both women being exiled from their native country to other countries and trying to resolve their resulting multifaceted national identities, along with trying to understand their complex personal identities.

Themes such as hybridity and identity have been addressed by critics specifically regarding *In the Time of the Butterflies*. *Butterflies* has received a good deal of critical attention; however, Alvarez’s second reconstruction of Dominican history, *In the Name of Salomé*, has not been granted the critical attention that it deserves due, most likely, to
its more recent publication date. I will also address the issues involving the hybrid and complex identities of the women Alvarez is representing; however, by including *In the Name of Salomé* within this study and including Benjamin’s essays, I aim to further the discussion of these themes by demonstrating how Alvarez’s historical reconstruction project has developed and changed from the publication of *In the Time of the Butterflies* in 1994 to the publication of *In the Name of Salomé* in 2000, and by demonstrating how this development has occurred. Furthermore, I will employ Benjamin’s ideas about storytelling and history to support my assertions regarding what it means to be a historical storyteller, what kind of a historical storyteller Alvarez is, and how her role as such affects both of the novels, Dominican history, as well as literary studies.

To begin with, however, it is useful to provide an overview of the main tenets of Benjamin’s ideas in the two essays with which this project is concerned. In his essay “The Storyteller,” Benjamin laments what he sees as “the art of storytelling” coming to an end with “less and less [frequent] encounters [with] people with the ability to tell a tale properly” (83). In her Dominican-American culture, Alvarez was fortunate enough to experience the power of storytelling. She recalls, “… I was in a very storytelling culture. Dominicans are great storytellers! My mother and all the women in my family were great storytellers…stories were very important” (Kevane and Heredia 20). Recognizing the necessity of storytelling, Alvarez asserts that “all of us need stories to survive. This is how we make our lives meaningful, trying to tell ourselves in our heads the story of who we are” (26). It is only natural then that in her writing Alvarez adopts the role of a storyteller, passing down the stories that have helped shape her own life.
Alvarez’s role as a storyteller separates her novels from the often more factually based genre of the historical novel. Alvarez’s novels, in Benjamin’s words describing storytelling, are far less concerned with conveying “the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report” (Benjamin 91). Instead, the concern of a storyteller is that their story “contains, openly or covertly, something useful. The usefulness may, in one case, consist in a moral; in another, in some practical advice; in a third, in a proverb or maxim. In every case the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers” (86). The “counsel” or usefulness of stories which Benjamin discusses is primarily the wisdom that can be gained from remembering the past. As Blayer and Sanchez assert in their book *Storytelling: Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Perspectives*, “stories are threads that weave cohesion into our existence. They link us to both our ancestors and our descendants” (ix). Additionally, “[stories] adhere to many surfaces and they bond to all manner of things – especially the cultural” (1). Thus the usefulness of stories is virtually limitless as they contain the possibility to provide meaning in our lives, the lives of people in the past, and in ours and others cultural pasts and presents. It is not the past itself that contains the power to provide meaning, it is in the “critical recovery of the past” by the storyteller that the usefulness is found, as Andrew Benjamin asserts. He writes in his book *Walter Benjamin and History* that according to the ideas found within “The Storyteller,” “The story is… an answer found in the past to a question formulated in the present. But, as it is in the past that the present finds its answer, it inscribes itself within the framework of a continuity –a retrospective continuity, since it is the critical recovery of the past, not the past itself, that has here a power of filiation” (140). In
Alvarez’s case, her quest to tell the stories of the Mirabals begins once she engages this process of “critical recovery of the past.”

The recovery of these women’s stories from the past begins for Alvarez through the medium of stories. Through stories, Alvarez is introduced to the “real” Mirabal sisters before writing *In the Time of the Butterflies*. Alvarez journeyed to the Dominican Republic to interview the sole surviving Mirabal sister and to interview others who knew the murdered sisters. Of this experience Alvarez recalls,

> when I met the surviving Mirabal sister, Dede, in the Dominican Republic, I realized that I was actually going to write a novel. Before that the Mirabal sisters were legends. But when I met Dede… I felt the sisters come to life in all those details that Dede shared with me. They became real to me because she was real. She was really my entry into the story. Then I also heard stories from other members of their family, from people who had been in the underground with them. I gathered all those pieces together. Their voices become real to me in an intuitive way. Each one would require something different of me. (Kevane and Heredia 29)

The multiple voices necessary in order to inform Alvarez’s newly acquired understanding of the Mirabal women clearly influences Alvarez’s choice of form for her novels. She recognizes the power that multiple stories, told by multiple voices, has on bringing a person or an event to life. The power of multiple stories told by multiple voices stems from the ability of multiple voices to provide a fuller picture of a person, an event, and/or a culture. The repetition of certain aspects of the stories she heard as well as the variation of the stories told provide Alvarez with a better sense of not only the Mirabals and their
lives, but the lives of the people who knew them or grew up “knowing” them through stories. The multi-voiced narrative form that she subsequently chooses for both *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *In the Name of Salomé* is one conducive to storytelling.

As Alvarez fulfills the role of the storyteller in both *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *In the Name of Salomé* and avoids providing a mere report or biographical sketch of the women in her novels, she demonstrates that some stories are better told through a poetic sensibility than factual documentation. As Benjamin suggests, the problem with communicating through the use of factual documentation alone is that meaning is dictated, an explanation is provided. Whereas in a story told with poetic sensibility, according to Benjamin,

> half the art of storytelling [is keeping] a story free from explanation as one reproduces it… The most extraordinary things, marvelous things, are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks. (89)

The information to which Benjamin refers is the factual data typically found within historical accounts. The problem with these historical accounts is that they dictate meaning and provide explanations rather than allowing or encouraging independent interpretation. Matthias Fritsch describes the type of history that Benjamin writes against in both “The Storyteller” and “On the Concept of History” as a history discovered by an objective science that borrows its tools from the natural sciences, thereby missing or explaining away suffering… Due to its
positivism and objectivism, historicism denies its interpretive construction of history, and suppresses the singularity of past events as well as the uniqueness of every experience of the past in the present. (159-160)

In her historical fiction, Alvarez encourages “interpretive construction[s] of history” by acknowledging that her novels are her own interpretive constructions of the stories she heard and the research she did regarding these women. Alvarez presents the stories of the women in her novels without dictating meaning. As the chronicler or storyteller, Alvarez’s role differs from the historian “in that [the historian] makes judgments” (A. Benjamin 132). Without making judgments, Alvarez still succeeds in providing counsel for her readers to assemble from her stories. In providing counsel without dictating meaning, Alvarez effectively brings back the art of storytelling – the art which Benjamin claimed was vanishing.

The art of storytelling, however, places specific though varied responsibilities upon both the storyteller and her audience. The storyteller must, according to Benjamin, “[take] what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others… in turn [making] it the experience of those who are listening to the tale” (87). However, the story is never turned over to the listener/reader entirely, because “traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel” (92). In his book *Walter Benjamin and History*, Andrew Benjamin interprets this idea from “The Storyteller,” writing that, “The story ‘does not aim to convey the pure ‘in itself’ or gist of a thing, like information or a report. It submerges the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus, ‘traces of the storyteller cling to a story the way the handprints of the potter cling to a clay vessel’” (139). Walter Benjamin’s
metaphor is appropriate because he has already described storytelling as an art, just like creating a painting or creating pottery are also forms of art. As art then, the artist or storyteller can never be entirely removed from their creations because their “handprints” either literal, as for the potter, or figurative in the form of life experiences, views, beliefs, and feelings, have impacted their art to make it their own personal and unique creation.

With aspects of the storyteller’s life intertwined with the story, storytelling becomes a participant art, with the storyteller conveying stories and bringing to life people and events, and the audience then assimilating, pondering, and responding to the ideas that have been presented. This relationship places an obligation upon the audience of stories, in this case, the audience of Alvarez’s stories, for as Benjamin writes, in storytelling, it is “left up to [the reader/listener] to interpret things the way he understands them” (89). Reading or listening to a story then, is an interactive process which is the opposite of Benjamin’s view of the process of reading the novel.

Both of Alvarez’s texts can be considered novels in the traditional sense of the word, meaning that they are fictional prose narratives with characters, action, plot, etc; however, *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *In the Name of Salomé* resist being defined as “novels” according to Benjamin’s description of novels in “The Storyteller” because both texts come from an oral tradition, from the stories of those who knew these women and who have then shared their memories with Alvarez. This is precisely how Benjamin differentiates between the novel and the story, asserting that the novel “neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it” making the novelist “isolated” with the “birthplace of the novel [as] the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself… is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others” (87). Benjamin views writing novels as
a selfish and solitary pursuit, concerned only with the self of the writer, not with creating any sort of shared community via the oral tradition of storytelling. Furthermore, Benjamin suggests that the reader of a novel is “isolated, more so than any other reader… In this solitude of his, the reader of a novel seizes upon his material more jealously than anyone else. He is ready to make it completely his own, to devour it, as it were” (100). Without any direction, guidance, counsel, or sense of shared meaning or experiences, the reading of a novel is merely a selfish consumption of information that is devoid of companionship. Conversely, “a man listening to a story is in the company of the storytellers; even a man reading one [a story] shares this companionship” (100). This is one of Benjamin’s primary concern with novels and short stories which are removed from oral tradition and “no longer [permit] that slow piling one on top of the other of thin, transparent layers which constitutes the most appropriate picture of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings” (93). The sense of community created by storytelling is due to the multiple lives, experiences, and voices of the storytellers that have passed down the story being told as well as the multiple lives, experiences, and voices being presented by the storytellers, all of which exist in the telling of the story.

Alvarez is able to provide the counsel and companionship that Benjamin suggests is integral to storytelling by her presence as the storyteller in her novels. In *In the Time of the Butterflies*, the Dominican-American reporter who comes to the island to interview the surviving Mirabal sister, Dede, corresponds with Alvarez’s own journey to the island to research the Mirabals and meet with Dede prior to writing the novel. In addition to creating a character with clear similarities to herself in *In the Time of the Butterflies,*
Alvarez interjects herself into both novels through the use of a postscript. These postscripts identify Alvarez’s purpose for writing the novels, what she hopes to accomplish by writing them, and provide a disclaimer that allows her to step away from her creation, claiming, in essence, that she only let the storyteller in her take over and that she cannot be held responsible for the resulting fictionalized representations of the women in her novels. Though she claims that she is only the medium through which these stories exist, Alvarez does admit that she has fictionalized the stories. She proclaims that the use of fiction is for the purpose of “immersing [her] readers in an epoch in the life of the Dominican Republic” that Alvarez believes “can only finally be understood by fiction, only finally be redeemed by the imagination” (Alvarez, Butterflies 324). Much as a storyteller recites a story which has been passed down from generation to generation – taking bits and pieces from the different people that she has heard telling these stories, Alvarez denies that her novels are historical documents, and instead suggests that she hopes that they are ultimately, “a way to travel through the human heart” (324). In In the Time of the Butterflies, Alvarez tells her reader that the Mirabals of the novel are “my creation, made up but, I hope, true to the spirit of the real Mirabals” (324). Likewise, in In the Name of Salomé, Alvarez clarifies that the novel is “not biography or historical portraiture or even a record of all I learned, but a work of the imagination” (357). Alvarez’s admission of modifying the stories that she tells in her novels is natural, according to Andrew Benjamin, for

the story depends on the capacity of the storyteller to listen and repeat a certain amount of information. Now, the cognitive capacities of memory are limited and inevitably give way to oblivion, deformation, but also
innovation. From one generation to the next, stories change without their modification being detected by listeners. (139)

Alvarez the storyteller is present as a companion to her readers in these two novels, and, as is evident by her postscripts, is concerned that her audience receives the message - the “counsel” - that they are supposed to receive after having read these novels.

The companionship between Alvarez and her readers is established within *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *In the Name of Salomé* by the fact that Alvarez, as the author, steps outside of the fictionalized historical world which she has presented to her readers in order to address them in the postscripts previously described. By addressing her audience, Alvarez defines a clear role or purpose that she has passed onto them through the telling of her stories. Of *In the Time of the Butterflies* Alvarez has said, “I wanted the readers to remember their [the Mirabals’] lives, not their deaths. Also, I wanted the readers, like Dede, the survivor, to have to make sense of their stories” (Kevane and Heredia 29). Her desire, in writing her novel, is to “immerse my readers in an epoch in the life of the Dominican Republic…[bringing] acquaintance of these famous sisters to English-speaking readers… as models for women fighting against injustices of all kinds,” ending her postscript with a phrase that encapsulates the ultimate purpose of the text, “*Vivan las mariposas!*” (Alvarez 324).

In *In the Name of Salomé*, Alvarez writes that her creation of Salomé and Camila is a recreation “in the light of questions only we can answer, as they did, with our own lives: *Who are we as a people? What is a patria? How do we serve? Is love stronger than anything else in the world?*” (357). These purposes reveal Alvarez’s desire to recreate through stories the lives of these women for her audience to use as models of
courage in the face of numerous forms of adversity, thus extending these women’s stories far beyond their actual lifetimes. Alvarez includes her self - creating a community and a personal relationship with her readers - as she ends the postscript of *In the Name of Salomé* proclaiming that Salomé and Camila have “[left] us to dream up their stories and take up the burden of their songs” (357, emphasis added). Alvarez’s readers leave both novels with a clear sense of her political purposes for writing these novels, understanding exactly where they themselves, as readers, fit into these specific purposes. As such, the readers/the audience become companions to Alvarez.

The feeling of companionship that Benjamin addresses and Alvarez enacts is something which is integral to the art of storytelling because it separates the communal story derived from oral tradition from the solitary novel and can give insight into Alvarez’s choice of genre and form for both of these novels. As Mario J. Valdes suggests in his article, “Story-telling and Cultural Identity in Latin America,” “a community…cannot be made by a city planner for it takes another kind of order, the order of a story-teller. People are born into communities but they belong because of the stories with which they want to be part of” (9). The sense of companionship and community which the storyteller creates is integral to creating a sense of belonging and a connection between one person’s life experiences and another’s. Valdes goes on to suggest that

the foundation of community life is dialogue, the willingness of persons to talk and to listen to each other, the expression of mutual concerns, and a debate on differences of opinion and, above all, the stories persons tell each other that give a sense of belonging and therefore of having a vested
interest in the life of the community…. The foundation of communities depends on story-telling. (9)

While city planners and developers can draw boundaries and label communities, these boundaries are arbitrary creations which do not necessarily provide a connection between or amongst those living in that community. Instead, it takes a storyteller, someone to discuss, to tell, to create shared meaning, experiences, stories, and beliefs in order to establish a true sense of bonding, connection, and community.

Alvarez uses storytelling to create a communal sense not only between herself and her readers, but to also provide the women that she is reconstructing with a community. This is important because by reconstructing the lives of these women and presenting their stories, a community can be created between people who recognize, understand, and have experienced the adversity and oppression that these women have experienced. This community may not consist solely of Dominicans who have had similar experiences as the women had, but it can extend beyond any expected or obvious communities, providing those not familiar with the lives of these women with models of courage to utilize in their own lives. The stories of these women will thus extend far beyond their actual lifetimes and lived communities into new spaces of companionship and community. As Mario J. Valdes writes, “human communities are founded on stories; and shared identity, be it regional or national, is based on the stories that are common to members of the community” (13). By telling the stories of these women to a vast audience, Alvarez is creating a new community that combines the past with the present, extending hopefully to the future.
A communal sense of history which combines the past with the present and extends to the future is an idea which Benjamin develops further in his essay “On the Concept of History.” Alvarez follows the tenets of this essay by acting as a “chronicler who narrates events without distinguishing between major and minor ones [acting] in accord with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history” (390). According to Benjamin, too often the major events of the past become the sole focus of the historian with other aspects of the past overlooked and possibly lost. Just as the stories of Benjamin’s storyteller do not consist merely of facts and information, Benjamin’s ideal historicist – the historical materialist - is able to articulate the past historically without necessarily just “recognizing it ‘the way it really was’” (391). Recognizing the past “the way it really was” is impossible, for historians, even those attempting to remain objective, will inevitably leave someone or some aspect out in favor of presenting some other aspect or person. Benjamin goes on to write that, Historical materialism wishes to hold fast that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to their historical subject in a moment of danger. The danger threatens both the content of the tradition and those who inherit it. For both, it is one and the same thing: the danger of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. (391)

This danger of becoming “a tool of the ruling class” is a concern that is inherent to historicism according to Benjamin. His view is that historicism always sympathizes with the victor, and because he sees “all rulers [as] heirs of prior conquerors,” empathizing with the victor becomes a way of “invariably [benefiting] the current rulers” (391). The historicism which Benjamin writes against contains, as Matthias Fritsch writes, “a
scientific objectivism about historical knowledge” which “uncritically affirms a history of violence… [and] at the same time, reifies present structures of oppression and domination. A continuous presentation of history thus (perhaps inadvertently) plays into the hands of the history of victors and the continuity of oppression…” (30). Benjamin writes that it is an “image of the past” that appears “in a moment of danger” that is necessary to disrupt previous accounts of history that sympathize with the victor.

The image Benjamin writes of is an image which reveals overlooked events or people, such as the women that Alvarez depicts in her novels. This image will contradict the “linear movement of history” often presented which is “discovered by an objective science that borrows its tools from the natural sciences, thereby missing or explaining away suffering” (Fritsch 159). Benjamin’s historical materialist understands this danger and seeks to reveal a disruptive and revealing “image of the past,” because it is the historical materialists’ “task to brush history against the grain” (392). To “brush history against the grain” is to consider “what is left out of consideration” (Fritsch 29), to view history from the position of those “other” to the dominant discourse of that time, to view history through points of view that do not necessarily sympathize or correspond with the experiences of the ruler or victor.

Alvarez brushes history against the grain and fulfills the role of Benjamin’s historical materialist by creating a new genre of telling the stories of the past – a historical and fictional account which allows multiple storytellers to speak through her as she tells the stories of six Dominican women. With the lives and views of women being depicted and represented as the actual subjects, Alvarez’s novels are especially revolutionary. Benjamin writes that “it is an irretrievable image of the past which
threatens to disappear in any present that does not recognize itself as intended in that image” (391). Alvarez does now allow these women who have been subjected to oppression at the hands of their culture and their country’s rulers to fade away. These women have been “excluded from telling their stories outside an immediate intimate group” (Valdes 10). They have been prevented from participating due to their gender within their hyper-masculinized culture and their status as “other.” While “persons in authority in communities around the world and in all periods of history… have established rules of eligibility which regulate rights and privilege and also attempt to control communal dialogue,” Alvarez shows that it is to no avail as “there is no authority that for long has been successful in silencing those who would speak in spite of being excluded” (10).

Thus Alvarez’s conception of history typifies Benjamin’s, in her recognition that “the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule” (392). As Matthias Fritsch states, “Benjamin argues that the suffering of some groups and individuals is forgotten precisely in remembering the deeds and works of others” (161). It is the historical materialist’s task then “to bring about a real state of emergency” by remembering the deeds and works of those forgotten in the struggle against forms of domination in order to, as Benjamin suggests, “improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. [Because] one reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm” (392). The fascism through which Benjamin suffered was the major concern for him; Alvarez’s concerns include fascism but also extend to patriarchy, economic disparity, and
dictatorial governments, all of which the women in her novels experience in some form or another.

Alvarez’s attempts to awaken her English-speaking readers and the Dominican Republic descendants of these women from their frozen position by telling their stories and reconstructing their lives, operates in a similar function to that occupied by what Benjamin calls the “angel of history” in “On the Concept of History.” Benjamin’s angel of history is someone who is unable to examine and recognize the bits and pieces, the fragmented stories and numerous influences, that make up history. Instead, the angel of history’s “face is turned toward the past,” seeing only “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage” (392). As such, the angel of history and people who view history in a similar manner are “doomed to observe what happens without being able to effect change” (Gomez-Vega 231). The importance of In the Time of the Butterflies and In the Name of Salomé exists in their ability to explain “what it feels to be caught in the storm… as a human being whose life is unsettled, torn to pieces by the historical events taking place in any given country” (231). Furthermore, as a storyteller, Alvarez refrains from viewing history in a manner that benefits the victors or rulers (such as Trujillo), or in a manner which would make her readers additional “angels of history.” Instead, Alvarez examines the bits and pieces of history through the multi-voiced stories of these historically overlooked women, giving them a place in history and a place within a community.

Thus Alvarez’s novels In the Time of the Butterflies and In the Name of Salomé are important texts of resistance that have become historical recreation for entire generations – providing active examples of Benjamin’s storyteller and historical
materialist, becoming novels that act as critical praxes of their own kind. Alvarez’s literature serves “as the life-blood of cultural identity, because in the long view of historical reality it is the stories, the songs, the images a people create as a matter of course in living that give us our sense of place and community” (Valdes 15). Alvarez enables the explosion of the “continuum of history” (W. Benjamin 396) through the creation of new ways of telling the lives of real Dominican women which break the mold of the traditionally told history of the Dominican Republic and of women in general. An understanding of Alvarez’s ways of telling and remembering is provided through an examination of the authorial role, the genre, and the multi-voiced narrative form of Alvarez’s novels in light of Walter Benjamin’s theories. Ultimately, these novels work to redeem, resist, create and remember the stories and the history of six Dominican women.
Reconstructing the Lives of Revolutionary Women:

Julia Alvarez’s *In the Time of the Butterflies*

In her 1994 novel *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Julia Alvarez memorializes the Mirabal sisters of the Dominican Republic - women whose dissent against their government cost them their lives. The novel presents each of the women – Dede, Minerva, Patria, and Maria Teresa - as human beings, as women, as sisters, and as revolutionaries. Each of the sisters’ journeys metamorphose from awareness, to awakening, to disillusionment, and finally to action, as the women reject the oppressive rule of the Dominican Republic’s dictator, Generalissimo Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina. The sisters also reject the similarly oppressive rule of their Trujillo influenced and controlled, male-dominated culture. The resulting depiction in Alvarez’s novel is a humanizing representation of the individual Mirabal sisters attempting to be heard personally and politically. Alvarez transforms martyred figures into women with personal lives and struggles. She creates particularized women who are active, passive, spiritual, strong, weak, sexual, powerful, and emotional - the type of women that would be unimaginable (and not allowed) by the culture and the dictator of the Dominican Republic in which the Mirabals lived and died. In so doing, Alvarez reconstructs the histories of the Mirabals, the Dominican Republic, and the polarized gender roles within the Dominican Republic.

A revision of conventional history (meaning the recorded, often reproduced, and widely accepted version/s of the past) which includes the stories of the Mirabals is crucial for although the history of the thirty-one years that constituted Trujillo’s tyrannical rule in Dominican history has been vastly documented, the historical texts produced make
“scant reference to the Mirabal sisters. The tendency is to merely mention the sisters’ legendary beauty and the tragedy of their ‘accidental’ deaths” (Brown 110). The important dissent of the Mirabals against Trujillo and against their male-dominated culture has been minimalized by the brief descriptions and references to them which deny their complex individuality as women and as revolutionaries. Furthermore, as they have been combined and suppressed within the one entity of “the Mirabals,” their multiple voices, which were integral to contesting Trujillo’s monolithic, all-powerful voice, have been silenced. As each of their personalities and experiences have been consumed within this one homogenized Mirabal “voice,” the power of their individual stories to relate to and connect with others on a more personal level has been lost.

Alvarez’s novel portrays the Mirabals, names each of their experiences and the lessons they taught and continue to teach through the telling of their stories, and finally redeems these women in her humanizing representation of them. Feminist scholar bell hooks writes that, “those who understand the power of voice as gesture of rebellion and resistance urge the exploited, the oppressed to speak” (110). Alvarez continues the revolutionary dissent these women enacted in their lifetimes by giving them voices to speak out against silencing cultural forces still at play, such as the double standard between men and women in regards to sexuality, and cultural mores which relegate women to predetermined roles in their lives, homes, and marriages. As I will discuss, these limiting gender roles have been deeply ingrained within many Latin American cultures, and the Dominican Republic is no exception, in part due to Trujillo’s damaging example and powerfully controlling dictatorship. Giving the Mirabals voices with which
to speak allows the sisters to be heard and remembered, bringing them back from theealm of untouchable iconic figures which has restricted and silenced them.

Alvarez’s carefully constructed historical re-envisioning provides more than just a
representation of the Mirabals. As Walter Benjamin suggests in his 1936 essay, “The
Storyteller,” the nature of every “real story” is that “it contains, openly or covertly,
something useful. The usefulness may, in one case, consist of a moral; in another, in
some practical advice; in a third, in a proverb or maxim” (86). The “counsel” or
usefulness of storytelling which Benjamin discusses is the wisdom that can be gained
from remembrance of the past. The usefulness of the Mirabals’ stories is their ability to
transcend time by continuing to influence and affect others (specifically other women).

Alvarez achieves this humanizing and particularizing reconstruction thereby
resisting the limited view of the women as one entity. She does this through the use of a
multi-voiced narrative, by creating a unique mixture of genres, and by establishing her
own authorial role. These key elements of In the Time of the Butterflies - the narrative
form, authorial role, and genre - are crucial to bringing to life the resistance of the
Mirabals. Ultimately, the novel becomes what Gus Puleo calls a “new pattern of looking
back at historical events – which is the creation of a new memory [that] corrects the past”
(3). Alvarez strengthens her depiction of the Mirabal sisters as individual women - as
complex, multifaceted, sexual, confident and insecure – and as a community of women.
Alvarez creates a powerful both/and construction, or in other words, a community of
particulars. Ultimately, In the Time of the Butterflies is a novel of dissent against the
archive of the Trujillo era in the Dominican Republic, against the depiction of the
Mirabals as iconic figures, and against the record of gender roles and extreme performances of masculinity within the Dominican Republic.

Alvarez’s multi-voiced narrative form is an effective artistic and ideological choice. By acting as the medium for the voices of each individual sister, Alvarez has become a storyteller in the Benjaminitian sense. In his essay lamenting the loss of the art of storytelling, Benjamin describes the ideal storyteller as one who is less concerned with conveying “information or a report” (92), and more concerned with recounting stories that provide counsel of some sort and memorably instruct the listeners in one way or another. Benjamin argues that most often these stories come from the storyteller’s life experiences or from the stories they have been told about others’ life experiences. Alvarez’s experience researching and learning the stories which resulted in the creation of her novel typifies this point in Benjamin’s essay.

_In the Time of the Butterflies_ emerged through the medium of stories, as Alvarez was introduced to the stories of the Mirabal sisters before writing the novel. Alvarez journeyed to the Dominican Republic to interview the sole surviving Mirabal sister, Dede, and to interview others who knew the murdered sisters. Of this experience she recalls, “when I met the surviving Mirabal sister, Dede, in the Dominican Republic, I realized that I was actually going to write a novel” (Kevane and Heredia 29). Hearing these stories inspired Alvarez to tell them to a larger audience. Alvarez’s desire to retell the stories she had been told, according to Benjamin, is the very nature of storytelling. Stories, told with the purpose to provide counsel of some sort, compel the listener to continue the telling of the stories by becoming a storyteller and repeating the very stories
which they have been told. Prior to hearing the stories Dede shared with her, Alvarez recounts that

the Mirabal sisters were legends. But when I met Dede… I felt the sisters come to life in all those details that Dede shared with me. They became real to me because she was real. She was really my entry into the story. Then I also heard stories from other members of their family, from people who had been in the underground with them. I gathered all those pieces together. Their voices become real to me in an intuitive way. Each one would require something different of me. (29)

The multiple voices/stories necessary to inform Alvarez’s newly acquired understanding of the Mirabal women influenced Alvarez’s choice of form for her novel. She recognizes the power that multiple stories, told by multiple voices, have on bringing a person or an event to life.

Multiple voices/stories are powerful because they are representative or reflective of life. Life is a negotiation, a gathering of pieces of stories that we are told and voices that we have heard in our lives to create our identities, to bring our “self” to life. Furthermore, the more voices and stories we hear, the more likely we are to make a connection with those stories and to recognize those voices, incorporating them into our own stories and voices. No one is entirely isolated, thus one voice and/or one story does not create a reality or identity for a person. Multiple voices/stories also contain the ability to provide fuller pictures, filling in gaps by gathering pieces together, lessening the possibility for resistance or misunderstanding which one voice or story could create. Alvarez recognizes the power of polyvocality due to the multiple stories and voices it
took to bring the Mirabals to life for her personally. The multi-voiced narrative form that she chooses for *In the Time of the Butterflies* is a narrative form conducive to storytelling, as it is basically a compilation of stories about the life experiences of each of the Mirabal sisters.

Furthermore, Alvarez’s polyvocal narrative form creates an understanding of the Dominican Republic and gender roles in terms of multiplicity, not homogeneity. Multiple narrative strands in the novel parallel the various forms and resistance of the Mirabal sisters against the violence inherent to the silencing of all voices by one voice, thus contesting Trujillo’s monolithic, all-powerful voice. Isabel Zakrzewski Brown argues that Trujillo, “whose worldview is exclusively patriarchal, is the personification of a metadiscourse antithetical to that of the multiple narrative voice in *In the Time of the Butterflies*. The dictator sees women as property and maintains an [extreme patriarchal] perspective on the role of women in society” (101-02). Including tenets designed to control, subjugate, marginalize and silence, this patriarchal perspective is the extreme form of masculine patriarchy that has long been associated with Latin American cultures.

For over thirty years, Dominicans were ruled by Trujillo, a “forceful, powerful, and dominating” (Wiarda 37) dictator, who provided them with the proof of the success available, power available, and women available to the most macho of all men. In order to maintain his thirty-one year tyrannical rule, Trujillo created the impression amongst the people of the Dominican Republic that his power extended to every area of their lives. Alvarez captures Trujillo’s omnipresent figure in Dominican lives. As Patria Mirabal explains in the novel, “we kept our sentences incomplete whenever we were criticizing the government inside the house. There were ears everywhere, or at least we imagined
them there” (Alvarez 210). Trujillo’s “voice” even pervades the history books given to the school children. In the novel, Minerva recalls that

when we got to school that fall, we were issued new history textbooks with a pictures of you-know-who- embossed on the cover so even a blind person could tell who the lies were all about. Our history now followed the plot of the Bible. We Dominicans had been waiting for centuries for the arrival of our Lord Trujillo on the scene. It was pretty disgusting. (24)

Minerva quotes from her history textbook that reads “All through nature there is a feeling of ecstasy. A strange otherworldly light suffuses the house smelling of labor and sanctity. The 24th of October in 1891. God’s glory made flesh in a miracle. Rafael Leonidas Trujillo has been born!” (24). As Gus Puleo has argued,

General Trujillo’s fatherly, patronizing voice is heard throughout the novel: it is omnipresent, omnipotent, and godlike in its reach. General Trujillo not only produces his own words but also commands every dialogue…[insisting] that all answers conform to his narrative and vision of the nation. (4)

Alvarez shows Trujillo’s voice, influence, and control pervading much of the novel to provide proof of the extension of his power and his limiting, monolithic voice, both of which illustrate what the sisters fought against as well as why Alvarez choose to utilize a multi-voiced narrative form to combat Trujillo and machismo.

Trujillo’s attempt to control through censorship was based on his understanding that for his dictatorship to remain in complete power, only one story or voice could be heard. As Minerva’s friend Sinita tells her, in Trujillo’s dictatorship, “‘People who
opened their big mouths didn’t live very long” (Alvarez 18). Sinita’s observation foreshadows the demise of Minerva and two of her sisters as they are killed for “[opening] their big mouths” against Trujillo. No opposing story to the one Trujillo offered Dominicans could be voiced. Clearly, Trujillo recognized and feared the power of multiple stories and voices.

This form of control affected all who lived under Trujillo’s rule, but as Gus Puleo argues, “this type of patriarchal discourse in form and theme” has a specific effect upon women, “[dismissing] female experience because only one centered voice, and not multiple ones, can be admitted” (Puleo 5). Although Trujillo succeeds in killing Minerva, Patria, and Maria Teresa, he fails to silence the Mirabals because Dede lives on to tell their stories, ultimately telling their stories to Alvarez whose novel provides a contrast through her creation of a polyvocal narrative form to the intertwined dominant discourses of Trujillo and machismo.

While allowing multiple voices to speak combats and overpowers Trujillo’s voice, the powerful example of the ideal embodiment of masculinity which Trujillo provided for the Dominican Republic must also be addressed through Alvarez’s novel, in order to rewrite the Mirabals out of the damaging ideology of machismo. By understanding the pervasive and extreme nature of Trujillo’s ideal of male “macho-ness” which the Mirabal sisters lived trying to resist, and by understanding the lingering remnants of this construction of masculinity which Alvarez is now attempting to resist through her depiction of the Mirabals, recognition of the importance of creating a new genre of telling history is established.
Mixing genres is crucial for Alvarez to fulfill her mixed role as a historical storyteller in *In the Time of the Butterflies*. Alvarez’s research prior and approach to writing this novel reveals her blurring and mixing of genres. Alvarez researched historical facts about the women, read the existing historical accounts, but also met with people who knew them, including the one sister, Dede, who survives. Researching historical facts and reading existing information about the Mirabals is a more traditional approach to writing history through an examination of well documented and substantiated facts/information. Conversely, meeting with various people to listen to their stories, impressions, memories, and ideas about the Mirabals is an approach which would create a most likely fictionalized, not entirely accurate (or at least it would be more difficult to determine accuracy) version of the history of the Mirabals.

Of these two methods which Alvarez utilizes, Alvarez reveals her bias towards a more poetic sensibility of telling historical events and stories, versus more traditional factual documentation. She suggests that, “…fiction is much kinder and more compassionate than facts, because the writer isn’t out to expose but rather to make meaning” (Kevane and Heredia 142). A desire to expose facts is precisely what Benjamin argues has come to predominate the modern world, leading to the decline in storytelling. “Information,” the need to provide verifiable facts and reports, a more traditional way of reporting about history/historical figures, divorces the result from the writer, removing the ability of the writer to provide counsel through the conveying of life experience. Benjamin defines “counsel” as the meaning making a storyteller is engaged in, which is imbedded within the story, and as Benjamin suggests, imbrued within the life of the storyteller as well as the story. The combination of some historical fact with
stories and Alvarez’s own conjecture and fictionalization of the sisters provides the “compelling immediacy and humanity” (Rich 180) that the novel has brought to the lives of the Mirabal sisters by bringing to life their stories.

Alvarez takes on limiting gender binaries through her use of a genre of telling history focusing on the stories, intermixed with empirical historical data, and specifically focusing on the stories of women who have traditionally been “other” to the dominant discourse of the Dominican Republic, for within Trujillo and the Dominican Republic’s “macho” construction of masculinity, gender roles are polarized to an extreme. Instead of allowing “free play in sex roles and gender ideals,” cultures that prescribe to this construction, such as the culture of the Dominican Republic, tend to “exaggerate biological potentials by clearly differentiating sex roles and by defining the proper behavior of men and women as opposite” (Gilmore 23). The extreme dichotomy in prescribed gender roles functions within a system of patriarchy that places men at one end of a spectrum which systematically dominates women.

The creation of woman as “other” is exactly the objective in these extreme performances of masculinity. When the man is the Subject of everything – the home, sexuality, the country –the woman is left as the “other,” alienated in her own home, her own body, and her own country. This marginalizing consumption of women is resisted by the form of the novel through the creation of multiple feminine subjects or voices, which can over power such marginalization, and also through the genre of In the Time of the Butterflies, specifically through Alvarez’s use of a historical, fictional, and biographical genre to depict each of the Mirabals. The representation of the Mirabals combines factual history with fictional interpretations, and biographical information
developed and provided through the stories which Alvarez was told, in order to effect the content of the novel, bringing to life the expression of individual voices, and demonstrating that even though they are women within this culture, they contain enough power combined to threaten Trujillo, as he claims in the novel that his “only two problems are the damn church and the Mirabal sisters” (Alvarez 281).

Alvarez resists defining her novel in traditional terms of genre by creating a compelling combination of historical, fictional, and biographical genres in order to brush the history of the Mirabals against the grain, as Benjamin advocates in “On the Concept of History” (1940). To Benjamin, in order to brush history against the grain, a historian must be able to articulate the past historically without necessarily just “recognizing it ‘the way it really was,’” (391), but by trying to recapture the everyday, providing a narrative of the major and minor events in history, with all of their larger historical implications. Alvarez captures the “every day” events in the lives of the Mirabals by depicting their sexual desires/needs.

In light of the sexual ideas and double standards of the Dominican culture, allowing each of the women to claim their own sexuality is one of the most important moves that Alvarez makes in the novel. The claiming of their own individual, feminine sexuality completes the picture of fully functioning and developed women that Alvarez is endeavoring to render in her fictional, historical and biographical account of these historical figures. This move combats the ideals of women as virgins or as saintly mothers as Alvarez alters the ideology of women being passive providers of sexual satisfaction with men as sexual aggressors by revealing women that, instead of being sexually passive, have legitimate sexual desires.
By revealing women who are able to claim their own sexuality, act upon it, and find a sense of fulfillment from it, Alvarez negates the sisters’ posthumous saintly status as iconic figures, revealing more complex and realistic women. Alvarez portrays all of the sisters expressing sexual desires that each fulfills through marriage. Interestingly, it is Patria, the pious sister most closely aligned to the Catholic church and the Virgin Mary, who reveals the strongest sensuality, “thus [defying] conventional notions of sexlessness” or passive sexuality (Adjarian 133). In fact, Patria recognizes and explores her sexuality as an individual, uncontainable sexuality apart from her desire for marriage and a sexual relationship with a male. At a very young age, Patria admits that there was a struggle, but no one could tell. It came in the dark in the evil hours when the hands would wake with a life of their own. They rambled over my growing body, they touched the plumping of my chest, the mound of my belly and on down. I tried reigning them in, but they broke loose, night after night. (Alvarez 47)

Through Patria, Alvarez “depicts the conflict between social expectations of purity and female desire in the aspiring novitiate Patria’s efforts to control adolescent impulses toward autoeroticism” (Adjarian 133). It is important that Alvarez depicts this struggle in order to prove the restraining and inhibiting nature of this culture which viewed women as existing to fulfill the desires of men, without their own sexual feelings and desires.

Alvarez avoids the stereotypes associated with feminism through the character of Minerva, the sister who could have easily become the most stock character as the “feminist.” Instead, Alvarez has Minerva asking herself, “What’s more important, romance or revolution? But a little voice kept saying, Both, both, I want both” (Alvarez
Though she is determined to fulfill her role as a resistor, Minerva recognizes that she does not want to give up the sexual, romantic aspect of her life. Adjarian suggests, 

Dedicated as these sisters were to their beliefs and causes, their devotion to God or to a cause outside home and family, does not mean that they negated, in word or in deed, the existence of their own bodily impulses. Their desires were as mingled as the private and public spheres in which they lived and moved. (133)

The depiction of the sisters as recognizing and acting upon their sexual desires helps to combat the performances of masculinity within the Dominican Republic which saw the woman as an object to obtain sexual pleasure from and not with.

Alvarez also combats the idea that the only purpose for women to be involved in a sexual relationship was to become pregnant. Rendering the Mirabals as such further denies preconceived ideas about female sexuality existing in the Mirabals culture as well as today. The prevailing religion in the Dominican Republic and the religion practiced by the Mirabals, Catholoicism, also provided support for the polarized gender roles in the Dominican Republic. Catholicism also teaches that mothers are saints who deserve to be placed upon a pedestal. Due to the importance of female chastity prior to marriage in the Catholic Church, marriage is necessary for continuing and maintaining what oftentimes becomes the carefully crafted façade of the traditional family. David Abalos explains that “The saintly/motherly wife stays home to nurture children. However, because women are sexual conquests or because they are put on a pedestal, Latino men often stop relating to their wives with sexual passion. So they turn to other women for their sexual needs” (10), turning the traditional family into a façade.
Alvarez reveals the presence of the traditional family façade in the novel, thus displaying one of the sexual double standards in the Dominican Republic and the Catholic Church. In the Catholic Church, a Catholic, traditional Latina woman is “socialized to protect her virginity at all costs.” Many women saints are venerated because they were examples of chastity, and “many were martyred in order to protect their virginity” (Sargent 269). A Latina woman then, as a Catholic, “is taught to believe that the greatest demonstration of love she can give on her wedding night is the surrendering of her virginity.” However, women are further polarized from men due to the fact that the virginity of the Latino male is not valued in the same light “nor does he suffer from the same psychological guilt if he loses it” before marriage (269). Men also escape the guilt of infidelity in this culture as Alvarez displays. In the novel, when Minerva Mirabal confronts her father and asks for an explanation for his betrayal and adultery, he replies, “‘cosas de los hombres’... Things a man does.” His response infuriates Minerva, as she recognizes that this weak explanation “was supposed to excuse him, macho that he was!” (Alvarez 92). Minerva’s father clearly believes that this does explain and excuse his behavior though Minerva does not accept it. Male infidelity in this type of culture is often overlooked or even expected, though there is a clear double standard in effect. For, it would not be acceptable, overlooked, or expected by any means, for a woman to have an extramarital affair, due to the prescribed role of the “saintly/motherly wife,” and due to the denial of female sexuality and the view that women have sex either to get pregnant or to give pleasure to their husbands.

However, Alvarez depicts the Mirabals experiencing their sexuality as a separate desire from their desire to be mothers. To them, having sex is not solely equated with
motherhood. With the depiction of the Mirabal’s as sexual women, Alvarez carefully “[deemphasizes] the iconic untouchability of the sisters, [attempting] to merge the reality of who they were as ‘living, breathing women’ with the near-divine nature of their service to and sacrifice for the Dominican motherland” (Adjarian 134). This is one of the examples where Alvarez’s recognition of the complexity of history can be seen in her attempt to “sort through the debris of history and the past” (para. ix), teasing new meaning out of old history.

The claiming and recognition of female sexuality in this novel is important because inherent to Latin American machismo and its systematic repression of women is a distorted vision of sexual entitlement. The culture in the Dominican Republic taught men that “To be a man [is] to sexually conquer women; if you do not have the ability to penetrate a woman, you [can] not prove your masculinity” (Abalos 10-11). In the Dominican Republic, there were many “…stories of hyperactive sexual antic [that] were a stock feature of popular mythmaking concerning all of the Trujillo family” (Derby 1114). Trujillo’s hyperactive sexuality becomes replicated in the lives of many Dominican males. The Mirabal sisters experience the consequences and effects of hyperactive sexuality for the first (but not last) time in the novel when they learn of the affair in which their father has been involved.

Learning of their father’s betrayal is a significant lesson for the Mirabals in their growth and development as revolutionaries. As Alvarez portrays in the novel, in the Dominican Republic’s “macho” culture, the man’s task is not to just make endless conquests, but to spread his seed. As David Gilmore suggests in his study, Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity, “promiscuous adventurism represents a
prior (youthful) testing ground to a more serious (adult) purpose” (42). While teenage boys are encouraged/expected to engage in sexual promiscuity, by the time they are adults, their sexual promiscuity is very purposeful, for a “real” man must fulfill the purpose of being able to impregnate women, as the Mirabal sisters’ father impregnates his mistress over and over again, regardless of his family that is already in existence.

The women are naive when young but are awakened to the evils of their culture when they learn of their father’s affair. In the novel, as Maria Teresa marches past Queen Angelita, Trujillo’s favored daughter, she thinks, “Looking at her, I almost felt sorry. I wondered if she knew how bad her father is or if she still thought, like I once did about Papá, that her father is God” (135). Their father’s betrayal deepens any skepticism they have felt regarding their “macho” culture and opens the sisters up to the possibility that other masculine “gods,” such as Trujillo was depicted, had also betrayed them in some way. Learning of their father’s affair introduces some of the sisters, such as the young Maria Teresa, and solidifies for the older, more mature sisters, the sexual double standards within their culture.

Encouraging sexual double standards through his example, Trujillo embodied the ideal “real man”, as he claimed all of the women in the country as his own personal prizes. As Lauren Derby has argued, Trujillo’s “self-aggrandizement was based on the sheer number of women he could lay claim to – women who highlighted his prowess as lover, father, husband, as well as defender of his female liaisons and extended family” (1113). As Alvarez writes through the voice of Maria Teresa Mirabal, during one particular celebration/parade,
There were hundreds of us [young women]... in white dresses like we were his [Trujillo’s] brides, with white gloves... We had to raise our right arms in a salute as we passed by the review stand. It looked like the newsreels of Hitler and the Italian one with the name that sounds like fettuccine. (131)

Alvarez combines, through Maria Teresa’s reflections, the image of Trujillo’s sexual and political power. Clearly, Trujillo’s power was “based as much on the consumption of women through sexual conquest as it was on the domination of enemies of state” (Derby 1113). Alvarez shows the Mirabals becoming aware of the sexual aspect of Trujillo’s power when Minerva witnesses Trujillo’s seduction of a beloved classmate. The classmate is wooed, seduced, impregnated, then “shipped... off to a mansion” (23) while Trujillo moved on to his next conquest. In the novel, Minerva recalls that “after I... saw what happened to Lina” she “[realizes] that I’d just left a small cage to go into a bigger one, the size of our whole country” (13). Through Minerva, Alvarez shows the Mirabals resistance to the confining nature of sexual expectations in their culture for both men and women.

Alvarez also depicts the Mirabals resistance to the role which these ideas of masculinity prescribe for women by revealing not just their sexuality, but their complexity as women. This is necessary because in the culture of the Dominican Republic the woman “serves as the mediating instrument for the engendering and maintaining of a world order – a male-dominated order –for the perpetuation of a national, patriarchal history though her body, literally” (Puleo 5). Therefore, even the woman’s own biological function and body places her in the role of Other – there for the
needs, purposes, conquest, and fulfillment of the Subject, the man. Alvarez combats this limiting gender role by highlighting the varied interests of the Mirabals and by showing that their ultimate role is not as wives or mothers, but as revolutionaries, for it is a role which they are willing to die for. Alvarez depicts the Mirabals as developing, changing, and metamorphisizing into their roles as resistance leaders (to varied extents) with complex, multifaceted personalities. Alvarez thus develops the literal and figurative resistance of the Mirabals against Trujillo. She describes the awakening of the Mirabals to the evils of Trujillo’s government and the actions that they begin to take, in their own ways, in an attempt to remove this evilness from their lives and their country.

Some critics have suggested that Alvarez “fashions stereotypes, rather than real people...[and] thus is unable to avoid the mythification process she [professes] to elude” (Brown 110). However, an examination of the ways in which Alvarez represents each of the Mirabal sisters reveals depictions of complex and realistic personalities and characteristics that work against the limiting ideologies of masculinity which Trujillo and the Dominican culture demanded. Alvarez’s novel intermingles qualities that were viewed in the Dominican Republic as being inherently “masculine” qualities, such as courage and personal strength, with qualities that were relegated to a lesser status as inherently “feminine” qualities, such as fear and uncertainty, in her depictions of the Mirabals. Alvarez’s novel disputes the idea that there is anything inherently feminine or masculine in specific characteristics, thus challenging gender essentialism.

Through the characters of the sisters, Alvarez shows that dichotomies, such as weakness versus strength and courage versus fear, exist in all people, including the Mirabal women. In the postscript, Alvarez discusses why she makes this move. She
writes that she realized that “deification was dangerous, the same god-making impulse that had created our tyrant. And ironically, by making [the Mirabals] myth, we lost [them] once more, dismissing the challenge of their courage as impossible for us, ordinary men and women” (324). Alvarez resists the myth of the Mirabals by portraying the sisters dealing with conflicting feelings and characteristics and eventually undergoing a metamorphosis, becoming aware of the great necessity of resisting the violence of Trujillo’s regime. The sisters come to their realizations independently and by different means which remain consistent with their individual personality characteristics and life experiences. As each sister experiences her own awakening to personal suffering and the suffering of others due to Trujillo’s tyrannical rule, each realizes their role in the resistance movement against Trujillo.

The oldest Mirabal sister, Patria, is awakened to the losses others around her are experiencing when she endures the loss of a baby leading to her involvement in the revolution that Minerva and Maria Teresa were already engaged in. Prior to this, Patria recognizes that while her family had not yet been personally hurt by Trujillo or his regime, “others had been suffering great losses” (Alvarez 53). The progression of Patria’s awakening highlights for the reader that “things had gotten so bad, even people like [Patria] who didn’t want anything to do with politics were thinking about it all the time” (Alvarez 149). However, Patria’s growing courage compels her to provide her home for the sisters’ movement. As Patria records, “it was between my walls hung with portraits, including El Jefe’s, that the Fourteenth of June Movement was founded. Our mission was to effect an internal revolution rather than wait for an outside rescue” (Alvarez 167). As Patria gradually recognizes the threat that Trujillo provides to the
things that she loves most - her family and motherhood - she recognizes that she cannot remain removed from the resistance movement that Minerva begins.

As the sister who survived, Dede’s involvement with the resistance against Trujillo was to a lesser extent than her assassinated sisters. It is important that Dede is not as involved, because it allows her to survive to become the storyteller -- the one who remembers and passes on the stories of her sisters’ lives. Dede is the most hesitant to speak out against either Trujillo or her macho and controlling husband, Jaimito. Jaimito is threatened by what he sees as the Mirabal sisters running their men and their households. He reacts against this, making sure that “in his house, he is the one to wear the pants” (Alvarez 177). However, Dede does not remain passive in her sisters’ struggle or in her own marital struggle. She experiences conflicting feelings over her minimal involvement with the sisters’ movement and her inability to stand up for herself, and comes to an awakening about her own fear, realizing that “Jaimito was just an excuse. She was afraid, plain and simple, just as she had been afraid to face her powerful feelings for Lio. Instead, she had married Jaimito, although she knew she did not love him enough” (Alvarez 185). Realizing her fear is an awakening in itself.

Dede does indeed metamorphize; however, she does so at a much slower rate than the other three sisters and does so in smaller, less outwardly rebellious ways. The difference in her development can be explained by Dede’s personality and her placement in the family. The oldest sister is the passionate Patria, then the more practical, rational Dede, followed by the opinionated Minerva. Sandwiched in-between such strong personalities, Dede, from a young age, has become the more conservative and logical sister. When Dede admonishes her father to be more frugal, he suggests that he does not
need to be more careful with his money, because that is why he has her, to take care of monetary concerns, just as “every soft foot needs a hard shoe” (Alvarez 8).

For the practical Dede, standing up to her husband is also a huge progression. When she finally does stand up to him, she “[admits] she liked what she sensed, that the power was shifting in their marriage. Coming home from Rio San Juan, she had finally told him, crying as she did, that she could not continue with their marriage” (Alvarez 194). Dede recognizes that while her courage might not extend to outwardly resisting Trujillo, her courage came in the form of confronting Jaimito and facing their problems rather than running away from her family. She knows that she “could not run away. Courage! It was the first time she had used that word to herself and understood exactly what it meant” (198). As Dede confronts Jaimito, she realizes that while she may not have the passionate courage of Patria or the bold courage of Minerva, she understands that courage takes different forms for different people. This recognition of the individuality of courage, and that courage does exist within her, provides Dede with an understanding of her less outwardly visible role in the struggle. In fact, Dede becomes perhaps the most courageous of the sisters. As the sister who survives, Dede must find the courage to live on and to tell the stories that need to be told of her life and her sisters’ lives.

Minerva’s stories reveal a strong, brave, feminist voice, much more so than any of the other sisters. Minerva is the most confrontational of the sisters from a young age. However, she still experiences a progression as she “moves from the naive disbelief she felt at the age of twelve, first hearing of [Trujillo’s] wrongdoings, to a very real fear of becoming an unwilling object of sexual conquest by the dictator” (Rich 168). She
combines the recognition of Trujillo’s wickedness which she learns from her friend Sinita, with her already natural sense of injustice at the male dominated culture that she was born into, in order to find motivation for her own personal resistance. When her mother says to her, “Ay, m’ijita,...You’re going to fight everyone’s fight, aren’t you?” Minerva replies, “It’s all the same fight, Mama” (Alvarez 108). Minerva recognizes the extension of her struggle against Trujillo’s regime to the patriarchal culture at large.

However, Minerva is still represented as a realistic human being who experiences occasional pain, fear and despair intermixed with the courage that seems to come more naturally to her than to the other sisters. Maria Teresa records an instance when Minerva’s tough exterior gives way to reveal a more fearful and emotional interior. Maria Teresa writes that she hears a “wracking sob” and realizes that it is Minerva, “my brave Minerva! It was all I could do not to start crying right along with her” (Alvarez 139). Alvarez’s varied depictions of Minerva humanize her. Instead of having Minerva only fulfill the role of the brave feminist, Alvarez avoids such limiting and unrealistic generalizations. No person can be that easily defined, and by revealing Minerva’s (and the other sisters) complexity, her life experiences become stories that provide counsel of how to remain strong when fears become overwhelming, and how to channel inner courage in order to overcome challenges.

Through the youngest sister, Maria Teresa, Alvarez portrays her progression as a revolutionary paralleling her progression in finding her own voice through writing and then finally acting out her resistance. The reader is introduced to Maria Teresa as a young girl writing about trivialities in her diary. The changing narrative in her diary illustrates her growth and education, often at the hands of Minerva, and her gradual and
increasing activism in the resistance. As the sweet, emotional baby of the family, Maria Teresa learns that Trujillo is not the god-like, benevolent ruler that she had been ingrained to think, and she recognizes that his not knowledge she is supposed have obtained in Trujillo’s censored country. She says, “It’s so strange now that I know something I’m not supposed to know. Everything looks just a little different” (Alvarez 39). Maria Teresa learns not only to view Trujillo with more skepticism and trepidation, but also learns to stand up for herself, and to Minerva of all people. “She [Minerva] seemed pretty impressed with my arguing back at her like that. She’s always telling me to stand up for myself, but I guess she didn’t figure I’d stand up to her” (Alvarez 38). The narrative form of the diary “closely interweaves Maria Teresa’s activism with poignant personal details of her life while it convincingly dramatizes her growing political consciousness” (Rich 170). We see her school-girl infatuations, her childish shallowness, and we also see how she becomes a woman and in doing so, becomes aware of the role that she must accept.

However, while Maria Teresa accepts her role as a resistor, she is honest about her fear in fulfilling this role. Maria Teresa is thus portrayed in a manner as someone whose ideals dictate what role they need to play, but also someone whose natural personality and fears conflict with this role. As Charlotte Rich has argued, Maria Teresa’s diary account of her experiences in prison is the most revealing glimpse into [her] consciousness, indicating that the youngest Mirabal does not endure the incarceration as bravely as appears. Though she tries to maintain courage with thoughts of her family and Minerva’s strong
example, Maria Teresa’s prison diary expresses secretly her despair, anger, and terror. (171)

However, as Maria Teresa expresses her fears and concerns in her diary, she is able to gain strength for her resistance through her expression, coming to realizations as she writes and finding an outlet for her fear so that she does not allow it to overcome her. Through the course of the novel, Maria Teresa sheds her school girl innocence and awakens as a woman who experiences fear and courage, strength and weakness in the midst of her involvement in the sisters’ resistance movement.

Not only does Alvarez establish the sisters’ complex individuality, but she also portrays the powerful and stalwart bonds of sisterhood and womanhood that tie the Mirabals together. The sisters create a tight-knit community that enables them to deal with their fear and find the strength, each in their own ways and to varying degrees, to resist Trujillo and their culture at large. The bond that they share with one another gives them the confidence necessary to continue their dangerous fight through the moments of great despair, hopelessness and struggle that they each encounter.

Alvarez reveals the connection between the sisters throughout the novel. As her sister, Patria understands Dede’s fears intuitively because she can “read a sister’s heart even if it was hidden behind a practiced smile” (211). Alvarez also demonstrates through Dede the bonds of sisterhood which the women experience when Dede recognizes that “whether she joined the underground movement or not, her fate was bound up with the fates of her sisters. She would suffer whatever they suffered” (193). The intuitive and powerful connection between the sisters enables them to form a community far stronger than any one of them individually could have been. Alvarez also depicts how the sisters’
connection strengthens them on an individual basis. When Maria Teresa is preparing to give a speech at university and becomes upset knowing that she must thank Trujillo, she recalls, “I get so upset thinking about him. I don’t want to be a queen of anything anymore. But Minerva won’t have it. She says this country hasn’t voted for anything in twenty-six years and it’s only these silly little elections that keep the faint memory of a democracy going. ‘You can’t let your constituency down, Queen Mate!’” (136). Again, Maria Teresa is strengthened by Minerva when they are in prison. Maria Teresa is having a panic attack but reflects that Minerva sees in time what was going on and “[crawls] in [her] bunk and held [her], talking soft and remindful to [her] of all the things [she] had to live and be patient for” (231). Minerva’s support and understanding works to settle Maria Teresa down, giving her the courage to live on while in prison. The Mirabals’ support and love for each other, as well as their personality differences, combine to give them the needed strength to become the revolutionaries they were, threatening Trujillo to the extent that Alvarez records him saying that the Mirabals (and the Catholic Church) are his only problems (281).

Alvarez creates a new history for women, portraying the strength available to them through the bonds of womanhood. She does this through depicting the Mirabals’ sisterly connection and bonds, but also by showing a few of the sisters within a larger community of women. While in prison, Minerva and Maria Teresa encounter women entirely different from them. However, as their prison stay continues, Maria Teresa and Minerva develop strong bonds with the women they are imprisoned with. Maria Teresa writes in her diary, “I keep mentioning the girls. I have to admit the more time I spend with them, the less I care what they’ve done or where they come from” (230). Later
Maria Teresa has a conversation with one of her fellow inmates, Magdalena about what creates a connection between people. She writes in her diary that the two of them wondered, “Is it our religion, the color of our skin, the money in our pockets?” As they are engaged in this discussion, Maria Teresa writes,

the girls started congregating, one by one… everybody contributing their ideas… we were talking about love, love among us women. There is something deeper. Sometimes I really feel it in here, especially late at night, a current going among us, like an invisible needle stitching us together into the glorious, free nation we are becoming. (239).

This powerful community of womanhood contrasts with the singularity of the males in this novel. As the rulers of the country and their own individual families, the men are without trust or relationships with other men (due to the fear of being viewed as homosexual) that would provide them with any support they might need. They are also without the relationship and community of female companionships since they refuse to see their mothers, sisters, and wives as equals. Instead, males under this construction of masculinity endeavor to cover any needs or feelings with their hypermasculine heterosexuality.

Within this form of hypermasculine heterosexuality there exists an exaggerated sense of power and of masculinity, where all that is deemed feminine is abrogated to fulfill the goal of this performance – that of becoming a true “man’s man.” The “man’s man” has been typified and supported by dictatorial rulers in Latin American countries, such as Trujillo. As a “macho” and sexually virile man, Trujillo had many of the qualities typical (and required) of a Latin American political leader. He did not share his
power, but kept it entirely concentrated in the hands of one man – himself. There could be no divided loyalties or divisions of command in Trujillo’s country; as Howard J. Wiarda states, “power and decision-making were vested solely with Trujillo” (47).

Alvarez contrasts the image of the all-powerful Trujillo with the Mirabals who find their power or strength from each other, from their community of women.

The mindset of men in the Dominican Republic often renders them unable to reach out for support, unable to rely on any other human beings, unable to express themselves or show their emotion, and unable to experience true intimacy. In contrast, the sisters’ allow themselves to appear weak at times, they allow themselves to rely on each other, and they provide each other with strength. This unique formation of a community of women combats the ideologies of Trujillo and extreme performances of masculinity, giving the women a confidence and power that the men do not have. This confidence is shown through a young Minerva. She observes that,

sometimes watching the rabbits in their pens, I’d think, I’m no different from you, poor things. One time, I opened a cage to set a half-grown doe free. I even gave her a slap to get her going. “But she wouldn’t budge! She was used to her little pen. I kept slapping her, harder each time, until she started whimpering like a scared child. I was the one hurting her, insisting she be free. Silly bunny, I thought. You’re nothing at all like me. (Alvarez 11)

Even though her society/culture would have her resemble these caged rabbits, Minerva recognizes that she is nothing like them. Instead, the rabbits in their individual pens are similar to the men that prescribe to such an extreme ideology of masculinity that they
remain trapped within the pressures of inflexible masculine ideals which inevitably entrap them within themselves. For although the ideology of masculinity in the Dominican Republic creates the image of the all-powerful male, underneath this construction is insecurity. For example, Trujillo was the most powerful man in his country, but was never secure enough to entrust any of his power to anyone else. He also encouraged the telling of his sexual exploits, because he feared people would think that he was not as masculine as he wanted to appear. Trujillo’s insecurity reveals that

Intrinsic to the stories of patriarchy, machismo, possessive love, capitalism, and other norms of exploitation based on male power is the inability to be close to one’s own self. Of its very nature, domination veils a deep fear, a profound insecurity about one’s own self, one’s own personhood. (Abalos 18)

Although these ideals for masculinity have been ingrained in Latino males for an extended period of time, as much as males try to ascribe to its tenets they still are left insecure, feeling vulnerable and weak – all of which are very stereotypically unmasculine. In the novel, Minerva recognizes this about her own father after he hits her for claiming that he has lost her respect, she realizes “right then and there, it hit me harder than his slap. I was much stronger than Papa, Mama was much stronger. He was the weakest one of all. It was he who would have the hardest time living with the shabby choices he’d made. He needed our love” (Alvarez 89). Minerva recognizes the isolation from their family community that her father has inflicted upon himself by trying to prove his masculinity through engaging in extramarital affairs. The insecurity of the men prescribing to these masculine ideals breeds isolation, whereas the community of the
Mirabals breeds strength. Through the Mirabals father’s betrayal, the other members of his family, all women, have become even more bonded, leaving him alone, in need of love, and in need of a community.

By depicting the negative and isolating effects of machismo, Alvarez refrains from villainizing men completely, just as she refrains from deifying the sisters. As a historian, Alvarez responsibly presents an account of the ills of the ideology within the Dominican Republic, highlighting both the oppression of the women and the solitude of the men within this system, hoping to influence both men and women to rebel against these polarized gender roles which harm both genders. Alvarez recognizes what David Abalos suggests in his book, *The Latino Male: A Radical Redefinition*: “Neither one nor the other is the villain; nobody can possibly win in these situations. Both of them have been taken over by stories from their cultural past, such as the story of patriarchy” (94).

Clearly the ideology of hypermasculinity, combined with Trujillo’s macho modes of domination, power and control, does not only damage Latina women, but hurts Latinos/as in general.

The importance of community which Alvarez stresses throughout her novel is also addressed in the postscript of the novel. She clearly defines her purpose for rewriting the history of the Mirabals, identifying this purpose as “[immersing] my readers in an epoch in the life of the Dominican Republic…[bringing] acquaintance of these famous sisters to English-speaking readers… as models for women fighting against injustices of all kinds,” ending her postscript with a phrase the encapsulates the ultimate purpose of the text, “*Vivan las mariposas!”* (324). With this call of “long live the Butterflies,” Alvarez is, in essence, placing the responsibility on her readers to keep the
Mirabals alive by telling their stories, remembering their stories, and by internalizing the meaning of their stories. Alvarez has said, “I wanted the readers to remember their [the Mirabals’] lives, not their deaths. Also, I wanted the readers, like Dede, the survivor, to have to make sense of their stories” (Kevane and Heredia 29). By thus connecting her readers with the Mirabals, and by using the lives of the Mirabals as a model for other women fighting repressive rulers or cultures, Alvarez creates a community for the Mirabals that extends beyond the community of sisterhood that they were a part of in their lives. She creates a community which combines these historical figures in the past with the present - with the readers of her novel. This establishes an intimate bond between Alvarez, Dede, Maria Teresa, Patria, Minerva, and the present reader/s and reader/s to come in the future. Alvarez thus fulfills the most basic component of the relationship between storyteller and listener, that of providing counsel through the telling of the life experiences of herself, the storyteller, and others, in order to begin the passing down/reproduction of these stories by new storytellers with unique life experiences/backgrounds to cling to these stories about the Mirabals, adding even more meaning to their stories. Furthermore, as a historian, Alvarez recognizes that “the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule” and that it is her task, as a historian, “to bring about a real state of emergency” (Benjamin VIII) through the creation of a community to resist historical accounts/stories as perpetuated by the ruling classes. Thus, Alvarez’s historical recreation creates a new community that combines the past with the present, and extends, hopefully, to the future in order to fight against controlling and limiting rulers and gender constructions.
Through the careful selection of the form, genre, and authorial role of the novel, Alvarez brings the ‘real’ Mirabals back to life. By examining the facts, stories, and lives of these women and finally providing them with voices, with a place in history and with a community, Alvarez succeeds in rewriting the archive of the Trujillo era in the Dominican Republic, the history of the iconic figures of the Mirabals, and the record of gender roles and extreme performances of masculinity, for not only the Dominican Republic, but for the world at large. Alvarez accomplishes this by reversing the tradition of male-dominated historical accounts by “deliberately turning the spotlight on the extraordinary women some observers consider to be the catalyzing force behind the dictator’s downfall” (Adjarian 128). Alvarez silences Trujillo by creating four, individual voices to overpower his single voice and by establishing a uniquely female community to combat oppressive ideologies of polarized gender roles.
Reconstructing National and Personal Identities:

Julia Alvarez’s *In the Name of Salomé*

Julia Alvarez’s 2000 novel, *In the Name of Salomé*, presents the lives of the famous Dominican poet, Salomé Ureña (1850-1897), and her daughter, Salomé Camila Henríquez Ureña (1894-1973). In her novel, Alvarez deftly weaves together stories of Salomé’s deep passion for her country, daughter, and life’s calling as a poet, with stories of Camila’s search for her country, mother, and own life’s calling. These stories are presented through a fusion of “fact” and fiction, thus creating Alvarez’s second novel of historical fiction.

*In the Name of Salomé* shares some key similarities but also differs greatly from Alvarez’s first creation of historical fiction, *In the Time of the Butterflies*. The discussion in the previous chapter focuses on Alvarez’s role as a historical storyteller, the polyvocal narrative form, and the blending of historical, fictional, and biographical genres within *In the Time of the Butterflies*. These themes could also be discussed in terms of *In the Name of Salomé*, because like *In the Time of the Butterflies*, *In the Name of Salomé* rewrites history from a female-narrated viewpoint, remembering and recreating the lives of historical figures. *In the Name of Salomé* is also written utilizing more than one narrative voice and with a combination of history and fiction. Clearly, similarities between the novels exist; however, it is the differences between the two novels that demonstrate Alvarez’s progression as a historical storyteller.

In *In the Name of Salomé*, Alvarez’s role becomes even more closely aligned with the ideas in Benjamin’s essays, “On the Concept of History” and “The Storyteller” than in *In the Time of the Butterflies*. Alvarez tackles larger and more widely applicable
questions in this novel: what is “la patria,” where is “home,” and what is it, particularly for people who have been displaced or exiled from their literal homes. Alvarez tells stories asserting the power of storytelling and history to establish personal and national identities.

In *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Alvarez allows her protagonists, the four Mirabal sisters, to speak for themselves and narrate the stories of their own lives with Alvarez present as the historical storyteller medium through which they are given their voices. The role of the historical storyteller medium corresponds with Alvarez’s role in telling Salomé’s life stories. Salomé’s stories are told through her own voice, in first person, and in a linear fashion. Salomé is presented to readers as a young girl, and her stories continue chronologically up until her death. The reader is allowed access to Salome’s inner thoughts, aspirations, and motivations. Conversely, the stories about Camila, Salomé’s daughter, are told in a distant third person by an omniscient narrator in non-linear fashion. The narrator which speaks for, narrates, and weaves together Camila’s life stories is the first narrator to appear in either *In the Time of the Butterflies* or *In the Name of Salomé*. The stories told regarding Camila’s life reveal a woman who is struggling to find her own home or country, her own mother, and her own identity, as told by a nameless narrator.

In her family, Camila is given the responsibility to tell specific stories – becoming the family storyteller and archive keeper/creator, as she “[sorts] out what to give the archives and what to destroy” (Alvarez 38) from her family’s history and lives. The narrator informs the readers that “the irony of this request is not lost on [Camila] – she, the nobody among them, will be the one editing the story of her famous family” (38).
Camila sees herself as the “nobody” of the family because she has “indulged this habit of erasing herself, of turning herself into the third person, a minor character, the best friend (or daughter!) of the dying first-person hero or heroine. Her mission in life – after the curtain falls – to tell the story of the great ones who have passed on” (8). As the displaced, exiled daughter trying to find her identity through the lives of those who came before her (specifically her mother) and through recognizing her country and its tumultuous history and politics, Camila is seeking to accomplish a two part goal. First, she tries to create an understanding of her mother’s life, art, and struggles. Second, she then struggles to recognize how her relationship to her mother’s life, art, and struggles impacts her own sense of purpose and connection to a “home.”

Through Camila, Alvarez shows the complexity of knowing exactly how to represent the past, once that past is retrieved. In the novel, Camila employs an American student to help her assemble the archive of her family’s history. As they sort through the different items and papers, the student, Nancy Palmer, comes across a picture of a beautiful woman and asks Camila if the picture is of her mother, and “Camila is tempted to say yes, as she would have said in the past when asked… But the photo is of a painting, done after her mother’s death on her father’s instructions” (Alvarez 43-4). As Camila explains to Nancy, “‘… that pretty lady is my father’s creation… He wanted my mother to look like the legend he was creating… He wanted her to be prettier, whiter’” (44). While her father creates a whiter, prettier version of Salomé, Camila re-creates her mother throughout her entire life always in regards to the struggles with which she is dealing. Because “[Camila] has never had that luxury: a mother to turn to at difficult moments in her life, a hand on her brow, a soothing voice in her ear” (31) she must
instead learn how to re-create her mother in light of her own present struggles and concerns, searching the past and the stories from the past for direction. Thus Alvarez again stresses the continual relevance of history in the present and the importance of applying the stories of the past to our lives in the present for much needed guidance and direction.

Just as Camila struggles with deciding what to include in her archive, Alvarez is also creating an archive of the lives of these women in her historical fiction and is also concerned with the same issues of representation – how to represent without limiting the subjects she is attempting to present. Alvarez avoids limiting her subjects in both *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *In the Name of Salomé* through many of the features of these novels which have been discussed. These features are the use of a multi-voiced narrative form which brings the women to life for readers who are able to “hear” their voices and recognize them as women who actually lived, rather than learning their stories through a historian who presents facts which keep these historical figures at a distance, removed from the present and from any recognition of the life experiences – both normal and mundane and heroic and revolutionary – of these women. Alvarez also effectively avoids limiting her subjects by fulfilling her role of the historical storyteller and by presenting the lives of her subjects through a combination of documented, historical information, stories that have been told about her subjects, and her own fictional additions which open the lives of these female subjects to the imaginations of her readers. Additionally, in order to further facilitate her representations in her historical fiction, Alvarez speaks to her reader/s directly to address her struggles in her representations and to try to guide their reading of the novels she writes. Therefore, this scene and discussion between
Camila and her American student as they decide together what belongs in the archive and as they discuss the legend of Salomé versus the reality of Salomé, parallels the relationship between Alvarez and her historical fiction texts and the relationship between Alvarez and her reader/s.

The similarity between the scene in the novel with Camila and Nancy Palmer and the relationship between Alvarez and her historical fiction texts can be illustrated through referencing Alvarez’s own reflection in *Something to Declare*. Ruminating upon her decision to write her first historical fiction novel, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Alvarez writes that she had first considered writing a biography about the Mirabals. However, when she tries to retell one of the stories she had been told about the Mirabals to her aunt, she remembers that “I had been so caught up in [his] story that I couldn’t remember what he had said had actually happened. ‘Let’s see,’ I told my aunt. And I think that’s when I realized that I was bound to write a novel about the Mirabals rather than the biography I had been vaguely contemplating” (202). Writing a biography, a genre which relies upon historical facts (such as dates, years, and government records) and regards stories as unsubstantiated truth or mere speculation, would reinforce previous portrayals of the Mirabals, thus limiting their development, just as Camila’s father’s creation of her “prettier, whiter” mother would reinforce previous portrayals of Salomé in her family’s archive by creating an inaccurate and simplistic view of Salome. Instead, Alvarez’s desire to “understand the living, breathing women who had faced all the difficult challenges and choices of those terrible years” (203) is what ultimately makes the women she depicts colorful, alive, and meaningful portrayals. As Lucía M. Suárez suggests, Alvarez “directs us, not to the historical accuracy of her accounts but rather, to the power
of a certain sensation, a far-off, enigmatic memory. This memory, based on the unknown and reconstructed from the possible past, affects the way Dominicans and Dominican Americans remember and imagine themselves, in the present and for the future” (121). Determining her own archive and portrayal of the “unknown and reconstructed… possible past” is where Alvarez’s true freeing of the past comes as the past is reimagined to help mold and form identities in the present.

The scene in the novel with Camila and her student, Nancy Palmer, determining what belongs in the archive and sorting through the reality of Salomé versus the legend of Salomé has been shown to parallel Alvarez and her texts. This same scene, though, is revealing of the relationship between Alvarez and her reader/s when read inserting Alvarez as Camila and Alvarez’s reader/s as Nancy Palmer. As Camila explains her complex and large family history to Nancy, what began as Nancy’s construction of a neat and simple family tree becomes a piece of paper “now dark with names and arrows and lines” (Alvarez 42). Camila presents the stories about her family, expecting Nancy to be bright enough to sort through the mass of information with which she is presented. Alvarez also presents the discontinuous history and stories from the past in this novel, and while doing so, places much of the responsibility of determining what belongs in historical archives on her readers. She does this by presenting her readers with the stories of multiple women told from multiple voices and perspectives, leaving her readers to differentiate between fiction and fact to determine meaning. By allowing her readers to determine their own meaning/s from the information Alvarez presents them with, the act of reading and learning about these women becomes a much more personal endeavor which encourages the application of the past to lives in the present. Furthermore, by
placing much of the responsibility for determining meaning on her readers, Alvarez avoids portraying a neat, uncomplicated history guided by an easily identifiable predetermined purpose. In denying the ability to pull from the historical facts and the historical fiction that she has presented any sense of ultimate and/or singular meaning, Alvarez indicates the impossibility of recovering exact historical occurrences, and instead “reveals a web of conflicting and hidden stories that mirror and inform her struggle to pull the thread of her own identity from a tangle of possibilities” (Suárez 118) while also mirroring her characters struggle to do so.

While creating her family’s archive, Camila admits that in order to create a full picture of her family’s history, she has taken some fictional liberties, fleshing out the facts, giving them life, and making them into stories. The narrator suggests that “Camila has questioned herself, as to whether she could possibly have remembered all this. The truth is: she remembers spots. And the rest is the story she has made up to connect those few dim memories so she does not lose her mother completely” (119). These liberties are allowable because the ultimate purpose of Camila’s role as archive creator is to tell stories of the life experiences of others which to help fulfill the basic human need to recount real-life examples of coping with life. In stories, the “truth” or meaning is communicated by a recounting of the concrete experience itself in such a way that the truth is revealed by the details of the story, not by abstract explanation. Such should be the quest of a historian in the vein of Benjamin’s historical materialist, to tell the stories of a person’s life experience/s in order to add meaning and “truth” to their life and the lives of others.
Alvarez also admits to her readers the impossibility of recovering exact historical occurrences even though she is trying to present historical figures. The impossibility is partially the result of Alvarez’s own complicated position, as Lucía M. Suárez writes that the discrepancies between what is true and not true, known and unknown, seem to haunt Alvarez, resulting in a body of literature that, despite its light-hearted exposition, interrogates Dominican American Latina identity from her particular perspective: a women of color who is considered ‘white’ in her country and privileged on many levels as well as coming from an exiled Dominican family. (118)

Another reason Suárez suggests for Alvarez’s fictional liberties is due to the Dominican history that she has access to, a history which “is filled with voids of information. These voices of information – such as the details of the way the Mirabal sisters were murdered… and the exact extent of state manipulation, and elimination…complicate Alvarez’s interpretation of Dominican identity, which is consequently ridden with ambiguity” (121). Alvarez addresses the ambiguity of Dominican identity in the acknowledgments at the end of In the Name of Salomé. Alvarez emphasizes again that she has taken some fictional liberties in order to strengthen her portrayal of these women. She tells her readers that the novel “is not biography or historical portraiture or even a record of all I learned, but a work of the imagination” (357). Alvarez also speaks to her readers telling them that it is their, her own and her readers, responsibility to “take up the burden of [Salomé and Camila’s] songs” (357). She continues in her acknowledgments to assert that “the Salomé and Camila you will find in these pages are fictional characters based on historical figures, but they are re-created in the light of questions that we can
only answer, as they did, with our own lives” (357). This encouragement from Alvarez to learn from the past to inform our own questions, concerns, and struggles in the present is exactly what she shows Camila doing in the novel.

Alvarez’s exploration through Camila of what “la patria” is, where home is and what it is, particularly for people who have been displaced or exiled from their literal homes, are integral themes in the novel, because these questions are central to the stories about both Salomé and Camila and are shown to be their primary concerns throughout their lives. In the novel, Camila’s family is forced into exile in Cuba from their native country, the Dominican Republic. Alvarez writes that in her own life, “Once upon a time, I lived in another country and in another language under a cruel dictatorship, which my father was plotting to overthrow” (133). Her family is also forced into exile in the United States from the Dominican Republic when she is young. Salomé’s art is also concerned with exploring what “la patria” is – a question she asks her entire life beginning at a very young age. These questions regarding “home” and one’s country are quite complicated for Camila because not only does she inherit the tumultuous past and unstable politics of her birth country, the Dominican Republic, but she is also exiled to Cuba and lives for a number of years in the United States.

Alvarez shows Camila rejecting simplistic answers to her questions about her identity, with the narrator explaining that “[Camila] hates labels that pin the self down to only one set of choices” (82). Limiting and overly simplistic labeling of one’s identity is something that Alvarez openly resists in her own life. When asked if she considers herself Dominican, American, or Dominican American, Alvarez said,
Our world is becoming a place with shifting borders, where nations form and reform. But what we’re really creating are new languages. There are so many hyphenated people, combination people who hear musical cadences in one language that come from another…. I’m not a Dominican writer. I can’t pretend to be Dominican. But by the same token, when people ask me if I’m an American writer, I have to say I don’t think of myself as being in the same tradition as Melville or Hawthorne. I’m a hyphenated person interested in the music that comes out of the language that hears both languages. My stories come out of being in worlds that sometimes clash and sometimes combine. I’m a writer who is Latina and not Latina who is a writer. (Rosario-Sievert 33)

Alvarez’s expression of appreciation for her Dominican-American identity reveals her acceptance of different backgrounds, cultures, and heritages – beginning with her own “hyphenated” identity. However, the conflicting feelings which can often occur for “combination people” – those with numerous countries or “homes” – are explored through Camila.

In the novel, Camila is searching for an understanding of her “hyphenated” identity due to her literal and figurative displacement from her home. Fatima Mujcinovic explores this theme in the literature of U.S. Latina writers in her book entitled Postmodern Cross-Culturalism and Politicization in U.S. Latina Literature: from Ana Castillo to Julia Alvarez. She writes,

Marked by their experiences of exile and displacement, the protagonists…struggle with the condition of dislocation, which is reflected
in their desire to find a place of belonging and reconnect with their past. In this search for affirmative and inclusive self-definition, they emerge as post modern subjects, contesting the notions of identity based on the rootedness in a singular place and tied to the national structure… Focusing on diasporic self-positioning, these works challenge the limiting concept of nation while redefining identity as fluid and hybrid. This allows them to provide alternative paradigms for imagining the space of the social and the individual. (11)

Alvarez defines Camila’s identity as “fluid and hybrid” as she shows Camila exploring and trying to connect with her family’s Dominican past. This description of Camila’s identity as “fluid and hybrid” is furthered as she tries to connect her heritage with her present identity which combines Dominicanness, Americanness, and Cubanness. Thus Alvarez’s protagonist does, as Fatima Mujcinovic writes, “[contest] the [notion] of identity based on the rootedness in a singular place and ties to the national structure” (11). However, Camila’s acceptance of her “fluid and hybrid” identity comes only after much distress as she tries to figure out her “place” in life in order to be “apprehended fully, rather than be seen only through the narrow lens of a few adjectives [another] person finds acceptable. And having been fully apprehended, she wants to be loved” (Alvarez 160).

Camila is only able to recognize her own “fluid and hybrid” identity once she has fulfilled her role as the family archive keeper and, by doing so, has come to know the stories of her mother’s life. Camila’s development and acceptance of her identity depends upon her role as the family archive keeper because it is what allows her to see
the complexity of her past, the different forces, the people, personalities, and events, which have combined to create who she is as a person with her own unique and multifaceted identity. Camila also learns from these stories as she fulfills her role as the family archive keeper and creator and recognizes how these stories apply to her and where she fits amidst her famous family. As the exiled storyteller and keeper of the archives, Camila searches the past to learn of her heritage, her country’s past, as well as her place in the present, in an attempt to find a way “home.” Her “home” does not necessarily coincide with common definitions of home, for it is not a literal place necessarily, but rather is a sense of belonging and purpose, a feeling of contentment and appreciation for the “fluid and hybrid” past, present, and future which combine to create who Camila is.

Camila explores the past by sorting through and compiling an archive for her family’s history which allows her to retrieve the past and apply it to her own life/identity. The archive which Camila compiles in the novel contains “years and years of papers” as well as her mother’s “notes to her children; a sachet with dried purplish flowers; a catechism book, Catón cristiano, with a little girl’s handwriting on the back cover…[and] a small Dominican flag her mother must have sewn herself…” (45). The narrator identifies these artifacts as the “details of Salomé’s story that increasingly connect [Camila’s] mother’s life to her own” (45). While these literal remnants of Salomé serve to further connect Camila to her mother, the actual naming and describing of past family members has a much more potent effect upon Camila. Having examined the archives and learned of the past, Camila’s ability to then voice the stories and names from these archives is an act which outwardly acknowledges her connection to this past, almost as if
she is calling out to her ancestors, to her past. The narrator describes that, for Camila, “Just introducing these ghosts by name has recalled them so vividly, they rise up before [Camila], then shimmer and fade in the shaft of the sunlight in which she is sitting. Maybe it is a good thing to finally face each one squarely. Maybe that is the only way to exorcise ghosts. To become them” (42). The power of naming and telling stories is seen to contain the ability to conjure the dead and the past in a moment of recognition for Camila which very literally connects the past with the present, thus redeeming the past by acknowledging and remembering it.

Alvarez’s depiction of Camila’s recognition of the past by the present “as one of its own concerns,” as Benjamin writes in “On the Concept of History,” eliminates the threat of having that particular image of the past “disappear irretrievably” (391). Alvarez’s narration of Camila sorting through the chaos of an unorganized archive with random stories and facts is the creation of a history that is distinctly opposite of “the conventional linear narratives of the historicist” (Gilloch 199). Opposition to traditional history is crucial, as Graeme Gilloch writes explaining Benjamin’s ideas, for “the discontinuity cannot find representation in the conventional linear narratives of the historicist, but can be conceptualized only as an ephemeral moment of recognition when a fleeting constellation between past and present is formed” (199-200). As Gilloch suggests, conventional linear narratives do not allow for the representation of the discontinuity of history, or the parts of history which do not neatly “fit.” Linear narratives which delineate one event leading to another event culminating in a final event do not leave room for tangents, for messiness, for those that do not coincide with the master narrative being told. The history of her mother and her family which Camila is
exploring is a complicated one with many different people, political parties, ideas, and stories. As Camila absorbs every piece of information about her mother and every work of poetry written by her mother, she experiences “ephemeral moment[s] of recognition” (200) which allow her to feel a closeness to the past in the recognition of how she belongs and comes from the past, rather than feeling removed by the presence of a linear narrative which works to distance those “other” to the master narrative.

Camila’s consumption of the past is not just an attempt to learn of her mother’s identity, but also an attempt to learn about her own identity. By showing Camila exploring her Dominican past and finally claiming a Dominican-American-Cuban present, Alvarez displays a personal identity which embraces national and historical complexities. It becomes obvious in the novel that Camila will remain disconcerted until she understands her mother’s struggle and how her own relationship to that struggle impacts her sense of purpose and connection to a “home,” thus retrieving the past and applying it to her own life. In one scene in the novel, Camila recognizes the connection of her past with her present. However, Camila’s friend Marion does not understand Camila’s need to connect the past with the present and becomes impatient interrupting her with, “I thought you were finally going to talk about yourself, Camila.” Camila’s reply is, “I am talking about myself” (8). The idea of the importance of the retrieval of the past coincides with Benjamin’s assertion that “every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievable” (391).

In the closing chapter of the novel, there is a narrative shift which is significant because instead of a third person narrator telling her stories, Camila is finally able to tell
her own story signaling the development of her recognition/understanding of her identity. At the end of her life, Camila finds both personal and national purpose in her life as she devotes her time and energy to building the new government of her adopted “home” - Cuba. Camila’s first person narrative finally holds the same intensity as Salome’s because she is now finally connected to herself, a home, and a sense of purpose, enabling her to speak for herself. Camila describes her progression towards this self-realization, telling the reader,

"After I realized that she would not be coming back, I hated to be reminded of my mother. But still, I longed for her – a longing that would well up in me in the middle of the night and send me wandering through houses, apartments, wherever it was I was living at the time. It tried all kinds of strategies. I learned her story. I put it side by side with my own. I wove our lives together as strong as a rope and with it I pulled myself out of the pit of depression and self-doubt. But no matter what I tried, she was still gone. Until, at least I found her the only places we ever find the dead: among the living. Mama was alive and well in Cuba, where I struggled with others to build the kind of country she had dreamed of. (Alvarez 335).

It is only through learning the past, learning her mother’s story, and trying to determine her relationship in the present with the stories of the past, that Camila is able to find this purpose and contentment in her life. Alvarez is highlighting here the importance of knowing one’s past to help inform the present, thus stressing the importance of understanding history and recognizing the stories of the past. Camila’s life is not only
her own, but is a compilation of the lives of family members alive and no longer living. Once she recognizes where she has come from, Camila finds the freedom to move on with her life and determine where her path, which begins generations before her, will continue. She is finally able to achieve a moment of real recognition of her mother, her mother’s life, and her mother’s purpose.

After learning from the stories of her mother’s life experiences and at the age of sixty-six, Camila finds her own life’s “truth” as she finally discovers her home (as in a sense of place, an identification) when she decides to join a revolution that is a continuation of one of the revolutionary movements her famous mother began in her lifetime. Camila has learned about this revolution – namely, creating and expanding literacy amongst oppressed, poor, and otherwise illiterate people - through the stories or life experiences of her mother. Salomé had established an “instituto,” a “school for señoritas” (Alvarez 177) to teach them in “the sciences as well as literature” (175). This school is a means of affecting and improving the Dominican Republic by making sure to “[forge] the new man” and “the new woman” recognizing that “without one [they couldn’t] possibly accomplish the other” (176). As Camila describes her own revolutionary cause she reflects, “I had never thought of the real revolution as the one Fidel was commanding. The real revolution could only be won by the imagination. When one of my newly literate students picked up a book and read with hungry pleasure, I knew we were one step closer to the patria we all wanted” (347). By joining this revolution, Camila finds her home – not in the country of her birth – but in Cuba. She finds her home after having found her mother through her mother’s life stories and through understanding the revolution that Salomé fought and struggled for in her lifetime.
As Camila says, “Mama was alive and well in Cuba, where I struggled with others to build the kind of country she had dreamed of” (Alvarez 335). Camila’s realization occurs near the end of her life. As the narrator explains in the novel,

Just when [Camila] had thought her life was over… just when, in short, she thought her story was over, epilogue, coda, diminuendo, she has happened upon a caravel with sails filling with wind (no Noah’s ark, please, no salvation for [her] at the expense of others), she has happened upon a way home, a song in her head from childhood, *I’m going to El Cabo to meet my mother… The bay is too shallow to float in today…* Just when she thought… (47)

Camila’s realization of her purpose in life occurs not very far into the novel, thus the rest of the three hundred plus pages of the novel shows how Camila emerges from her doubts and insecurities in order to realize her purpose and her place in life. Her realization occurs during the chapter which shows Camila as the archive keeper/creator sifting through her family’s and her mother’s archives and explaining their stories to her student helper, Nancy Palmer. By including Camila’s realization with the account of Camila learning about the past, Alvarez highlights the importance of learning stories of the past to inform the present, as endeavoring to learn, understand and represent to others the stories of the past finally provides Camila with an understanding of her own personal and national identity and purpose in life.

Just as by fulfilling her role as an archive keeper and creator Camila is able to learn the stories of the past to inform the present, in Alvarez’s historical fiction, Alvarez presents stories from the past to her readers in order to inform their lives in the present.
Thus Alvarez, in both of her novels of historical fiction, also functions as the keeper of the archives. Alvarez is the master storyteller attempting to represent the lives of historical Dominican women who came before her, to inform her English speaking readers, to rewrite history so that it resides closer to a “reality” that takes into account the complexity of life and of history and the impossibility of a perfectly accurate historical representation, and in so doing, to rewrite the history of other Dominican women and of women in general, providing counsel for the present as she shows courageous women in the past who became revolutionaries in various ways to fight against injustices in their worlds.

Clearly, in *In the Name of Salomé*, Alvarez’s more active role as a narrator, as keeper of the archive of stories and as a storytelling medium, moves her closer to Benjamin’s ideal storyteller and less of a historian. *In the Name of Salomé* focuses on the telling of the stories and the lessons to be learned from these stories. Also, in comparison with *In the Time of the Butterflies*, *In the Name of Salomé* contains less traditional history – meaning that while the novel does present history and the lives of historical figures/women, the history is much more disjointed in that it is less of a presentation of a moment in history and more of an overarching impression of an expanse of time. In *In the Time of the Butterflies*, readers learn “specific and thorough lessons about several key aspects of the Trujillo period, the U.S. role, and the everyday life of those important, ordinary people in the Dominican Republic who struggled for social change and justice” (McCracken 86). However, in *In the Name of Salomé*, a large expanse of time is incorporated, from Salomé’s birth in 1850 to near Camila’s death in 1973. Thus the novel’s historical presentation encapsulates much of the tumultuous, fluid history of the
Dominican Republic, rather than just focusing on the Trujillo era, which results in the lack of the presentation of a clear historical lesson with any one overarching meaning.

*In the Time of the Butterflies* also resists the presentation of a historical lesson with just one meaning. The historical lessons in Alvarez’s first creation of historical fiction can be termed as warnings about the evils of a dictatorship such as Trujillo’s, warnings about dominating patriarchal/macho cultures, and warnings against the effects of overmythologizing historical figures. However, in *In the Name of Salomé*, picking out even multiple lessons or warnings is harder to do because while the history is there, the names, the dates, and the places, the responsibility of sorting through this presentation is placed directly upon the reader. The reader must engage in additional research to truly understand the differences between the “blue party” and the “red party,” the different political forces which struggled to gain control of the Dominican Republic, the extent of the United States’ involvement in Dominican Republic politics, and the effects of these parties/forces upon the lives of the everyday Dominican Republic citizens. Thus as the reader is forced to piece together all of the history within the various stories in the novel, the reader is more actively engaged in determining and identifying meaning. This enables Alvarez’s reader/s to create their own meanings, to apply these stories of women in the past to the present in order to learn about their own personal and national identities and life purposes, which is the ultimate goal of stories and which is where the importance of storytelling as a learning device resides, following Benjamin’s ideas.

However, this reader responsibility in Alvarez’s novel extends beyond encouragement to actively engage the text and the history of the time period within the novel. In *In the Name of Salomé*, readers are also admonished and reminded that there is
something required of them much further than just reading these stories for their own consumption and enjoyment. As Alvarez writes in her acknowledgments at the end of the novel, “Given the continuing struggles in Our America to understand and create ourselves as countries and as individuals, this book is an effort to understand the great silence from which these two women emerged and into which they have disappeared” (357). In helping these two women, Salomé and Camila, reappear by presenting the stories of their lives, Alvarez is much more overtly political in In the Name of Salomé than in In the Time of the Butterflies. The questions she tackles in the novel extend much further than the time periods or moments in which Salomé and Camila lived. Instead, they extend to her readers today, questions such as “Who are we as a people? What is a patria? How do we serve? Is love stronger than anything else in the world?” (357, emphasis in original). As Alvarez fulfills the role of a narrator or storyteller in this novel, she is much more actively involved in telling these stories; she does not give the impression that she is merely a storytelling medium. However, while Alvarez does leave the creation of meaning open to her readers, she does encourage or guide their creation of meaning by narrating and by naming the specific questions mentioned above in her acknowledgments at the end of the novel, thus guiding her readers about how to think about the novel, while staying away from dictating to her readers what to think about the novel.

Throughout In the Name of Salomé, Alvarez provides advice and counsel for her readers, establishing and enforcing her views about the political power of storytelling and of history to create personal and national identities and life purposes for those who have learned about the past in the present. With her more active involvement in this novel in
guiding her readers, Alvarez relies upon a Benjaminian ideal regarding storytelling, that hearing stories will teach us and call us to action in some sense, thus emphasizing the political power possible in the telling of stories. Stories require more from a reader than the mere remembering of historical figures or events. Stories require the hearer/reader to pass them on, learn something from them, apply them to their own lives, continue to tell them, and in so doing, create a community, of sorts, that have all heard the same stories and have all learned, albeit in different ways, from the life experiences contained within those stories. As Lutz Koepnick writes in his book *Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Power* regarding “The Storyteller,” Benjamin’s “storytellers provide narrations that guarantee communal identity… Far from offering objects of mere entertainment, storytellers embody a public institution of remembrance. They incarnate society’s conscious and unconscious mirror of reflection and their primary function is to … give advice and counsel” (151).

Alvarez contributes to the conversation that Benjamin begins regarding the importance and the political power of storytellers and storytelling through the character of Camila. Through the narrator, we learn that Camila, during a conversation with her older brother, feels “the stirrings of her self-respect. She does not want his pity. That would be awful. There are other women she can be besides the heroine of a story” (126). As the designated storyteller for her family by virtue of her being in charge of the family archives, Camila begins to recognize the importance of her role as archive creator. She struggles at first with living up to her mother’s legacy as a heroine, but she ultimately recognizes that her identity, role, and legacy are just as important as her mother’s, though different. Camila realizes that she too “can be part of that national self-creation” and that
while “her mother’s poems inspired a generation. Her own, she knows, are not clarion calls, but subdued oboes, background piano music, a groundswell of cellos bearing the burden of a melody. Every revolution surely needs a chorus” (121). Camila recognizes that she does not have to be the heroine in the traditional sense of the word, meaning the woman/women who is/are widely recognized and noted for her courage and special achievements, but that she can also be heroic by telling the stories of the heroine, her mother, and in so doing, teaching others.

As the “chorus” for the revolution though, Camila is the first female historical figure that Alvarez presents who is not a “heroine.” All of the Mirabal sisters are viewed as heroines, and Salomé, as the National Poetess, is also a heroine. They are all famous historical figures who made real and solid contributions to the history of the Dominican Republic in various ways, the Mirabals in their resistance movement against Trujillo, and Salomé in her literacy movement and in her political poems that inspired generations.

The other women differ from Camila’s role as the storyteller for the heroine, Salomé. However, once again, Camila’s role in the novel corresponds with Alvarez’s role as the author. Alvarez is not telling the stories of her own life, though they could be written similarly, as she was also displaced, exiled from her country, caught in-between various cultures, lifestyles, and identities. Like Camila though, Alvarez has recognized that she does not need to be the heroine, and her stories and achievements do not need to be the subject matter of the stories she tells. Instead, she can be the storyteller’s voice which brings to life the stories of heroines to inspire and teach others. Just as Camila describes her Aunt Ramona’s role as being “‘something of the guardian of Mama’s memory,’” meaning that her aunt “took charge of keeping [her] mother’s memory alive”
(43), Camila later takes on that role as the guardian of her mother’s memory, just as Alvarez takes on that role, as the guardian of the memories of these various historical female figures in Dominican history. As guardians rather than as heroines, Camila and Alvarez bring the stories of various heroines to the forefront, focusing their lives on telling not their own stories always, but the stories of those who came before them.

More than just acting as a guardian of her mother’s memory though, Camila knows that in order to properly fulfill that role, she must continue to fight for the things that her mother stood for in order to allow not only Salome’s memory to live on, but to allow the struggles and causes that she fought for to live on. Addressing a group of students and professors during a speech given to celebrate her mother’s work, Camila says that “if I remain quiet, then I lose my mother completely, for the only way I really know her is through the things she stood for” (85). During her speech, Camila recognizes the political power of her position as a guardian, as a storyteller, as the archive keeper. Namely, that power is the ability to conjure the dead by continuing their memories, their struggles, their stories, and their causes. In this moment, Camila not only recognizes that power, but celebrates and utilizes it. She tells the audience,

‘I have accepted this invitation in error… I cannot celebrate my mother’s work when her country is in shambles.’ She brings up the recent disappearances, the murders, the massacre of the Haitians she has never mentioned publicly before. All her life she has had to think first of her words’ effect on the important roles of her father and brothers and uncles and cousins were paying in the world. Her own opinions were reserved for texts, for roundtables on women’s contributions to the colonies, for
curriculum committees implementing one theory of language learning over another. (85)

After she ends this speech, “from the front row, she hears… ‘¡Salome!’ ‘¡Salome!’ And beside him… ‘Camila!’” (86). As Camila conjures her mother, she fulfills her role and creates her own purpose and identity as herself, as Camila. By properly invoking and guarding her mother’s memory and using that memory to inform the present and be able to speak to issues in the present, Camila becomes not only her mother, but also herself, Camila, finding her own identity through her mother’s as she discovers her own cause to speak about through remembering her mother’s causes.

Not only does Alvarez acknowledge the political power of stories and storytelling, but she also acknowledges the power of history throughout the novel. In presenting history through the non-heroine, the guardian of the heroine’s memory, Alvarez recognizes the importance of history as viewed by the non-rulers, by non-key players, by the people viewed as “less important” in historical accounts thus redefining and broadening our view of the heroine. The importance of this type of history is that it takes into account various stories, various experiences, and various points of view outside of the ruling class, creating a history that is much more involved and less neatly defined. As such, Camila’s role, as mentioned earlier, is that of the chorus, the background which provides a platform for other voices to be heard. Alvarez is also one of the voices required to make up a chorus of voices re-presenting Dominican, Latina, and female history. Presenting history and storytelling in this Benjaminian way is revolutionary as it combats traditional modes of historical representation which tell the stories of only the ruling classes.
As the “chorus,” Alvarez and Camila’s powerful voices appear in how the stories are presented and in their ability to rewrite the stories and to refocus the history. At a young age, Camila embodies the power of voice when after she “had found [a] poem in a collection of her mother’s work in her father’s library” she “with a pencil, line by line… changed all the pronouns and masculine endings – her first poetic endeavor! – so the poem was addressed to her, not Pedro” (120). Camila’s action here corresponds with what Alvarez achieves in both *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *In the Name of Salomé*. Alvarez changes the history of the Dominican Republic so that it is addresses not just the history of men and of the rulers, but the history of all Dominicans, and specifically, Dominican women. In a sense, Alvarez adds the feminine ending to history that has traditionally been told with masculine endings. She makes the females the subject rather than the object in her historical accounts and in her stories, just as Camila constructs herself, a female, as the subject of her mother’s poem rather than her brother, a male.

The politicization of the novel does not end with Alvarez’s depiction of the power of storytelling and history. Alvarez strongly admonishes her American audience throughout *In the Name of Salomé*. In *In the Time of the Butterflies* Alvarez implies the disservice done by the United States to the Dominican Republic in their uninformed involvement with the country’s affairs at certain times or in their lack of involvement with the country’s affairs at other times. However, in *In the Name of Salomé*, Alvarez condemns, through Camila, America’s disinterest with smaller “third-world” countries. Camila actively tries to teach her English speaking audience and change the indifference many of her students feel about the writers, artists, political struggles, and oppression within countries such as the Dominican Republic. As the narrator informs the readers,
“When a student says she’s never heard of Salomé’s poetry and asks if she is supposed to be any good, Camila responds, “As good as your Emily Dickinson, as good as your Walt Whitman” (39). While she asserts through Camila the quality of Salome’s poetry, Alvarez never reprints any full copies of Salomé’s poems. Instead, just as she does with her presentation of history in this novel, Alvarez places the responsibility to learn more on her readers. She effectively sparks an interest in the poetry, thus making her reader want to look up the poems, read them, and learn for themselves why Salomé and her poetry were revered during her lifetime and even since then.

However, Alvarez also reveals how frustrating the lack of knowledge of her American students is to Camila. When students reveal their ignorance about Salomé, Camila “cannot forget the indifference in their voices, the casualness of their dismissal. Everything of ours – from lives to literature – has always been so disposable, she thinks. It is as if a little stopper that has contained years of bitterness inside her has been pulled out” (39). This “bitterness” is further revealed when Camila reflects that “Americans don’t interest themselves in the heroes and heroines of minor countries until someone makes a movie about them” (7). Through Camila, Alvarez condemns her readers, but still tries to teach them and to spark an interest that will propel her readers to take the initiative to learn more about the history and art of the Dominican Republic, to learn more about what could have been done, what should have been done, and what needs to be done.

With Alvarez’s more active involvement in her second creation of historical fiction and through the fulfillment of her historical storyteller role which is closely aligned with Benjamin’s ideas, Alvarez creates a more overtly political novel. *In the*
*Name of Salomé* reveals the complexity of the past which can never be simplified or reduced to create one meaning or one lesson, thus denying previous, limited historical accounts of the Dominican Republic. Instead, Alvarez creates a historical account with multiple lessons for her readers to find on their own in their exploration of the questions she asks about what “la patria” is, where “home” is, and what it is, particularly for people who have been displaced or exiled from their literal homes. The reader is left with the impression of the importance of using the past to assist those living in the present in determining the purpose and meaning of their lives. By doing so, finding a national and personal identity can be achieved, as seen through Camila, which ultimately brings one the peace that comes with a purposeful sense of belonging.
Conclusion

In this thesis I have focused on Alvarez’s role as a historical storyteller and the aspects of *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *In the Name of Salomé* which coincide with Walter Benjamin’s ideas in his essays “The Storyteller” and “On the Concept of History.” I have discussed Alvarez’s choice of narrative form, which is important to recognize because this multi-voiced narrative form utilized in both of the novels effectively reverses the tradition of male-dominated historical accounts by allowing each of the women to speak and be heard as they tell the stories of their lives. With women speaking and telling their stories, oppressive ideologies of polarized gender roles are combated which existed especially during the lifetimes of Salomé and the Mirabals, but definitely continued to exist in Camila’s lifetime and even today, and not just in Latin American cultures still prescribing to tenets of machismo, but also in the United States.

I have also discussed the genre of these novels, a historical fiction mixture, which enables Alvarez to do what she does best, that is to tell stories. As these texts are not biographies, Alvarez is not bound to strict codes of only writing about things that have been proven as facts and that are historically documented. Instead, Alvarez has the freedom to flesh out the stories she has heard and to bring to life the historical documents and facts that she has researched. Clearly, this is similar to the freedom which other writers of historical fiction retain; however, it is notable to recognize this genre because, when combined with the narrative form and authorial role in these novels, it furthers the understanding of how Alvarez has achieved a presentation of the lives of six Dominican women in these novels which lends reality to their lives and struggles and ultimately brings their stories to life.
While the narrative form and genre are important elements of these texts which work to enable the result of these tests - namely, historical recreation for entire generations told from the point of view of six women - Alvarez’s role in these novels as a historical storyteller and how Benjamin’s ideas are incorporated into her authorial role is where the most important implications of her texts can be found which is the work that she does to bring back Benjamin’s dying art of storytelling and expand upon this art.

Alvarez fulfills the role of the ideal storyteller, according to Benjamin; however, she departs from Benjamin as she presents the stories and the history of these women in writing, in the form of the novel. Benjamin’s focus in his essay was on the oral storytelling culture, which he saw as a disappearing art. While Alvarez adapts this art by writing out her stories instead of only verbally telling them, she does includes the most important aspects of the oral storytelling art – that is, hearing voices of individual people, learning from the life experiences of others, and creating a community through the telling and passing on of stories. Alvarez proves that these aspects of storytelling can be found in the written word, that the art of storytelling can be adapted to writing. This ability may have come from Alvarez’s background. Raised in the Dominican Republic, Alvarez grew up in a storytelling culture and learned to appreciate stories “hearing them, telling them.” However, the storytelling culture in the Dominican Republic was “an oral culture, stories were not written down.” Alvarez recalls that “it took coming to this country [the United States] for reading and writing to become allied in my mind with storytelling” (juliaalvarez.com). With her oral storytelling culture now combined with the predominant reading and writing culture in the United States, Alvarez created her two
texts of historical fiction, *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994) and *In the Name of Salomé* (2000), which are written texts filled with past voices and stories of Dominican women.

Furthermore, in her Benjimian role as a historical storyteller, Alvarez provides counsel for her readers through the telling of the experiences of others. Walter Benjamin describes the counsel which comes from storytelling as the meaning making a storyteller is engaged in, imbedded within the story and within the life of the storyteller as well. Alvarez rewrites and refocuses the history of the Dominican Republic so that it does not only address the history of men and of the rulers, but instead focuses on another version of the history of the Dominican Republic, a feminine history. Alvarez adds the feminine ending to history that has traditionally been told with masculine endings. She makes the female the subject rather than the object in her historical accounts and in her stories. This is an important move because while some of the women Alvarez writes about enjoyed privileges in their lives that other women would not have been afforded, for example, the upper-middle class status of the Mirabals, they were still relegated to the status of “other” due to their gender. However, Alvarez recognizes the importance of history as viewed by the non-rulers, by non-key players, by the people viewed as “less important” in historical accounts, people such as the women she writes about. The importance of this type of history is that it takes into account various stories, various experiences, and various points of view outside of the ruling class, creating a history that is much more involved and less neatly defined. Presenting history and storytelling in this Benjaminian way is revolutionary as it combats traditional modes of historical representation which tell the stories of only the ruling classes. Alvarez re-presents not only Dominican history, but Latina history and female history as well.
While Alvarez does create meaning for her readers, she does not dictate the counsel that her readers must take from her novels. Instead, Alvarez directs the creation of meaning by having women as her subjects, and specifically by providing postscripts written directly to the reader about the novels. These postscripts appear at the end of the novel; however, they do not interfere with any meaning making occurring in the mind of the reader while he or she is actually reading the novels. In these ways, Alvarez guides her readers about how to think about the novel, but stays away from dictating to her readers what to think about the novel, as she has already shown the danger of dictating meaning through her depictions of dictatorships such as Trujillo’s. This is something that is lacking in Benjamin’s essay on storytelling, the recognition of the potential danger of storytelling if the wrong person telling the wrong stories creates meaning for his/her listeners which enables dictatorships such as Trujillo’s or ideologies regarding gender roles and positions, such as machismo.

While describing her motivation to write In the Name of Salomé, Julia Alvarez remarks that “you wouldn’t know it from reading the official stories, but Latin America has had its share of amazing women” (juliaalvarez.com). In order to find out about these “amazing women”, Alvarez had to search for stories which provided more detail, more information, more of the reality of the lives of these women than was contained in the “official stories.” Ultimately, the compelling forces which motivated Alvarez to write her award winning novels In the Time of the Butterflies and In the Name of Salomé were the stories that she heard. The stories about the Mirabals became “voices” that were “real to [Alvarez] in an intuitive way” (Kevane and Heredia, 29). The stories that she encountered about Salomé describing “this young mulatta woman [who] managed to
overcome seemingly insurmountable odds to become la musa de la patria” intrigued Alvarez immediately (juliaalvarez.com). Having heard all of these stories and researched these women, Alvarez then created her works of historical fiction in order to present the stories of these “amazing women” to a more diverse audience.

Alvarez’s careful presentation of historical fiction in these two novels provides a new way of thinking for her American audience which takes into account versions of history that differ from the more typical representations of Dominican history. Alvarez helps her American audience to reimagine the history of a nation such as the Dominican Republic as being a fluid history containing many stories from many voices which do not always coincide with, and may even contradict, more traditional master narratives. If her readers can understand that a country such as the Dominican Republic, a small, island that is often overlooked on the world political stage, could contain stories of an interesting and diverse history filled with women who acted as revolutionaries, who wrote inspiring poetry, who fought for their convictions, then it may inspire them to find out more about other countries, to search out the stories about other women, thus realizing more fully the impact that women have had over the years in the development and politics of various countries around the world.

Alvarez opens up space for a new kind of study of history which relies upon a combination of historical facts and stories, which listens to voices “other” to the dominant discourse, which is written in language that is anything but cold and empirical, and which appeals to a mass audience beyond historical scholars. Alvarez’s novels of historical fiction provide an excellent example for other female authors from marginalized communities or countries especially, as she shows the connection of first
world countries to “third” world countries, the connection and contributions of every day people, and of women specifically, to the politics and histories of every country.

Studying other female writers of historical fiction and calling attention to the kinds of history and the kinds of stories that they are presenting helps to deny any master historical narrative and open up a much more productive space where many histories, many stories, many cultures, and many people can be heard.


http://juliaalvarez.com/


