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Translating the Dominican experience : authorial leadership and how the narratives of Julia Alvarez and Junot Diaz imagine community

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Abstract

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This paper closely looks at Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and Junot Díaz's *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* in order to understand literature as a form of leadership. Alvarez and Díaz draw upon historical Dominican memory to frame their characters' identities and recreate communities in a new landscape. Their works challenge cultural authority, deconstruct borders, and provide the language to dialogue about the realities of multiculturalism.

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Translating the Dominican Experience: Authorial Leadership and How the Narratives of Julia Alvarez and Junot Díaz Imagine Community

Thesis presented

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This is to certify that the thesis prepared by *Mary Rachel Ehret* has been approved by her committee as satisfactory completion of the thesis requirement to earn honors in leadership studies.

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Chapter 1: The Era of Trujillo and Dominican Memory

"For those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history," Junot Díaz admonishes in the very first footnote in *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, he ensures that his novel's audience quickly realizes the context in which he writes. His protagonists come from a Dominican-American family and their stories are intertwined with the course of Dominican history equally, if not more so than, with American history. The legacy to which Díaz refers is the Era of Trujillo, and he provides a short, sarcastic summary of the dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina - "a portly, sadistic, pig-eyed mulato who bleached his skin, wore platform shoes, and had a fondness for Napoleon-era haberdashery." [1] The disgust evident in Díaz's description comes from a recognition of the leader's self-interested policies that did more to harm the nation than to help it. Trujillo used violence, terror, and authoritarian means to control the nation's political, cultural and economic life and Díaz's critical tone is evidence of the impact, even now, of the dictator on Dominican memory. While the two seconds of Dominican history which Díaz shares revolves around the twentieth-century authoritarian regime of Trujillo, modern Dominican history has its roots in Spanish colonialism, the moment which marks the establishment of a distinct Dominican identity; through language, race, and culture, Dominicans, over time, have created a distinctive narrative of identity in Latin America. In the case of *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the history that Díaz introduces is specific to the characters of his fictional world, but is also universal and essential to the shared experience of Dominicans. Authors like Díaz and Julia Alvarez base their narratives of transition and transformation in history because they function as a reliable identity-marker which is challenged and reconfigured during the process of immigration and cultural re-identification.

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[1] Junot Díaz, *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2007), 2.

Colonization in the fifteenth century provided the first opportunity to recreate communities in a new landscape, and Spanish culture became the foundation of Dominican identity. Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic, was also the first capital of the Spanish empire in the Americas. Hispaniola, the Caribbean island shared by the Dominican Republic and Haiti, literally translates to "Little Spain," and the Spanish colonialists who established their first colony in the Dominican Republic also ingrained European culture into the foundations of the nation. [2] The white Europeans who brought their culture to Hispaniola completely replaced the indigenous population and set about reconstructing their lives in the New World. Tainos, the indigenous population of Hispaniola, had a population of half a million in 1492, and by 1519 they numbered only eleven thousand.[3] Many of the Tainos died from small pox and the rest were used for slave labor as the Spanish transformed the island. From the architecture to the economic infrastructure, Santo Domingo became a representation of Europe. In their study of Dominican culture, Howard Wiarda and Michael Kryzanek define the impact of Spanish colonialism on the small nation as instilling a strict socio-economic classification based on race, introducing "a state-dominated economy and society," and establishing a sense of political and religious unity among the people.[4] Furthermore, "because these institutions were associated with the glory and prosperity of Hispaniola in its first fifty years they continued to represent an ideal model to which subsequent Dominican regimes would aspire." [5] Post-colonial Dominican history, then, has been about achieving the same political, cultural, and economic dominance of these early years.

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[2] Howard J. Wiarda and Michael J. Kryzanek, *The Dominican Republic: A Caribbean Crucible* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1982), 25.
[3] Jared Diamond, "One Island, Two Peoples, Two Histories: The Dominican Republic and Haiti," in *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 333-334.
[4] Wiarda and Kryzanek, 26.
[5] Ibid., 26.

Even as the Spanish colonizers moved on from Hispaniola after exploiting its natural resources, they left behind the legacy of European tradition by which Dominicans continue to live. As the first established colony, Dominicans take pride in maintaining tradition which is evidenced through their language. Dominican Spanish, "having the purest tradition in Latin America," is clear and remains the most classical in comparison to other Latin American nations.[6] Likewise, the Spanish who established the new colony supported a racial hierarchy that remains today, which characterizes the upper-class and elites by lighter skin: a physical representation of the European language. The majority of Dominicans, however, identify as mulatto, descendants of white European colonials and black African slaves.[7] Even though light-skin is valued socially in the nation, most Dominicans recognize themselves as separate from the culture that introduced those strictures. While the historical narrative of the Dominican Republic is founded in the European tradition, the racial identification of Dominicans reveals the complications of this narrative. There is pride in that history, but there is also a sense of hybridity among a people who reconstructed their culture in a foreign landscape. These influences are strongly tied to the construction of both government and citizenship – what Dominicans expect from their leaders and each other. Since hierarchy, centralization, and conformity were so integral to the success of Spanish "golden age," these attributes also gained a sense of desirability in governance, and leaders like Trujillo would utilize them to consolidate their power.

After gaining independence from Spain in 1821, the Dominican Republic was quickly conquered by Haiti which controlled the entire island of Hispaniola until 1844. Between the time of their independence and Trujillo's coup the nation faced the political challenges of a weak

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[6] Wiarda and Kryzanek, 18.
[7] Ibid., 16.

government and economic development, as well as the consequences of internal war and foreign intervention.[8] During the period of transition at the turn of the twentieth century, the Dominican Republic saw a number of dictators come to power in attempts to shape the modern Dominican state. Several decades before Trujillo's authoritarian regime, Dominicans accepted and welcomed autocratic leaders into political leadership in attempts to reestablish the stability and economic security enjoyed under Spanish control. Rufino Martinez, a Dominican scholar, asserts that Dominicans are a people "which needs a director of public opinion or caudillo," and that when faced with challenges, "in the absence of a collective consciousness to determine their point of view and push for a determined solution, they turn blindly to whatever occurs to their directors of opinion to say or do."[9] Dominicans rely upon their leaders to make decisions based on notions of hierarchal power; democracy was not introduced in the Dominican Republic until after the Era of Trujillo, creating a void of civic participation in government because the tradition had never been introduced.[10] Essentially, a weak civil society resulted in caudillismo, on both a regional level and ultimately a national level.[11]

Regionalism characterized the Dominican Republic's underdeveloped economic system, which was similarly reflected in the divided political affiliations of the nineteenth century. Even though a geographically small nation, the Dominican Republic's traditionally agrarian economic structure varies from region to region, indicating the distance between Dominican communities and the competition among them.[12] However, the social structure evident in agrarian communities reveals the importance of family relationships to Dominicans while also

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[8] Michael R. Hall, "The Transition from Dictatorship to Democracy in the Dominican Republic," *Journal of Third World Studies* 23, no. 1 (2006): 13.

[9] Emilio Betances, *State and Society in the Dominican Republic* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 59

[10] Hall, 15.

[11] Betances, *State and Society in the Dominican Republic,* 60.

[12] Emilio Betances, "Social Classes and the Origin of the Modern State: The Dominican Republic, 1844-1930," *Latin American Perspectives* 22, no. 3, The Dominican Republic: Social Change and Political Stagnation (Summer 1995): 22.

demonstrating distrust for individuals who live outside their communities. At the turn of the twentieth century, however, the Dominican Republic began an economic transformation based in the sugar industry that changed both the social and political landscape. Sugar plantations began to emerge between 1874 and 1916 and became the most profitable export for the developing nation. The great potential of the Dominican sugar industry was soon recognized and controlled by large corporations that introduced the Dominican Republic into the international capitalist system.[13] These sugar plantations allowed for the rise of a new bourgeoisie class which found residency in the nation's cities, distinct from the rural plantation workers. Santo Domingo, in particular, became a metropolitan center of export that embodied an evolving sense of citizenship based on international commerce. Unlike the agrarian communities, city life forced residents to interact with each other on a regular basis and determine ways that they could coexist.[14] In addition, education increasingly became an integral part of the definition of citizenship; public education became available in order to foster a politically informed and engaged populace.[15] The emerging sense of nationalism and individual economic efficacy in this era was challenged as the sugar industry continued to evolve; while small, local companies first controlled the market, the increased productivity and wealth of the industry, in conjunction with the U.S. military occupation during the period, led to eventual foreign control of the Dominican industry as foreign investors found increased access to the Dominican Republic and used their wealth to control the industry.[16]

Political partisanship which resulted from the nation's regionalism led to the United States military occupation of the Dominican Republic from 1915 to 1924. For years the U.S. had

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[13] Betances, "Social Classes and the Origin of the Modern State," 25.
[14] Teresita Martínez-Vergne, *Nation & Citizen in the Dominican Republic, 1880-1916* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 81.
[15] Martínez-Vergne, 57.
[16] Betances, "Social Classes and the Origin of the Modern State," 25.

been wielding its influence in the Caribbean. In 1907, the Dominico-American convention gave the U.S. control of Dominican customs collections and management of debt service in just one example of how the U.S. had previously found its interests intertwined with those of the Dominican Republic.[17] The people of the Dominican Republic, however, were always wary of their northern neighbors, and, in a 1913 celebration of the nation, expressed their sentiments on this threat:

> We will create a NATIONALISM or we will recover it, because if at any time we had it [we have to] confess, with our contrite soul, that we have been gradually losing it, and the expansionist tentacles of the Northern octopus, acting as protector of its younger sisters, will end up sucking, if we do not thwart him in time, the last drop of blood of our dignity and our honor. [18]

Even in 1913 there was a desire for a strong sense of national identity - political, social, and economic beliefs that would protect the Dominican Republic from continued foreign influence. The United States, despite its many advantages as an ally, works ultimately for its own interests and not those of Dominicans. While the U.S. occupied the Dominican Republic the Marines worked in conjunction with the Dominican military to control the country; after the occupation officially ended in 1924, the power of the military and the relative weakness of regional politicians, economic leaders, and the intelligentsia allowed for the emergence of a caudillo greater than the regional powers - a leader who had a monopoly on the power and resources necessary to control the nation. [19] Rafael Trujillo, a general commander in the military, was able to utilize his close affiliation and support from the United States to begin his career as a political leader.

Trujillo ascended to power in the Dominican Republic in 1930 by overthrowing the government with the help of the United States-backed military. Trujillo joined the national guard in 1919, at the age of twenty-eight, and by 1925 he had been promoted to colonel - a

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[17] Martínez-Vergne, 20.
[18] Ibid., 19.
[19] Betances, *State and Society in the Dominican Republic,* 60.

commander of the national police. [20] In 1927, the national police became the national army of the Dominican Republic and Trujillo remained the general commander until his coup in 1930.[21] Between 1924 and 1930, the Dominican Republic was led by Horacio Vasquez, a popularly elected president whom Trujillo forced to resign through military intimidation; in the May election of that year, Trujillo was elected president, unopposed, after using military force to eliminate all other potential political candidates. From the very beginning of his regime, Trujillo used the military to transform the nation into a police state where obedience became a requirement of citizenship. [22] His authority was consolidated by "military might, political and governmental absolutism, economic monopoly, thought control, educational and intellectual conformity, systematic terror and control over all socioeconomic groups." [23] Adopting a centralized political system, like that of the Spanish colonialists, Trujillo reintroduced colonial notions of governance as characteristics of citizenship during his regime. Education, previously revered for cultivating the people, became important only to advance a constructed narrative. During this period, Dominican national identity became a product of Trujillo's nationalistic agenda which promoted conformity, hierarchy, and cultural superiority to consolidate his power.

The violence and fear of the Trujillo Era is recorded in Jesus de Galíndez's 1956 doctoral dissertation, which illustrates his own story. The work details Trujillo's rise to power, the history of political transitions, the terror of authoritarianism, and the state of social and economic institutions; it also examines Trujillo's successes and provides a critique of his regime. Thirteen days after presenting his work, Galíndez disappeared, never to be seen again. The disappearance while officially unsolved, almost certainly happened on Trujillo's orders and became "a cause

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[20] Jesús de Galíndez, *The Era of Trujillo,* ed. by Russel H. Fitzgibbon (Tuscson: The University of Arizona Press, 1973) 9-10.
[21] Ibid., 10.
[22] Wiarda and Kryzanek, 36.
[23] Ibid., 37.

celebre throughout the hemisphere, turning hemispheric opinion against Trujillo like nothing else had."[24] The obvious censorship of opinions, particularly the voice of a respected scholar, conflicted with Americans' belief in the freedom of speech. The United States had previously supported Trujillo because his dictatorship secured the Dominican Republic from a communist regime like that in Cuba. However, as the U.S. Secretary of State noted at the time, "nothing would do more to promote communism in Latin America than for the U.S. to support a dictator, who like Trujillo, has been guilty of torturing prisoners and trampling on human rights."[25] After the disappearance of Galíndez, an event representative of the oppressive and repressive atmosphere that permeated the era, Trujillo began to face the international repercussions of his leadership.

Trujillo's reign began to crumble after nearly thirty years of unchecked power that gave him political, economic, and military control over the nation. As with the disappearance of Jesus de Galíndez, Trujillo attempted to eradicate all opposition, national and international; Venezuelan president Romulo Betancourt and the National Civic union, a Trujillo-oppositionist group, were targeted by the government and military police.[26] A 1960 trade and arms embargo against the Dominican Republic after the assassination attempt of Betancourt created a depression in sugar prices that weakened the Dominican economy as international revenue decreased. The relatively new urban working class was "impatient with Trujillo's excesses and monopolistic practices and eager both to liberalize Dominican society and to get a share of the wealth and power for themselves." [27] In both the city and agrarian communities, the favor of the dictator influenced who had access to power as political and economic power were concentrated

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[24] Galíndez, ix.
[25] "Trying to Topple Trujillo," *Time* 76, no. 10 (1960): 30.
[26] Galíndez, 37 and "Uneasy Time".
[27] Galíndez, 37.

among few individuals; it created a system that fostered distrust and suspicion. [28] In a post-Trujillo Dominican Republic, access and opportunity for social and economic power increased and through their participation a democratic identity began to develop. However, the new political liberalness conflicted with the still powerful military creating political instability in the nation that forced many Dominicans to leave in search of more secure communities.

An article in Time magazine entitled "Chamber of Horrors," published four and a half months after Trujillo and his family were finally removed from the Dominican Republic in 1961, details specific accounts of the terror perpetrated by Trujillo's secret police. As the post-Trujillo atmosphere became more open, citizens began to come forward and recount the crimes of the Military Intelligence Service (S.I.M.) they had once been too afraid to share. In the capital Santo Domingo, La Cuarenta and Kilometer Nine housed two of the largest "murder factories" – buildings that represented the systematic torture of the Trujillo opposition. Run by the S.I.M., these buildings were associated with "unsophisticated but highly effective torture instruments," including electrocution, broadcasting victims' yells, and castration. [29] While the account focuses on the events of Trujillo's regime, it also emphasizes the sense of justice demanded by Dominicans in the post-Trujillo era. Citizens sought accountability on the part of the S.I.M. for its role in the terror, and sought closure to an era that would allow them to develop a sense of identity independent of the horrors of the Era of Trujillo. In one instance where two police attempted to escape to Haiti, a mob forced the army to arrest the men in a moment of public outrage. However, when followed by the mob, "the soldiers reacted in typical Dominican fashion – a burst of machine gun fire killed one man and wounded three." [30] This one moment,

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[28] Walker, 497.
[29] "Chamber of Horrors," *Time* 79, no. 8 (1962): 41.
[30] Ibid., 41.

which occurred in the period of turmoil after Trujillo's assassination, represents the continued struggle between Dominicans and the military.

Even decades after Trujillo's rule unceremoniously ended in assassination, his influence is still felt throughout the country. For instance, the town Libertad was originally founded during Trujillo's regime and was named Batey San Rafael in honor of the leader. After his death, when cities like Santo Domingo reclaimed their pre-Trujillo titles, this small town chose to call their community Libertad – "freedom." [31] Originally founded as a work camp for Haitian sugar cane workers, the community has been consistently plagued by poverty, systemic negligence, and institutionalized racism towards the community's primarily dark-skinned population. Trujillo, as Díaz noted, was obsessed with having light skin and identifying as a part of the European-descended elite; of his own grandparents, only one was of Spanish descent, while two were Dominican, and one was Haitian. [32] He, like the majority of Dominicans, was mulatto, but for the entirety of his rule, Trujillo reinforced a racial hierarchy and the ideal of European identity, despite the contradiction of his personal history. The perception of race in the Dominican Republic has traditionally favored those with light-skin, and Trujillo, "obsessed with the so-called 'Haitian Threat'" - the fear of expansionist neighbors - constructed a policy actively oppressing the nation's dark-skinned Haitian population; he officially redefined "Indian" as the official label for mulatto Dominicans, distinguishing them from "black" Haitians. [33] Trujillo's policy embraced the colonial racial hierarchy and reinforced the significance of racial identity within the nation. The sense of nationalism created was a legacy that defined the era and is only now being qualified and amended by scholars in the Dominican Republic since the Haitian-Dominican population continues to be persecuted.

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[31] John J. McLaughlin, "The Shadow of Trujillo," *National Catholic Reporter* 42, no. 40, September 2006, 18.
[32] Galíndez, 9.
[33] McLaughlin, 18.

Most infamously, Trujillo's radical racial policy resulted in the massacre of Haitians living in the Dominican Republic. In October of 1937, Trujillo sent his soldiers to the border region shared with Haiti with sprigs of parsley, "with orders to ask, 'What's this?' If the answer of 'perejil' lacked a sufficiently trilled 'r' and aspirated 'j' to prove Spanish as their native tongue and thus their 'Dominican-ness' they were hacked to death." [34] So in addition to skin-tone, command of classical Spanish became a critical indicator of Dominican identity. Haitians, and even Dominican-Haitians living in the border region, who came from a French-language background, would not have mastery of the clear and precise classical Spanish language prized by the Trujillo regime, and ultimately would have been killed. The October tragedy resulted in the deaths of 12,000 to 25,000 Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian descent and reinforced terror as a cornerstone of Trujillo's regime. [35] During this one historical moment, language became the critical identifier of Dominican identity, once again recalling the nation's colonial roots. Racism persists in the border town of Libertad; in 2005 the "Dominicanization of the border" repatriated 3,000 Haitian immigrants and at least fifty Dominican citizens who appeared to be Haitian. [36]

Appearance continues to remain a critical indicator of belonging in the Dominican Republic; in a nation that has a closely guarded and seemingly exclusive identity there is limited access to citizenship for those who do not fulfill the image of Dominicanness. For the most part, outside of border towns, racism is not actively instituted, but rather characterizes socio-economic classes. The unskilled labor force in urban and rural settings is composed of darker-skinned Dominicans, and the necessity of economic advancement leads these families to seek opportunity outside the Dominican Republic. While this group is not alone in their search for opportunity,

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[34] Ibid., 18.
[35] Ibid., 18.
[36] Ibid., 18.

their distinct lack of choice and their existence outside of Dominicanness is one of the lasting legacies of Trujillo.

Trujillo is remembered by many names, "El Jefe, the Failed Cattle Thief, and Fuckface," as noted by Junot Díaz – names that impart sense of frustration and hatred towards his self-serving regime.[37] Yet that anger is complicated by the sense of pride Dominicans felt in their country while he was in power, because Trujillo, for the majority of his tenure, transformed the Dominican Republic into an organized, economically stable, and independent nation. Trujillo's powerful leadership was one of the first periods in which the Dominican Republic was free of colonial influence - whether from its original Spanish colonizers or the regional power of the United States – and the army and national police effectively maintained order in both public and private spheres.[38] As well, Trujillo's racial policy served a nationalist discourse that "exalted Dominicans at the expense of Haitians" and supported a sense of cultural superiority that survived in a post-Trujillo Dominican Republic.[39] Economically, Trujillo is noted for balancing the Dominican national budget, increasing revenues, securing the end of customs, and establishing a sound currency.[40] The material successes of the era of Trujillo contributed to cultural and academic progress that gave further legitimacy to his rule and narrative. The number of university students increased during his time in power from 328 in 1937 to 2, 449 in 1952: focus on primary and secondary education led to the increase in university enrollment, but academic experiences were expanded to include the creation of a music school, a school of fine arts, a diplomatic and consular school, and a vocational school.[41] Cultural institutions gathered support under Trujillo; the national orchestra, the national archives, the library of the university,

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[37] Díaz, 2.
[38] Galíndez, 238.
[39] Martínez-Vergne, 18.
[40] Ibid., 18.
[41] Galíndez, 241.

and a gallery of fine arts were created or reorganized, and "more than one Dominican writer or artist [was] appointed to diplomatic positions as a practical way of helping his creative activities."[42] These tangible benefits were a source of pride for a nation that had previously served the benefit of other nations. During the Era of Trujillo, the Dominican Republic became an influential regional power and Dominicans were able to identify themselves in a global context. The nationalism that Trujillo instilled in Dominicans, however, has always been at odds with the oppression he created, and, as Díaz reminds us, complicates the sense of identification Dominicans have with the leader and the era.

Trujilloism, according to Wiarda and Kryzanek, is based on a system of values publicly denounced, yet essential to Dominican society: "There is a little Trujillo in all of us," one Dominican shared with the authors.[43] Despite the outward expression of repulsion towards Trujillo's methods, Dominicans continue to admire his strength and showmanship; he was, "a man on horseback, a macho authority figure par excellence."[44] Machismo in the Dominican Republic is a long-standing cultural trait that emphasizes the performance of masculinity. Dominican men demonstrate their strength through their ability, "to appear superior and in control, sexually and otherwise." [45] Trujillo certainly embodied Dominican machismo, and the sense of domineering control accepted on a cultural level translated to his political and economic leadership. He may have been supported by American imperial interests, but Trujillo was always recognizable and identifiable to Dominicans for his machismo which was representative of a greater national pride and socioeconomic success.

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[42] Ibid., 241.
[43] Wiarda and Kryzanek, 20.
[44] Ibid., 20.
[45] Ibid., 19.

The notions of masculinity which are celebrated in the Era of Trujillo and by Dominican identity contrast with the narratives of Alvarez and Díaz which present the lives of strong, self-determining women. The García girls embody the shared experience of immigration through the discrete strands of Alvarez's narrative. Oscar, the titular protagonist of Díaz's work, is surrounded his entire life by much stronger women: his mother, Belicia Cabral, and his sister, Lola, are the two most prominent and influential. These two works, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, diverge in this particular sense from Dominican narrative of family and authority, but remain part of a larger tradition of remembering Trujillo in literature. In an analysis of texts by Dominican and Caribbean authors, comparative literature scholar Ignacio López-Calvo examines the impact the Era of Trujillo has had on the creation of character. The Era has become the means of addressing questions that surround a period characterized by skepticism and a crisis of national identity: why do Dominicans call for "hard-line" leadership in periods of crises? Why do intellectuals, professionals, and powerful foreign governments support brutal regimes like that of Trujillo? And "where is the essence of specificity of Dominicanness to be found?"[46] López-Calvo's conclusion ultimately recognizes these narratives as reconstructions of particular events or historical figures that, "through the deconstruction and negation of false myths … eventually become narratives of national identity."[47] Alvarez and Díaz, Dominican-American authors, use the history of the Dominican Republic in relation to the process of immigration and acculturation to redefine Dominican identity in a new national context.

Immigration poses challenges for individuals and families that Dr. Krista M. Pereira of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill identities in three distinct phases of immigration:

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[46] Ignacio López-Calvo, *"God and Trujillo": Literary and Cultural Representations of the Dominican Dictator.* (Tampa, FL: University Press of Florida, 2005)
[47] Ibid., 143.

pre-migration, migration, and post-migration. Factors such as poverty, family separation, and political violence often provide the impetus for individuals to become immigrants and leave their homelands in search of a more secure life in the pre-migration phase. Politics and economics, as in the case of the Dominican Republic, create a climate that forces families to seek alternative communities that provide more opportunity. Significant migration from the Dominican Republic did not occur until after Trujillo was assassinated, and political instability defined the proceeding era. During the Era of Trujillo only few intellectual, economic, and political elites fled the country because of the dictator's oppression, but for the majority of Dominicans political instability and the lack of economic opportunity created the necessity of departure. After the Era of Trujillo, migration became primarily a phenomenon of the urban middle class.[48] Pereira presents immigration as a potential solution to the conflicts individuals face in their home countries, but it is also a process that creates an entirely new set of challenges for those that undertake the endeavor to reshape their lives.

The narratives of leaving and the experiences of cultural translation vary greatly between the works of Alvarez and Díaz. The García Girls are the daughters of a noted Dominican intellectual, and their family flees the nation in fear of political oppression after a failed revolution against Trujillo. They come from a family of wealth and prominence in the Dominican Republic and represent the light-skinned Dominican, but over the course of the narrative their notions of home are challenged through the struggles they face in America. Beli Cabral, Oscar's mother, is the character forced to migrate in Díaz's story. Like the García girls she was the daughter of an intellectual, but she was also a "negrita" - dark-skinned. After her father was killed by Trujillo, her mother died soon after and she faced ostracism and violence

[48] Antonio Ugalde, Frank D. Bean, and Gilbert Cárdena, "International Migration from the Dominican Republic: Findings from a National Survey," *International Migration Review* 13, no. 2, Special Issue: International Migration in Latin America (Summer 1979): pp. 235-254.

unknown to the García Girls. Ultimately, Beli became pregnant with the child of an important (and married) Trujillo official who did everything possible to get rid of the baby; he had the secret police beat Beli, ending her pregnancy, which led Beli to leave for New York soon afterwards. Dominican authors, according to López-Calvo, "do not venture to articulate who Dominicans actually are, hence avoiding the plausibility of creating new false national myths, they declare who they are not, thus defining their identity by negation."[49] The characters in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* seem worlds apart from one another in terms of their appearances, social classes, and experiences, but in each instance Alvarez and Díaz challenge Trujillo's construction of Dominicanness as they navigate and settle a new landscape.

America is where many Dominicans reconstruct their lives and reestablish communities in the continuation of an arduous process. As Periera notes, migration presents the possibilities of physical trauma, emotional trauma, and accidental injury, and the scale of harm inflicted depends greatly on where families are moving from and the resources that they possess. Once established in their new home, immigrants are confronted with an entirely new way of life and the difficult process of acculturation, post-migration. Often times political awareness, economic instability, and language prove to be barriers in this undertaking and stressors which potentially lead to family conflict. These challenges are present in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as part of the immigrant experience. Their characters emerge from a history of domination, oppression, and violence only to face new hardships outside of their homeland. The Era of Trujillo haunts these families as they attempt to reconcile the narrative of Dominican identity with their new landscape. Trauma has created their stories and will ultimately influence their conception of community. Alvarez and Díaz serve as

[49] López-Calvo, 147.

translators of the difficulties and of obstacles of immigration as they create a bicultural identity founded in history that looks forward towards a greater sense of citizenship.

Chapter 2: Translating Identity

In 1991 Julia Alvarez published *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* - her first full length novel. The García sisters encounter an America entrenched in multiculturalism, and Alvarez's narrative focuses less on the nation's attitude towards the family, and more on the sisters' relationships to their new landscape. Ten years later, on September 11, 2001, that landscape radically shifted after the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers; the challenges for families like the Garcías remained the same, but awareness of cultural differences was heightened in the majority community and their attitude became less multicultural and more nationalistic. In part, this shift in perspective is due to the immediacy of trauma the terrorist attacks brought to the United States, and the threat of violence which has haunted immigrants, including Dominican-Americans, for so long, became tangible to all Americans. The atmosphere of anxiety fostered Junot Díaz's first full-length novel, published in 2007 in which Oscar de Leon and his family respond to and face the troubles of their communities in Paterson, New Jersey and Bani, Dominican Republic. These particular realities shape the differences in the texts of Alvarez and Díaz as they reveal how Dominican Americans understand and shape their identities in America.

The process of immigration, which physically uproots and dislocates a person from their home landscape, serves as the uniting frame through which Alvarez and Díaz explore the recreation of identity as their characters either assume or reject characteristics of the Trujillo-constructed Dominican identity in relation to their new environments. Gloria Anzaldúa, who has written prolifically on Chicano cultural identity, defines identity as "an arrangement or series of clusters, a kind of stacking or layering of selves made up of the different communities that you

inhabit."[50] Alvarez, Díaz, and their characters inhabit each of these communities which pull them in opposing directions; these spaces range from their country of origin in the Dominican Republic, their national home in the United States, and their specific immigrant communities in New York and New Jersey where they grow up. Each of these places offers unique cultural and historical heritages, but each also asserts expectations on the performance of identity.

How the García Girls Lost Their Accents begins with Yolanda's return to the Dominican Republic. From the start, Alvarez impresses upon the audience the constancy of this location in the novel and in her characters' lives: "The old aunts lounge in the white wicker armchairs, flipping open their fans, snapping them shut. Except that more of them are dressed in the greys and blacks of widowhood, the aunts seem little changed since five years ago when Yolanda was last on the Island." [51] The space is dominated by women, and Alvarez immediately begins to subvert notions of the patriarchal Dominican Republic. In Alvarez's world, and Yolanda's world, women are not only visible, but they serve as the heart of the narrative and actively rewrite their identities. The description here also demonstrates a continuity in the nation's impression on Yolanda; "unchanged" is the word used to describe the women, and there is a sense of reliability in them and their country. The static temporality that defines the Dominican Republic marks that space as a memory for the García girls, part of their past which is also the origin of their identity. Yet the detail of the "greys and blacks of widowhood," at the same time, suggest the diminishing of that influence, as though the aunts have recognized, at the very start of the narrative, how far the girls have traveled from the Island. The narrative of the García girls begins and ends in the Dominican Republic, reminding the audience of where they began even as

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[50] Kelli L. Johnson, *Julia Alvarez: Writing A New Place on the Map* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), xiii.
[51] Julia Alvarez, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents,* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 1991), 3.

their lives are firmly rooted in the United States. Their cultural home bookends their story as Alvarez defines the Dominican origins of the sisters' self-conception.

The first time that the Dominican Republic appears in Díaz's novel, it serves as a refuge through the eyes of Oscar. The summer between his junior and senior years in high school, Oscar and his sister Lola are sent to Santo Domingo, "and this time he didn't fight it like he had in the recent past."[52] In Paterson, Oscar's lack of machismo in combination with his mother's harsh expectations make him miserable, so returning to the Dominican Republic becomes an escape from these pressures and ironically offers a place where he can be himself. When Oscar is at home in the Dominican Republic, "instead of discouraging his writing, and chasing him out of the house like his mother used to, his abuela, Nena Inca, let him be. Allowed him to sit in the back of the house as long as he wanted, didn't insist that he should be 'out in the world.'"[53] Instead of making the United States a place of free expression and opportunity, Díaz instead constructs the Dominican Republic, the location of Oscar's cultural heritage, as a site of comfort and security. There Oscar writes and observes the world around him, as no one puts pressure on him to actively participate. The problem with this is that, like his home in Santo Domingo, in the Dominican Republic, Oscar is not "out in the world." He is hiding in a place where he does not actively fulfill his notions of self: he imagines them. The Antilles and Hispaniola are sources of fantasy, and the Dominican Republic is a significant location for Oscar because it is where he cultivates the fantastic ideas he uses in his writing and which sustain his identity.

Identity in Alvarez's novel is heavily influenced by tradition and family, and these values support the girls in the United States. Every year the García sisters return home to celebrate their father's birthday; they leave their spouses at home and arrive alone so as to recall the memory of

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[52] Díaz, 30.
[53] Ibid., 31.

their childhood when it was just the four daughters: "they were passionate women, but their devotions were like roots; they were sunk into the past towards the old man."[54] Their lives continue forward in the United States, but the girls remain closely connected to their father. The description Alvarez includes is organic, and their relationship is deeply connected even as they move across different landscapes. The roots they share with their family will forever link the García girls with Dominican history despite their American lives; the reference to the "old man" also offers the suggestion that history includes Trujillo's influence over them. The man who led the Dominican Republic for three decades still lives on in them, even after they have moved on. The United States, however, becomes the site of Dominican memory and tradition to operate because it is the landscape that allows for change. For example, the birthday party that begins the second chapter takes place in Sofia's home; her parents, sisters, and their families all travel to this new location to celebrate their father and expanding family.

Paterson and New Brunswick are the most tangible settings in Díaz's text. In these locations the narration is always in the present tense, and the references to these communities come naturally and fluidly through Díaz. Experience in a community like Paterson allows the audience to make assumptions about its members based on that familiarity. Díaz details those preconceptions in his description of Lola: she was "one of those tough Jersey dominicanas, a long-distance runner who drove her own car, had her own checkbook, called men bitches, and would eat a fat cat in front of you without a speck of verguenza."[55] In the description which describes Lola in localized language, Díaz creates the impression of a tight-knit community which requires a specific identity in order to decipher. Díaz portrays a specific type of female character found in Paterson, New Jersey – one character out of many in the community – and his

[54] Alvarez, 24.
[55] Díaz, 25.

manner of literary construction reveals even more. Díaz continues to rely on the reader's cultural knowledge; whether we know what a "fat cat" is and our linguistic knowledge to understand that without "verguenza" means without shame also determines whether we learn about Lola.[56] For both the characters and the audience, the reality of these localized communities is most familiar to our understanding of identification.

Negotiating identity and self becomes even more complicated for those who have to recreate home in an unfamiliar landscape and for those who come from the bicultural world that transplantation produces. In some cases, a sense of hybridity results in the Spanish notion of *mestizaje*: "both the literal sense of interbreeding and the metaphorical sense of the 'intermingling of cultures.'"[57] In *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,* Alvarez and Díaz respond to the U.S. understanding of the Dominican narrative; machismo, social class, race, and language become the spheres of negotiation through which their characters identity themselves. In Alvarez's novel her female characters address their experience as Dominican women, reconciling what that means outside of the Dominican Republic. Díaz, on the other hand, more closely follows a Dominican family less privileged socially and racially and the challenges these factors produce.

Before she even begins her narrative, Julia Alvarez draws a picture of the García de la Torre family, highlighting the historical narrative that influences each of the García Girls. Both the García family and the de la Torre family are descended from "The Conquistadors." The family's European lineage remains outside of the actual narrative, unencumbered by the story as

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[56] "Sandwich invented in New Brunswick, NJ on the campus of Rutgers University. Although many derivatives exist today, such as the 'Fat Darrell,' voted best sandwich by Maxim Magazine, the original Fat Cat was engineered on a 'Grease Truck' (a rolling lunch truck) sometime in the late seventies. The original sandwich consists of two hamburger patties lined up on a sub roll, french fries, lettuce, tomato, onions, cheese and ketchup. It is then held closed with parchment paper wrapped around the lower 3/4 of sandwich holding all the ingredients in tightly" (fourth definition of "Fat Cat" according to urbandictionary.com).

[57] Peter Burke, *Cultural Hybridity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 49.

a fixed understanding. The de la Torre family also has an ancestor "who married a Swedish girl"; for the sisters, this is their great-great-grandfather. Not only do these women have the upper class roots of a Spanish heritage, but they also phenotypically display the light skin of their fair skinned Scandinavian great-great-grandmother. Alvarez's picture of the García de la Torre family reveals their position of privilege in the Dominican Republic as they fit Trujillo's standards of Dominicanness.

How the García Girls Lost their Accents begins in the Dominican Republic allowing the audience to glimpse the world at the foundation of the García girls' identities. The depiction of the sister's identities begins from its most recent and arguably complete position; temporally, Alvarez constructs the narrative of *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* in reverse as each chapter moves back in time, the women growing younger rather than older. The narrative structure here allows Alvarez to reveal the different layers of identity Anzaldúa describes. In the first section of the novel the adult sisters have relationships and share moments that demonstrate the full amalgamation of their identities as the result of their navigation of issues such as race, class, and gender. At the García de la Torre family home, "a maid peeks out of the pantry into the hall. She is a skinny brown woman in the black uniform of the kitchen help."[58] The first physical description Alvarez provides is for "the help" in a moment that intertwines race and class. The maid's dark skin is a sign of her status in the Dominican social hierarchy, and, by contrast, the García family is the Dominican dream; as history establishes and Alvarez filters through her imagination, the Garcías are the Dominican family Trujillo idealized. When the narrative shifts settings back to the United States in the following chapter, the privilege and distinction of social class is removed as the audience sees into the family's American home. There are no Haitian servants, only an increasingly multicultural, yet white, family.

[58] Alvarez, 4.

The youngest García girl, Sofia, in a rebellion against her parents, falls in love with a German man while in Columbia. She not only rejects a relationship with a Dominican man as her parents desire, but she infuriates her father by sleeping with Otto outside of the sanctity of marriage; it is an act of revolt against her family, religion, and culture. Even though their relationship is a source of tension in the family, it also provides one of the greatest sources of happiness – the family's first son in two generations – a child who is especially important to Carlos García:

> During his two visits the grandfather had stood guard by the crib all day, speaking to little Carlos. 'Charles the Fifth: Charles Dickens: Prince Charles.' He enumerated the names of famous Charleses in order to stir up genetic ambition in the boy, 'Charlemagne,' he cooed at him also, for the baby was large and big-boned with blond fuzz on his pale pink skin, and blue eyes just like his German grandfather's. All the grandfather's Caribbean fondness for a male heir and for fair Nordic looks had surfaced. There was now good blood in the family against a future bad choice by one of its women.[59]

The grandfather invokes famous Europeans of their namesake to inspire "genetic ambition," a reference to the family's relationship to the European conquistadors. Where on the Island that heritage is enough to gain social status, in America the physical representation of that blood is even more important to ensure acceptance in a community. The implication at the end of Alvarez's description is that Carlos has inherited the Dominican conceptions of race which values European whiteness, whereas his daughters embrace a broader notion of racial identity. One of them makes a "bad choice" in the future, a suggestion that she creates a family outside of that racial hegemony.

One of the reasons the girls seek to resist the racial construction of identity is because of their own struggles against Dominican patriarchal culture. The machismo that defined Trujillo's regime still slips into their American lives, decades after his fall. During the birthday party they hold for their father, the García girls imagine his thoughts: "Everyone one in this room would

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[59] Ibid, 26-27.

survive him, even the silly men in the band who seemed like boys ... Where were the world's men anymore? Every last one of his sons-in-law was a kid; he could see that clearly. Even Otto, the famous scientist, was a school-boy with a pencil doing his long division."[60] For Carlos there is a loss of masculinity in their new landscape and a diminishing of his identity; the older he gets and the more his daughters take care of him, the patriarchy he is familiar with transforms into matriarchy. His daughters represent a new generation that has broken away from the Dominican narrative he still believes faithfully in. From the time the García girls enter the United States during their impressionable youth, their identities have been the subject of cultural and familial expectations, but in their new home the sisters find space to resist Trujillo's narrative.

Reflecting on their youth, the girls remember theirs as strictly defined by their parents. The story's third chapter mirrors the broader shape of the novel as each daughter's identity is condensed into a singular, fragmented memory by which their mother defines them. During their childhood the girls were treated by their mother as a collective unit: she "devised the color code to save time. With four girls so close in age, she couldn't indulge identities and hunt down a red cowboy shirt when the third daughter turned tomboy or a Mexican peasant blouse when the oldest discovered her Hispanic roots."[61] The plan Julia García created was the best way for her to maintain a sense of order in the chaos of dislocation. From their adult perspectives, however, the girls view these methods as harmful to their understanding of themselves. As Americans they have embraced an individualism denied to them in their youth. They found no way to express their identities in the ways that have so meaningfully shaped their Dominican culture – whether responding to hyper-masculinity or attempting to embrace a cultural heritage. Even the manner of reflection suggests the absence of identity; it is the "third daughter" that wanted to be

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[60] Ibid, 36.
[61] Ibid, 41.

a tomboy, not Yolanda. Their names, which are critical for the audience to distinguish and follow the many narrative voices, are denied a physical representation. As Alvarez reveals, the concern the sisters have over that physical appearance makes their bodies representative of identity conflict.

As the chapter continues, Alvarez describes the fears and hardships of the García girls as a result of the struggle to identify in a community. When she was younger Yolanda began to lose her hair due to nerves – a fact that she attempted to keep hidden even from her partner: "the lover knew Yolanda would not have wanted him to know about this indelicacy of her body. She didn't even like to pluck her eyebrow in his presence."[62] She tries to control not only the physical maintenance of her body and identity but the presentation of it as well. Even when Yolanda is intimate with her partner she cannot reveal herself: "an immediate bathrobe after her bath. Lights out when they made love." [63] Yolanda struggles to reconcile her rejection of the Dominican objectification of woman and American feminist notions of sexual liberation; her body is the site of this insecurity and cultural conflict. Like her sister, Sandra too suffers physically from the competing expectations of her communities.

Unlike Yolanda, Sandra experiences a mental breakdown which places her in the hospital. Physically, Sandi has an eating disorder that results from a compulsive personality. Her mother explains, "Sandi wanted to look like those twiggy models. She was a looker, that one, and I guess it went to her head."[64] Their mother suggests that the outside pressure on Sandi is too much, when in actuality the conflict is much more internal: "Sandi got the fine looks, blue eyes, peaches and ice cream skin, everything going for her! … But imagine, spirit of contradiction, she

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[62] Ibid, 48.
[63] Ibid., 48.
[64] Ibid., 51-52.

wanted to be darker complected like her sisters."[65] Out of all the García girls Sandra fit the racial and beauty standards of the world around her, but it made her the outsider in her family, the community dearest to her. When she is hospitalized, Sandra believes she was turning into a monkey, expelled from the human race. Alvarez is ambiguous about whether the Dominican or the American part of Sandra is more human, but she does argue that being a part of a community is an essential human need. For Sandra, Yolanda, Carla, and Sofia, identity conflicts result from the tensions that navigating their cultural, familial, and national communities produces.

As in Alvarez's text, family heritage is a fundamental way that the characters in *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* identify themselves. Oscar may be the titular character, but the narrative structure Díaz employs focuses on each member of the de Leon family, revealing them as the story progresses. In the first chapter of *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the narrator introduces Oscar as the "un-Dominican," distancing him from the expectations of his cultural heritage. Oscar is marked as an outsider to his community because of his distinct lack of machismo: "except for one period in his life, dude never had much luck with the females."[66] Dominican hyper-masculinity is pervasive in Paterson, New Jersey, as even young boys are applauded for their "game." Oscar was one of those boys, and "in those days he was (still) a 'normal' Dominican boy raised in a 'typical' family, his nascent pimp-liness was encouraged by blood and friends alike."[67] The narrator makes it evident that Oscar is no longer considered normal; Oscar's lack of success, even in the performance of Dominican identity, make him an unrecognizable figure to his family and community. Díaz makes it clear, then, that his character will be unfamiliar not only to a non-Dominican audience, but also to those who completely buy

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[65] Ibid., 52.
[66] Díaz, 11.
[67] Ibid., 11.

into the narrative of Dominicanness. Oscar's identity makes it impossible for him to be a part of either community, and, as an audience, we cannot rely on stereotypes to define his experience.

With the removal of a hyphen, Oscar's "pimp-liness" becomes pimpliness - a more accurate description of the young man during his adolescence. He was the neighborhood "pariguayo," a term that Díaz ensures that all of his audience will understand in the footnote he provides: "the pejorative pariguayo, Watchers agree, is a corruption of the English neologism 'party-watcher.'"[68] Oscar is an outsider, in both Spanish and English. He could not play dominoes or ball, he had no rhythm, and "no hustle, no rap, no G," nothing that would allow him to join the party[69]: "Most damning of all: [he had] no looks. He wore his semi-kink hair in a Puerto Rican afro, rocked enormous Section 8 glasses ... sported an unappealing trace of mustache on his upper lip and possessed a pair of close-set eyes that made him look somewhat retarded."[70] Oscar's physical appearance makes the performance of his role impossible and he is condemned to life on the outside of what would seem to be his organic community; but his hair is described as "Puerto Rican," disinheriting him from the Dominican community. Oscar's search over the course of his brief and wondrous life to discover to the community, geographically and culturally, that he can identify with becomes how Díaz suggests we should understand ourselves in a social context.

Rather than identify with Dominican culture, Oscar de Leon more comfortably finds himself engrossed in "nerd culture." Oscar loves "the Genres" - science fiction, fantasy, comic books, and role play - and "in these pursuits alone Oscar showed the genius his grandmother insisted was part of the family patrimony."[71] His accomplishments meant he "could write in

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[68] Ibid., 19.
[69] Ibid., 20.
[70] Ibid,. 20.
[71] Ibid., 21.

Elvish, could speak Chakobsa, could differentiate between a Slan, a Dorsai, and a Lensman in acute detail, knew more about the Marvel Universe than Stan Lee, and was a role-playing game fanatic."[72] Oscar's fluency in these very specific worlds is especially notable because they cross cultural boundaries; Tolkien's Elvish, in particular, is rooted in the European literary tradition. This knowledge is essentially useless in connecting to his community, but as a writer Oscar relies on these vocabularies to communicate with his audience. Oscar is not limited by strict cultural borders. Instead he comes to represent the possibilities that transcending geographic, cultural, racial, and even temporal boundaries produces, and Díaz's understanding of self-conception comes to reject those labels.

When the narrator declares that Oscar, "couldn't have passed for Normal if he'd wanted to," Díaz includes a footnote that explicitly addresses Oscar's love of sci-fi. "It might have been the consequence of being Antillean," he suggests, referring to the heritage of voodoo on Hispaniola, but he also attributes this passion to the difficult relocation between the Dominican Republic and New Jersey: "a single green card shifting not only worlds (from Third to First) but centuries (from almost no TV or electricity to plenty of both)."[73] Díaz recognizes and emphasizes the disparities between the two landscapes he has moved through and which his characters continue to navigate. The differences between the United States and the Dominican Republic were established in their parallel histories; most significantly where the U.S. became a stable democratic republic, the Dominican Republic was plagued with political instability and occupation. This divergence in their colonial histories has produced competing effects on those who occupy each landscape

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[72] Ibid., 21.
[73] Ibid., 21-22.

In the United States, a nation founded on ideals of liberty and equality, there is supposedly a commitment to racial egalitarianism, while authoritarian dictatorships in the Dominican Republic have created strict racial hierarchies. These different conceptions of racial understanding complicate Díaz's characters' racial identities. When Oscar goes to Rutgers, the state university of New Jersey, "the white kids looked at his black skin and his afro and treated him with inhuman cheeriness. The kids of color, upon hearing him speak and seeing him move his body, shook their heads. You're not Dominican."[74] The "inhuman" quality of his reception by the school's white majority suggests a form of falsity in their behavior; it is not an authentic cheeriness, but rather a forced friendliness that they perform in order to satisfy the expectations of multiculturalism. On the other hand, the dissonance between Oscar's physical appearance as a member of a minority community and his total lack of relationship to its members externalizes him from all communities built upon racial considerations. In the same way that Díaz uses Oscar's lack of machismo to deny expectations, his understanding of race subverts another way we would attempt to define these characters.

In Oscar's family he is not alone in his experiences of racial and cultural displacement, as his older sister Lola often finds herself subject to discriminations based on race. When she is fourteen years old, Lola spends thirteen months living in the Dominican Republic after she runs away from home. There Lola faces resistance from those around her. The Dominican Republic did not welcome her home as it did the García girls: "if you think it was tough being a goth in Paterson, try being a Dominican York in one of those private schools back in DR. You will never meet bitchier girls in your whole life."[75] Díaz makes evident that the Dominican Republic is not a safe haven; rather, like the United States, it is a place that upholds specific values at the

[74] Ibid., 49.
[75] Ibid., 71.

expense of others. In the Dominican Republic, Lola's identity as hybrid "Dominican York" made her an outsider to those of a unified national heritage. This is a consequence of biculturalism, one that Díaz is critical of as he continues to explore what it means to embody many things.

The creation of community in Lola's experience ignores racial identification all together. Throughout the entire text Díaz makes it plain that Oscar, Lola, and their mother Beli all have black skin, a sign in the Dominican Republic of lower socio-economic status, or, even worse, according to the Trujillo-narrative, Haitian. When Lola, who ran on her Dominican school's track team, began to lose her races because of an unsettling "bruja feeling," she attracted the negative attention of her competitors: "You ain't so great, are you, gringa, the girls on the other teams hissed at me and I could only hang my head."[76] Even though Lola had dark skin, by the standards of the United States and the Dominican Republic, these Dominican girls consider her a "gringa," a pejorative usually reserved to describe white, English-speaking outsiders. In Díaz's writing, racial classifications become an unreliable descriptor of physical appearance as he seeks to prove the ineffectiveness of these labels in the construction of community.

In the second section of *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Díaz introduces the narrator of the text as Yunior - Lola's friend and Oscar's roommate. His descriptions of the characters throughout the text reveal the dichotomies of their identities, and Lola in particular confuses his notions of what a woman should be. He says expressly, "like the fucking opposite of the girls I usually macked on."[77] Physically, Lola, "almost six feet tall and no tetas at all and darker than your darkest grandma," interested Yunior – an apparent insider of the Dominican community in New Jersey. Lola was "one of those overachiever chicks who run all the

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[76] Ibid., 74.
[77] Ibid., 168.

organizations in college and wear suits to meetings. Was the president of her sorority, the head of S.A.L.S.A. and co-chair of Take Back the Night. Spoke perfect stuck-up Spanish." [78] Like Oscar, Lola's pursuits place her on the outside of Dominican cultural identity - a realization that inspires the question of who determines and constructs identity. However, where Oscar is utterly incapacitated by his non-cohesive identity, Lola finds ways of operating in both the majority and minority communities, both in the United States and the Dominican Republic. Unlike her brother and much like her mother, Lola rejects romantic notions of the world and defines herself without consideration of cultural expectations.

From her birth Belicia de Leon was alone. Her father died in one of Trujillo's secret prisons, perhaps La Cuarenta or Kilometer Nine. Her two older sisters died suspiciously. And her apocalyptic fearing mother committed suicide. For the first nine years of her life Beli lived on her own until her aunt, La Inca, found her and "filed the paperwork to give the girl an identity."[79] Beli was so completely displaced in her childhood that her entire identity had been erased from public record. La Inca's paperwork formally recognizes the girl as part of the community even though it never embraces her. As the daughter of a well-respected doctor, Beli received a scholarship to attend one of the best public schools in the village. However, "putting her darkskinned media-campesina ass in a tony school where the majority of the pupils were the white-skinned children of the regime's top ladronazos turned out to be a better idea in theory than in practice."[80] Out of place in her new circumstances, Beli's black skin and rural class heritage made her inferior to every other student in the school, and she became defensive and aggressive because of that: "it wasn't like *In the Time of the Butterflies*, where a kindly Mirabal Sister steps up and befriends the poor scholarship student. No Miranda here: everybody shunned

[78] Ibid., 168.
[79] Ibid., 257.
[80] Ibid., 82-83.

her."[81] Díaz continues to highlight the trauma Beli faces in the Dominican Republic and at the hands of her peers. Díaz also takes issue with Alvarez's portrayal of the Dominican Republic in this moment; he sees that Dominicans are equally as capable of racism and discrimination and that the Island does not foster undivided identities. All of Díaz's characters are at odds with expectations placed on them by their Dominican and American communities as he continues to wrestle with the question of what that belonging should mean.

For novels that have so much to do with the contemporary life of Dominicans in America, history, both the national and the personal, reveals the greater context of the challenges each character faces. In the explication of those conflicts we find the potential for both understanding and recognition. *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* and *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* preserve the experience of identity conflict and encourage the recognition of the identities derived from it. The García and de Leon families suffered during the Trujillo era, which includes the transplantation of their lives to a landscape that was geographically, culturally, and linguistically different. In new spaces miscommunication and misunderstanding threaten our sense of security and allow for the greater possibility of identity misrecognition. Charles Taylor argues that our identity is equally shaped "by recognition or its absence" and "often by the *mis* recognition of others ... Non recognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false distorted and reduced mode of being."[82] For families like the Garcías and the de Leons, violence defines the experience of dislocation – psychologically and physically. These experiences stem, partly, from the misrecognition of their identities in foreign landscapes. Yolanda and Oscar both lead lives of misrecognition: "Yolanda, nicknamed *Yo* in Spanish, misunderstood *Joe* in English, doubled and

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[81] Díaz, 83; Díaz references Miranda from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.
[82] Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 27.

pronounced like the toy, *Yoyo* – or when forced to select from a rack of personalized key chains, *Joey*."[83] Her name misheard and mistranslated leaves Yolanda disconnected from the community around her because they do not recognize the name that defines her. Oscar, too, is misheard by those closest to him: when Yunior cannot understand him Oscar complains, "I said *copacetic*. Everybody, he shook his head, misapprehends me."[84] All of his life Oscar struggles to be understood, and that is why he writes. That is also why Yolanda writes. Both Yolanda and Oscar, like Alvarez and Díaz, use the vocabularies of their experience to express their misrecognition and reclaim their identities.

Taylor's *Politics of Recognition* describes the historical development of identity in relationship to authenticity and the creation of the self. Social hierarchies once served only a privileged class, but they have given way to a more universalist belief in egalitarianism. As dignity became accessible to all men and women, Taylor argues that every individual also valued the need to have their authentic-self recognized.[85] Authenticity, "the displacement of the moral accent," according to Taylor, "comes about when being in touch with our feelings takes on an independent and crucial moral significance. It comes to be something we have to attain if we are to be true and full human beings."[86] The moral accents to which he refers were once found in God or the form of Good, but "now the source we have to connect with is deep within us. This fact is part of the massive subjective turn of modern culture, a new inwardness, in which we come to think of ourselves as beings with inner depths."[87] Every individual's unique sense of self, which Taylor argues we find internally, is shaped by our personal history and our cultural history, by our family values, and how we choose to navigate those inner depths in order to

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[83] Alvarez, 68.
[84] Díaz, 189.
[85] Taylor, 27.
[86] Ibid., 28.
[87] Ibid., 29.

discover and establish truth; the authentic self, in turn, shapes how we view and engage in the world around us.

The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao and *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* were written, published, and marketed as fictional works, but those familiar with the authors can quickly note the autobiographical strains which influence them. Alvarez and Díaz carefully draw upon the violence of their national history and personal experiences to define the harsh landscapes of their settings, assuming the challenge of translating how their lives are both the Dominican experience and the American experience. In Taylor's language, they pursue the depiction of the authentic self through their own projects and their character's identities as authors. The way in which Alvarez and Díaz accomplish the construction of the García girls and Oscar and Lola demands that the audience reconsider how cultural, racial, and gender labels are used to define communities. A fully realized identity legitimizes the resolution of identity conflicts and allows, in literary terms, for a complete narrative to be written.

Literary critic Kelli Johnson notes that "in the postmodern world, 'identity is literally unthinkable without narrative,' and narrative, like identity is a process, a becoming a performance."[88] Every individual narrative thread represents a recognized identity. Alvarez acknowledges her characters as the product of multiple cultures, while Díaz creates a world independent of them all. The weaving together of these narratives – the overlapping, the supporting, and even contradicting – creates the story of a more inclusive community.

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[88] Johnson, xix.

Chapter 3: Imaging Community in a Bicultural Context

As the strands of identity come together to create a complete yet malleable narrative– perpetually producing new ideas – the intersections of these narratives provides the framework of community by creating stories of people connected by some common thread: they may speak the same language, or live in the same neighborhood, come from the same hometown, or live by the same values. These are the powerful relationships which foster social interaction and interpersonal engagement. The sense of friendship and concern communities share among each other encourages citizenship, a conception defined by active participation in political, social, and cultural dialogue.

In their novels, Alvarez and Díaz recognize the relationship between identity and community as their characters find themselves split between two competing worlds. Carla, Sandra, Yolanda, Sofia, Oscar, and Lola physically move between the landscapes of the Dominican Republic and the United States. In each place constructions of gender, race, and social class are firmly established, and the García girls and the de Leon family represent the contact and conflict between those communities. However, as history demonstrates, that contact is inevitable. The United States occupation of the Dominican Republic introduced the American and Dominican communities to one another in a political context, but Trujillo's authoritarian rule, which forced many Dominicans to leave their country, guided many Dominicans to the United States in an attempt to create more secure, stable, and prosperous communities.

The García family moved to the United States after the family patriarch, Carlos, participated in a failed attempt to remove Trujillo from power. Belicia Cabral, the mother of Oscar and Lola, moved to the United States, alone, after years of being rejected by her homeland. The historical origins that propel each narrative begin in different geographic and psychic

locations, but lead the characters of each novel to the same place – a tenuous space in which they must recreate themselves and their communities. In *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, Alvarez explores the middle-space between two cultures and the give-and-take which defines integration. The García sisters explore how their identities adapt to their new landscape, and they participate in conscious revolutions to reorganize their world. Alvarez imagines an America where the García girls have the autonomy to define themselves. Díaz, on the other hand, idealizes an unbounded space and definition of community in *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Oscar and Lola, who consistently find themselves on the outside of all communities, are part of Díaz's effort to broaden the definition of America to include Dominican, American, and Dominican-American values. Alvarez and Díaz, despite their different goals, operate in the same political context of multiculturalism as they use literature to demonstrate what their conceptions of community mean for those living in a bicultural world.

David Miller addresses the political nature of citizenship in his essay "Immigrants, Nations, and Citizenship." Miller's theory, which broadly addresses immigration in western liberal democracies, prescribes a quasi-contractual relationship between an entering immigrant group and their receiving national community regarding the rights and obligations of each group. Miller's argument originates from the increasingly challenging nature of immigration as a result of "the conception of the nation-state as a culturally self-determining political community" and "the rise of global culture."[89] Miller suggests a nation-state attempts to protect its political community by reinforcing its national territorial boundaries against external cultural influence. As he attempts to operate in these bounded definitions of nationhood, Miller asserts a theory of citizenship which accepts an inherent relationship between a political and cultural community. National interests of receiving nations to protect their culture and of immigrants who also seek to

[89] David Miller, "Immigrants, Nations, and Citizenship," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 16, no. 4 (2008): 375.

preserve their own culture in the face of external pressures complicate the state's commitment to equal citizenship. Preserving both national and individual cultures becomes a challenge that involves the state in "the defence and reproduction" of culture in attempts to control its borders.[90] Integration, then, becomes the foundation of a political policy which attempts to reconcile these notions of culture.

Literary scholar Wai Chee Dimock questions what it means to refer to literature as "American" in her essay "Deep Time: Literature and World History." Dimock criticizes the assumption that geographical space can be used to define literary causality and how that definition pervades all aspects of life.

> Physical space, in this paradigm, is endlessly reinscribed in other spheres of life: it becomes a political, entity, an economic entity, a cultural entity. All of these are its replica; all warrant the use of the adjective *American*. There is a kind of causal chain gang at work here. We assume that there is a perfect fit, a seamless correspondence, between geographical boundaries of the nation and of all its other operative domains.[91]

When spaces are nationalized they are also detached from their surrounding world, and Dimock argues that spheres of influence cannot be isolated, despite our attempts to organize the world into temporal and geographical periods. She uses literature to demonstrate how geographically wide and temporally deep influence can be: how influence transcends national borders. When we view physical space in the way she describes, Miller's prescription of a reciprocal contract is necessary in order to define citizenship in specific political and cultural terms. As political leaders attempt to negotiate rights and obligations that will allow two clashing communities to unite under one national identity, the dialogues that authors like Alvarez and Díaz participate in address those same concerns of citizenship. They allow their audience to experience crossing boundaries, both geographically and temporally, as they imagine the potential of community.

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[90] Ibid., 375.
[91] Wai Chee Dimock, "Deep Time: American Literature and World History," *American Literary History* 13, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 755.

The construction of community in *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* and *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is accomplished through Alvarez and Díaz's recognition of the differences between political and cultural citizenship. Carla, Sandra, Yolanda, Sofia, Oscar, and Lola are Dominican-American characters struggling to identify themselves in dual American and Dominican context, and Alvarez and Díaz use national landscapes representing political community in order to understand the significance of each geographic location. Alvarez discusses the Dominican Republic and the United States as distinct worlds; one represents the past and one represents the future. The girls, despite their conflicting identities, fully belong in the American landscape at the beginning of *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, and Alvarez's narrative reveals the process of their integration. Díaz, on the other hand, understands the United States as a necessary place for his characters. The Dominican Republic is ultimately limiting and there is potential for inclusivity in the United States. Both authors grapple with questions of what it means to be Dominican-American as they imagine community for their characters.

Alvarez's narration of the García girls' political entrance to the United States begins with feelings of uncertainty and the complications of Dominican citizenship: "For three-going on four years Mami and Papi were on green cards, and the four of us shifted from foot to foot, waiting to go home. Then Papi went down for a trial visit, and a revolution broke out, a minor one, but still."[92] For several years, the García girls and their parents lived with a temporary sense of belonging, never willing to fully commit to a political or cultural contract that would completely alter their lives. The unease that persisted in the absence of decision mirrors the political instability of the Dominican Republic during the 1960's in the post-Trujillo nation. Trujillo's revolution and reign forcibly defined Dominican identity and, through its sheer longevity,

[92] Alvarez, 107.

brought stability to the nation. But Trujillo's revolution also forced the García de la Torre family from the island into a new world after their father participated in an attempt to topple the dictator; with such a shaken and displaced sense of home, the family's return would hinge on the restoration of a national community that they could share in and protect them.

The green cards that the girls' parents kept for years represent their hope that stability would return to the Dominican Republic and show that they intended to return once security had been established. If the Dominican Republic stabilized, the García de la Torre family could return to the geographical space of their cultural and national identity. However, as violence persisted and the revolution continued, the girls come to understand that there could be no going back: their identity must be reimagined in an American context. When he returns from the Dominican Republic, the girls recall how their father "came back to New York reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, and saying 'I am giving up, Mami! It is no hope for the Island, I will become *un dominican-york*.' So, Papi raised his right hand and swore to defend the Constitution of the United States, and we were here to stay."[93] Carlos García declares his individual loss of faith in the Dominican Republic, but his pronouncement has implications for the entire family. The Constitution is invoked, as a symbol of the American political identity, as one man's decision influences an entire community of people – much like Trujillo's reign controlled the entire nation. The patriarchy that has culturally dominated the sisters' lives from the moment they were born also politically determines their national identity, and throughout the novel Alvarez will use the metaphor of revolution to demonstrate the sisters' sense of belonging.

The description of Carlos García's return from the Dominican Republic to the United States presents the tension between these two sites of citizenship that return frequently throughout the novel as Alvarez identifies what each location can signify: "It is no hope for the

[93] Ibid., 107.

Island, I will become *un dominican-york*." The Dominican Republic becomes the point of departure, a place in the past, while the United States represents the setting with the potential for becoming something new. Carlos García can reclaim his Dominicanness outside the Trujillo regime and narrative he sought to undermine. In New York he would not be a new man, but an "un dominican" one. He expresses the transformation as an undoing rather than creation, an erasing of the Trujillo-constructed parts of his Dominican identity and citizenship. The Dominican Republic clearly remains a location of importance as Alvarez capitalizes "the Island," recognizing it as a place of permanence and memory outside of national labels. The United States, however, presents the possibility of rewriting the Trujillo narrative which is particularly important to the daughters of this revolution.

Belicia Cabral is one of those daughters as well, born into the political and social turmoil of the revolution at the end of Trujillo's regime. She represents in many ways the disjointed identities of Díaz's characters in *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,* which serves to highlight the dissonance they experience between their authentic selves and the conflicting expectations of Dominicanness. Unlike the García girls, however, the de Leon family do not escape instability and suffer from violence, especially on the Island. The family is not descended from the conquistadors like the Garcías, but rather, as the references to their black skin suggest, the de Leons are a part of the African Diaspora, a population brought to Hispaniola by violence and then repressed by Dominican culture as outside the narrative of Dominicanness. In a nation where European heritage has been institutionalized since the colonization, the de Leon family are vulnerable outsiders from the start.

Díaz understands the violence which extends through the history of the de Leon family as a consequence of their position outside of the Dominican community; Oscar and Lola's

grandfather is arrested and sent to one of Trujillo's secret prisons, and their mother Belicia is nearly beaten to death in the cane fields of the Dominican Republic. It is after this last event, which was caused by and resulted in the death of her first child, that served as the impetus for Beli's departure from the Dominican Republic: "Her whole life she had tried to be happy, but Santo Domingo ... FUCKING SANTO DOMINGO had foiled her at every turn. I never want to see it again."[94] Santo Domingo inspires anger in Beli, and leaving it is an escape that presents the opportunity for happiness. The Dominican Republic, from its creation, has excluded Beli and everywhere she attempts to reroot herself in the landscape of her birth she is rebuffed. She has exhausted every possibility for happiness in that country. The United States is then the landscape that presents the potential for community.

Díaz never addresses the United States in the political terms that Alvarez invokes in her novel; Beli's citizenship is never discussed and there are no moments where the characters recognize themselves as members of a political community. Even in the Dominican Republic Díaz's characters never engage politics directly, though they remain connected to Trujillo's inescapable network. When Beli leaves the Dominican Republic and enters the United States there is an absence of what that national identity means and there is no moment of transition. The closest she comes to directly addressing the meaning of her new geographic location is during the activity of her passage between the two nations: "and then the boarding and the preflight chitchat from the natty dude on her right, four rings on his hands - Where are you going? Never-never land, she snapped."[95] The relationship she establishes with those who are also entering a new community, specifically the man who would father Lola and Oscar, is antagonistic, and yet she continues to reveal complicated notions of hope. "Never-never land," a

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[94] Díaz, 163.
[95] Ibid., 163.

reference to *Peter Pan,* is a literary construction of escapism, immortality, and happiness, while the literal interpretation of her language expresses a space of negation. Like Carlos' unbecoming, Beli's entrance to the United States is marked with the potential for recreation as she denies the Dominican Republic and calls upon an imaginative vision of the future.

Despite her lack of engagement with a national community, Beli does not reject community altogether during her journey to her new home: "On the plane there were other First Wavers. Many waters waiting to become a river. Here she is, closer now to the mother we will need her to be if we want Oscar and Lola to be born."[96] Yunior creates a community between himself and his audience based upon their investment in Oscar and Lola's story, and Beli is a part of that because she is at the narrative's origin. She represents the formation of a community across narrative lines and beyond geographical borders. Reflectively, the narrator understands Beli's place among the men and women like her - the first wave of immigrants - who sought and continue to seek out opportunity. As individuals their lives would come together and be intertwined in "a river," the narrative of the immigrant experience in America.

Where Alvarez represents the moment of transition between the Dominican Republic and the United States as one essentially related to national identity and community, Díaz refrains from defining which communities are being left and which are being entered - ominous for its uncertainty, but hopeful for its potential. The nationalization of community is not central for his characters as they simultaneously exist in both. Alvarez and Díaz, however, continue to construct community in their respective novels by recognizing the fluidity of geographical borders in the conception of community. The first critical entrance from the Dominican Republic to the United States does not occur chronologically first in either novel; these moments are tucked into the center of the text allowing the audience to understand the continuous relationship between these

[96] Ibid., 164.

two sites of citizenship. In Julie Barak's article, Barak cites Roberto Gonzalez Echeverria's description of Hispanic-Americans' relationship to their home nations: they have

> old countries that are neither old nor remote. Even those born here often travel to their parents' homeland, and constantly face a flow of relatives from 'home' who keep the culture. This constant cross-fertilization makes assimilation a more complicated process for them than other minority groups. [97]

The relatively close geographical distance between the Dominican Republic and the United States, on a global scale, allows for the convenience of movement between two grounding landscapes which represent both a political and cultural home. The "cross-fertilization" of cultures increases the Dominican spirit in America but also emphasizes Americanness in the Dominican Republic.

As Alvarez begins the second section of the novel about the girls' adolescence, the moment in which the García de la Torre family accepts political citizenship to the United States is narrated by all four daughters. Their collective memory directly challenges the notion of individual citizenship through their united voices. The end of the chapter "A Regular Revolution," which contains the particular memory of the family's migration, concludes with the sisters coming home from the Dominican Republic, Fifi against her will: "we look at each other as if to say, 'She'll get over it.' Meaning Manuel, meaning her fury at us, meaning her fear of her own life. Like ours, it lies ahead of her like a wilderness just before the first explorer sets foot on the virgin sand."[98] The "we" and "ours" employed by the sisters works in the same way as Yunior's "we," connecting them to their audience and a larger community. Throughout *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, Alvarez allows these sisters to share their intrinsic memory and experience with one another while also including the reader in these moments in order to create community across narrative lines. An audience from a Dominican or Caribbean heritage can

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[97] Barak, 160.
[98] Alvarez, 132.

identify with the García sisters, while those unfamiliar with this memory can begin to share and recognize the shared virtues necessary to create community. And in what follows, the sisters are able to collectively piece together the cultural assault upon them during their assimilation in New York which affects their relationship to their new community.

"We didn't feel we had the best the United States had to offer," the García girls plainly state once the decision had been made to stay in the United States.[99] In the Dominican Republic the Garcías lived on a large compound, surrounded by their extended family with every comfort they could imagine. In America everything is second-hand or second choice and "cooped up in those little suburban houses, the rules were as strict as for Island girls, but there as no island to make up the difference."[100] There is a sense of confinement in the girls' childhoods even though America represents the promise of freedom and opportunity; virtues which seem unavailable to the sisters upon their entrance to America. They were living a Dominican life except without the greatest consolation - the Island. Hispaniola is a beautiful Caribbean island and picturesque for the Garcías who were allowed a life of privilege there, a drastic contrast from their "second-hand" life in the United States. American citizenship immediately places the García girls outside of their comfort zone and forces them to adapt their expectations of what life should be.

The shift in perspective occurs more readily when the girls are sent to private school after their parents decide they are not meeting the appropriate sort of American youth. At their new school, a train ride away from their home in New York City, the girls finally met "the right kind of Americans all right, but they didn't exactly mix with us."[101] The girls at their boarding school - "the Hoover girls and the Hanes twins and the Scott girls and the Reese kid" - are part of

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[99] Ibid., 107.
[100] Ibid., 107.
[101] Ibid., 108.

affluent and influential American families that derive their power from the capitalist culture. [102] The economic power of these families compares to the status of the Garcías in the Dominican Republic, but in their new landscape the García girls are denied by that comparable community. The daughters of these brand name families continue to extend cultural hegemony by excluding the García girls, defining and reinforcing who can be American. As the sisters struggle to find acceptance in American culture they learn the means of navigating citizenship.

Despite their lack of inclusion by their peers, the García girls find ways to explore America and practice the freedoms guaranteed by their nation, but denied by their parents, when they finally leave for boarding school. The distance between the girls and their home provides the literal space they need to figuratively understand the differences and potential of their new landscape. "It was a long train ride up to our prep school in Boston, and there *were* guys on that train. We learned to forge Mami's signature and went just about everywhere ... We began to develop a taste for the American teenage good life, and soon, Island was old hat, man."[103] As they continue to gather experiences, the sisters find independence from their family and the narrative of Dominican identity placed upon them. By forging their mother's signature, a first act of rebellion, the sisters resist a Dominican life in America; unlike their parents, these adolescent girls need to operate under the rules of their new community in order to partake in it. From the beginning they are rejected by their peers at school based upon their physical differences, so instead the García girls find themselves as a part of a community based on the experience of freedom.

Where the boarding school is described as the physical location of the sisters' introduction to an American community, the Island is constantly placed in opposition to their

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[102] Ibid., 108.
[103] Ibid., 108.

adolescent freedom. The longer and more deeply imbedded in America the girls become, the more their parents fear they have lost their daughters. They send the girls to spend summers on the Island to keep their ties immediate: "the hidden agenda was marriage to homeland boys, since everyone knew that once a girl married an American, those grandbabies came out jabbering in English and thinking of the Island as a place to go get a suntan."[104] There is a fear that the family unit and the community will fall apart the longer the girls are away from the Island, or, even worse, leave forever. For the Garcías, like many Dominican families, a physical connection to the Island and the act of participating in Dominican culture becomes the way through which they ensure they remain a part of it. Unlike their children, the older generation cannot as easily make a new life; their lives and identities are dependent on the landscape of the Island while their daughters' identities are not.

In addition to serving as a physical reminder of the girls' heritage and rooting them in tradition, the Dominican Republic is also understood as a punishment for the adolescent sisters. Each sister takes their turn breaking out and defying - revolting - against their parents, and when threatened with expulsion to the Island they would "shape up pretty quick, or pretend to. Sometimes the parents upped the ante. It wouldn't be just the bad daughter who'd be shipped back, but *all four girls.*"[105] At some point the Island became a prison for the girls with the constant family surveillance and strict rules. Carlos and Laura retained expectations of appropriate behavior for their daughters based on their lives in the Dominican Republic, and only returning to that geographic space would reinforce their rules. For the sisters, however, avoiding that forced crossing of borders became the preoccupation of their adolescence and they worked together to conceal their revolutions: they "had devised as sophisticated and complicated a code

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[104] Ibid., 109.
[105] Ibid., 109.

and underground system as Papi had when he and his group plotted against the dictator."[106] The girls' subversion of their parents is comparable to their father's political engagement; secrecy and solidarity allows Carla, Sandi, Yoyo, and Fifi to achieve the promised freedoms of the States. In comparison, the Dominican Republic becomes a place where those explorations, experimentation, and freedom are nonexistent and a place that in many ways moves backwards for the García girls. Quite literally, time regresses in the narrative and as they undo part of their identities to fit into that landscape.

Fifi, the youngest García girl, ends up spending an entire year living in the Dominican Republic as punishment after her mother finds a bag of marijuana hidden in their room. She had the choice between a year on the Island under the supervision of her aunts and cousins or returning home to attend public school under the watch of her parents. Fifi, who said she was not happy in the United States certainly did not want to live under the strict rules of her parents and decided that the Dominican Republic would be the lesser of two evils. However, when her sisters returned to the Dominican Republic to visit they found that she had changed completely; instead of resisting the pressures of the Island she accepted them: "'She's turned into a S.A.P.,' Yoyo mutters. A Spanish-American princess."[107] Fifi, who in the United States left her hair natural, had it curled perfectly in the Island style and she carried a patent leather purse to match her patent heels - Fifi, who stayed in the Dominican Republic to escape her mother, had become her mother. The sisters ultimately did everything they could to bring Sofia home, because Alvarez sees the harmful impact the past has on these modern women. While Alvarez asserts a construction of community which is unlimited – she would never make her characters choose only one – she also suggests there is more opportunity in the United States for her bicultural

[106] Ibid., 110.
[107] Ibid., 118.

characters. The challenge which remains, and that Alvarez exemplifies through the García girls, is an America which accepts the possibility of biculturalism.

In *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,* Lola shares an impulse with the García girls to escape her mother. In high school she ran away from her home to the Jersey shore so she could live with her boyfriend. After becoming jaded in her new found freedom, Lola reached out to Oscar and ultimately revealed herself to her family who found her and brought her home. Instead of returning to Paterson, however, Lola was sent to Santo Domingo: "I guess my mother thought it would be harder for me to run away from an island where I knew no one, and in a way she was right. I'm into my sixth month here and these days I'm just trying to be philosophical about the whole thing." [108] The freedoms that Lola embraced in the U.S. became so threatening to her mother and family unit that her mother sought to isolate her in the Dominican Republic. Like Fifi, Lola found happiness in Santo Domingo, and fourteen months later, when her mother came to bring her back to New Jersey, she did not want to leave.

Out of all the characters in the text, Lola always seems the most integrated in New Jersey: she supports Oscar and takes care of her family, she is accepted by the Dominican community in Paterson, and at Rutgers finds herself engaged in multiple communities like S.A.L.S.A. and Take Back the Night. She also, probably because of this, most easily imagines herself in other spaces because her identity is never predicated on her geographical location. When she calls Oscar from the Jersey shore she plans to convince him to run away with her: "My plan was that we would go to Dublin. I had met a bunch of Irish guys on the boardwalk and they had sold me on their country. I would become a backup singer for U2 ... and Oscar would become the Dominican James Joyce."[109] Lola places herself not only in an international context,

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[108] Díaz, 70.
[109] Ibid., 68.

but as an integrated member of international culture. Rather than feel limited by her national background and cultural identity, Lola embraces the similarities between the Dominican Republic and Ireland as colonized nations to understand how she can move through nationalized space. The comparison that Díaz employs deliberately highlights the connections between geographical spaces across time, while also diminishing the differences between them.

While Ireland was a dream of Lola's that reveals her desire to cross borders, she does successfully transition between communities. Yunior encounters Lola studying Japanese on the bus several years after they graduate from Rutgers, and she tells him that she is going to Japan to teach English. He questions her, "What the hell is a Dominican going out to Japan for?" to which Lola responds, "You're right, she said, turning the page irritably. Why would *anyone* want to go *anywhere* when they have *New Jersey*?" [110] Yunior's question implicitly suggests that national citizenship and cultural identity limits individuals to those particular spaces; in Yunior's understanding, Dominicans have a place in their community – for him Paterson – and their cultural home of the Dominican Republic. Japan, an island so far east, could not possibly be of interest or hold opportunity for a Dominican. Lola, however, rejects this understanding of community and belonging. For her, anyone can go anywhere and everyone belongs everywhere. Through Lola and her fluidity between borders, Díaz suggests a broader notion of citizenship and inclusivity. After Oscar's death, Yunior briefly mentions that Lola is living in Miami where she has met a man and they have a daughter. She continues to move freely through space as she sets an example for her daughter and future generations to understand the mutability of borders.

Even though Lola takes advantage of the porous boundaries between communities, Díaz does not underestimate the importance of the Dominican Republic and the appeal it has to displaced citizens: "Every summer Santo Domingo slaps the Diaspora engine into reverse, yanks

[110] Ibid., 197.

back as many of its expelled children as it can." [111] The description he provides suggests an inescapable and even forceful quality to the return to Santo Domingo. There is no choice for them and the Dominican community is one of permanence and longevity. When Oscar is in high school, he spends a summer in the Dominican Republic which alters him completely; after Oscar's return from the Dominican Republic, he does not return to his old relationships. He distances himself from his two closest friends, Al and Miggs, who he recently came to understand did not appreciate him as much as he did them: "overall they never regained the friendship they had before Santo Domingo. Oscar listened to their messages on the machine and resisted the urge to run over to their places."[112] Instead, Oscar focuses on his writing, lonely as it is, and it is in this process that he finds pride in himself. When his friends question his absence, he tells them that he is working on his fifth novel as he refuses to succumb "out of fear and loneliness" to their abuse. Before leaving the for the Dominican Republic, Oscar makes physical changes to his appearance, but after returning from the Island he brings the fortitude to embrace his identity, even if is outside of expectations. Back in the United States Oscar, "finally showed some backbone ... and although it hurt, it also felt motherfucking good" (Díaz 33). Oscar was able to develop this strength in Santo Domingo which he practiced in the United States as long as he believed that was the community he belonged in. After spending years unable to make himself accepted by any American community, Oscar returns to the Dominican Republic and feels the need to remain.

The Dominican Republic is the place where Oscar overcomes his insecurities and finds fortitude. It is also where he finds love, the emotional relationship he cares most about, elusive to him in Paterson. As a Dominican male, Oscar is expected to be a ladies' man, but the

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[111] Ibid., 272.
[112] Ibid., 32.

relationship he finds in the Dominican Republic is not about fulfilling expectations. Of course, he does not want to be the only Dominican to die a virgin, but Oscar's relationship with Ybón is important because he finally feels significant. Someone has reciprocated his feelings and he is part of a community: he "considered her the start of his *real* life." [113] Even though Díaz has already established the Dominican Republic as source of fantasy, that place is the most real for Oscar. While there is great joy for Oscar in this relationship, it also causes him suffering at the hands of Ybón's boyfriend, el Capitan. El Capitan is a member of the police, the modern day extension of Trujillo-Era violence, and Oscar is severely beaten by the Capitan's cronies, and then is killed when he returns for Ybón. Oscar's relationship with Ybón, however, allows Díaz to explore how Oscar views his communities.

When Oscar is beaten in the Dominican cane fields it is so terrible that he enters a coma; for three days he occupies a world which is neither the Dominican Republic nor the United States, and a world in which in no one can reach him. When Oscar wakes, he "returned home. He lay in bed, he healed." [114] Oscar does not get the chance to stay in the Dominican Republic like he planned; instead he is violently pushed away. Despite everything that happens to him, Oscar still understands his home as in the United States. This is the landscape and community which allows him to get better. When he fully recovers, Oscar returns to the Dominican Republic against the wishes of his family to be with Ybón and "take her back to the States." [115] The Dominican Republic provides Oscar the courage and capability to fall in love, but by bringing that relationship to the United States, Díaz acknowledges the fantastic quality of the Dominican Republic as too good to last. Oscar does return to his motherland one last time, and, in a final moment of courage in the cane field, he spoke out about his imagination of his

[113] Ibid., 279.
[114] Ibid., 306.
[115] Ibid., 318.

community: "over there he wouldn't be no fatboy or dork or kid no girl had ever loved; over there he'd be a hero, an avenger. Because anything you can dream (he put his hand up) you can be." [116] The characteristics that define him in the material world mean nothing when they are all equal in death. Over there, in the afterlife, Oscar imagines himself not only as part of a community, but the one who defends it. Even though the power which strengthens Oscar in the Dominican Republic makes him a hero in his imagination, Díaz seems to contend that sustaining that autonomy is impossible: it leads to death in the Dominican Republic. The landscape does not cultivate dreams. By contrast, the United States, while there was no place for Oscar while alive, can continue to be imagined as home because that is where his memory lives on.

After Oscar's death, the novel continues, but none of the characters return to the Dominican Republic: "Lola swore she would never return to that terrible country. On one of our last nights as novios she said, Ten million Trujillos is all we are." [117] Lola refers to the actual continuation of violence from the Era of Trujillo by the police and their continued acts of oppression. She also alludes to an idea that is inherently Dominican. Díaz's definition of Dominican is not bound to the Island and Lola also implicates everyone who denied Oscar a place of belonging; her contemptuous observation mirrors the real comment quoted earlier that "there is a little Trujillo in all of us."[118] The recognition of this violent influence is part of the memory that inextricably links Dominican-Americans.

Díaz's primary concern in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is the agency of the Dominican community as a whole. In an interview Díaz explains, "I'm just a lot more passionate about having a critical dialogue with my communities. Exposing white racism and white arrogance is important, but, if I don't criticize myself and my peoples, how are we ever

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[116] Ibid., 320.
[117] Ibid., 324.
[118] Wiarda, and Kryzanek, 20.

going to get better?"[119] Díaz understands how communities based on specific identities share a consciousness; as a part of an immigrant community, he appeals to their communal memory and experience of oppression in order to change the oppressive behavior that still permeates his community. Throughout *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Alvarez and Díaz implicitly and explicitly engage audiences in a dialogue that explores the possibilities of what community can be. Their challenges to the definitions of "American" and "Dominican" allow Alvarez and Díaz to employ Dimock's literary argument against nationalized space in their own imagination of community, and unlike the plan Miller proposes for integration, these authors reveal the reality that a migrating community faces.

In Lionel Trilling's *The Liberal Imagination* he explains "a culture is not a flow, more even a confluence; the form of its existence is struggle, or at least a debate - it is nothing if not a dialectic." [120] Dialogue has long been a part of the process in determining the course of leadership: Plato's *Symposium* is literally a discussion of society and ethics as they ought to be. Alvarez and Díaz converse with that tradition, with each other, and with their audiences; the origins of Alvarez and Díaz's leadership are their participation in the dialogue about biculturalism and immigration. When Díaz describes Beli's migration to the United States she is a part of "many waters waiting to become a river."[121] These waters represent both flow and struggle; like rapids, they are fluid and violent. Rivers are uncontrollable natural forces and the streams that comprise them cannot anticipate where they lead. Violence is a necessary part of the river's course, and so Beli and all those like her who stream into that river face it together as they form a community. The discourse that Díaz and Alvarez engage in is highly personal, because it

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[119] Diógenes Céspedes, Silvio Torres-Saillant, and Junot Díaz, "Fiction is the poor man's cinema: An interview with Junot Díaz," *Callaloo* 23, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 901.
[120] Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1950), 7.
[121] Díaz, 164.

is their own experience, and also imperative because "the rise of global culture" is not lessening anytime soon.

Chapter 4: Authorial and Narrative Leadership

Language and literature are creators of culture, cornerstones of the arts, and universal means of communicating experience. They are also a critical part of education and the liberal arts – the means by which leadership as a reciprocal process is most completely understood and practiced. Literary scholar Lionel Trilling describes literature as "a historical art" where the poet is also the historian, "recording and interpreting … personal, national, and cosmological events," in a condition causing art and history to become inseparable.[122] Authors, then, have power to inscribe meaning into their personal and national experiences; history remembers Ancient Greece through the texts of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, just as Emerson and Thoreau document the experience and condition of antebellum America. Julia Alvarez and Junot Díaz are contemporary Dominican-American authors who have experienced the violence and turmoil of dislocation and migration and translate it for a national audience. Their writing, deeply rooted in Dominican history, narrates the struggles inherited from the past and recreated in a new world. They engage in dialogue with each other and with their audience about what it means to be bicultural in America. The stories they tell may not be real, but they are very true. They do not record a specific experience, but rather the essence of many experiences: community.

In September of 2008 Díaz held a reading, which aired on NPR, during which he shared a selection from *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and addressed questions from the audience. One of the men who spoke near the end of the event introduced himself as a man from Texas who is married to a Dominican woman. He has four Dominican-American children. And they are "oddities" in their world; his thirteen year old, in particular, is going through difficult time. The entire family has found inspiration in Díaz's voice. The gentleman continued, commenting on traveling to the Dominican Republic, the racism that he witnessed there and in

[122] Trilling, 179.

the United States, and his humble understanding that relationships begin with love of individuals, not groups of people. At the end, he emotionally addressed Díaz: "having kids my question would be, do you see hope for it being any different?"[123] In a small bookstore in Washington D.C., an author was sought out for his leadership. The answer that Díaz provides is the same one that can be found in his writing.

The notion of authors as leaders is not new, and leadership scholars have addressed in a number of ways how literature serves the understanding of leadership. Frank Shushok and Scott Moore recognize in their 2010 article the value of "Great Texts" as a way of studying leadership; they argue that reading classic literary texts including Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Machiavelli's *The Prince*, and a number of Shakespeare's dramas can prepare students with "leadership skills in logic, rhetoric, analysis, interpretation and imagination," while also encouraging participation in "a type of cultural analysis that is helpful for traversing and translating leadership assumptions within an incredibly diverse and ever-growing global context."[124] These texts, according to Shushok and Moore, are inscribed with valuable moral lessons that with scrutiny and thought can be applied to current questions of leadership. The works of Alvarez and Díaz, despite their critical acclaim, do not rank among the "Great Texts" and do not have the historical significance of Aristotle or Shakespeare. These are contemporary authors who address the immediate issues related to navigating a bicultural world, which they have and continue to traverse; their insights allow Alvarez and Díaz to lead the discussion on the relevant and persistent issue of biculturalism. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* require the same invigorated cultural analysis given to

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[123] Junot Díaz, "Book Tour: Junot Díaz Reads from *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*," NPR, October 21, 2008.

[124] Frank Shushok, Jr. and Scott H. Moore, "Reading, Study, and Discussion of the 'Great Texts' of Literature, Philosophy, and Politics as a Compliment to Contemporary leadership Education Literature," *Journal of Leadership Studies* 3, no 4 (November 2010): 72.

the "Great Texts" in order to uncover what Alvarez and Díaz ultimately suggest about citizenship in that "ever growing global context."

In Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Said criticizes Western assumptions about Eastern civilizations produced by cross cultural interactions in a global context. He also addresses the notion of authority, describing it as "formed, irradiated, disseminated; it is instrumental, it is persuasive, it has status, it establishes canons of taste and value."[125] The canon of taste and value in Western culture – as it is currently understood, periodized and geographically bounded, beginning with Transcendentalism through Modernist, Post-Modern, and Contemporary fiction – is perpetuated primarily by white men of privilege. Authors with power have created literary worlds centered around white, masculine, and privileged characters that reflect their own identities, but which perpetuate the notion of "the Other" to define anyone outside of their community. Literature-in-culture works to determine social values, informs conceptions of social realities, and creates the foundation for stereotypes of those outside of the majority; with both positive and negative influences, culture remains a significant determining force in how individuals relate to those inside and outside their communities. Authors from outside of the cultural majority are able to contribute perspectives that create a more inclusive representation of Western communities; Alvarez and Díaz provide a new framework to understand, challenge, and change how we live together in a multicultural American context.

When it comes to authority, Alvarez and Díaz draw upon Dominican memory and experience to follow through with Said's critique: "[Authority] is virtually indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true, and from traditions, perceptions, and judgments it forms, transmits, reproduces. Above all, authority can, indeed must, be analyzed."[126] Said suggests that

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[125] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) 19.
[126] Said, 20.

authority is embedded in popular ideas, values, and perceptions, to the extent that they are accepted as truths despite being constructs of the majority. Cultural leadership, the leadership field that considers the direction and future of culture, then has the responsibility to interrogate hegemony, so that the established and accepted authority cannot continue to propagate unfair and potentially harmful cultural values. A more inclusive cultural understanding will help to promote more inclusive notions of citizenship, as well.

Alvarez and Díaz, in their challenge of textual authority, assume a form of power which serves to influence their audience. Authors and their works, as a part of a subversive cultural leadership, do not exercise a pure form of expert, referent, or moral power that most often appears in institutional positions of leadership. Rather, audiences embrace authors who inspire them and then revere these leaders who build trust upon their authenticity. Power is not expressly invoked by the author, but is implicitly accepted by the audience. Authors who write to challenge authority do not ask for the audience to believe their every word, but, when they do, the intention of an author's language will shape the reading of a work. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* concludes with Yolanda's memory of forcibly taking a kitten away from his mother, only to be haunted by that cat for the rest of her life. This fragment of Yolanda's experience could remain just that, a mistake and moment of sadness and fear, but when an audience accepts Alvarez's power, the story of that kitten is also the story of Yolanda – too soon taken from her motherland, leaving her lost and haunted.

Authorial power only resonates with an author's readership: those who have read their works and believe in their interpretations of reality. The greatest advantage authors cultivate through their leadership is a sense of trust among their followers. Trilling suggests that great authors are revered by audiences because of the honesty of their work: "In the American

metaphysics, reality is always material reality, hard, resistant, unformed, impenetrable, and unpleasant. And that mind is alone felt to be trustworthy which most resembles this reality by most nearly reproducing the sensations it affords."[127] Using language, authors create a textured world that reveals realities unmentioned and distant from popular media depictions. Alvarez and Díaz represent the landscape of multiculturalism, which we have already seen produces conflict as their characters confront the resistant reality Trilling describes. As they deconstruct authority, authors like Alvarez and Díaz appeal to followers because they provide their audience a new language to discuss social realities and actively participate in critical conversations.

The motivation behind the accepting the authority of an author comes from a combination of traditional forms of power. Authors are viewed as experts because their works have been printed; publishing houses, an institutional source of power, provide legitimacy to the texts. When an audience accepts an author, they also give him or her referent power which extends beyond the details of the narrative. The audience's admiration is a form of reverence which affords an author the possibility of spreading his or her vision. In addition, authors maintain a sense of moral power. Unlike the coercive and legitimate power dictators like Trujillo use to build a national narrative, an author's power creates questions that can challenge the authority of prevailing considerations. Questions remain a critical part of leadership because they reveal the faults of accepted narratives and prevent stagnation. Ultimately leadership is about change, and questions are critical in determining the course that change will take.

Novelists' narratives function as a unique form of leadership, independent of the author's authority, regardless of any autobiographical influences. Mikhail Bahktin, Russian philosopher and literary critic, made the compelling statement that "language ... lies on the borderline

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[127] Trilling, 11.

between oneself and other" in his essay "Discourse in the Novel."[128] As a form of communication, language is shaped by one individual and interpreted by others, but literature has the possibility of existing through time, even after the moment of its creation has passed. The ambiguity of a narration's origins leaves the work largely independent, and it maintains the authority of the author even as it stands alone. One of the challenges of adapting to manners and morals of a particular culture, according to Trilling, is "the half-uttered or unuttered or unutterable expressions of value."[129] These are not the rules that govern how we interact with one another or traditions that dictate order; "the unutterable expressions of value" are the assumptions we make to judge the world around us. Trilling addresses a certain unspoken cultural knowledge that is inherited and learned from experiencing a particular place. In Alvarez's novel she notes how the girls, in particular Yolanda, have difficulty understanding sexual and romantic relationships. Reflecting on a college experience, Yolanda confesses that she "didn't have a good excuse" for her failure: "it was the late sixties, and everyone was sleeping around as a matter of principle. By then, I was a lapsed Catholic [and] my sisters and I had been pretty well Americanized since our arrival in this country a decade before."[130] Yolanda lacked an inherited sense of value that would help her navigate her notions of what love should be and the realities of her relationships. Narratives like *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* reveal the challenges cultural expressions of value present. Narratives assume leadership as they allow an audience to experience traditionally inherited values in a way that can be reinterpreted and digested. The authors who

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[128] Mikhail, Bahktin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, edited by Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 293.
[129] Trilling, 200.
[130] Alvarez, 87.

have the ability to voice these values provide the language to discuss the challenges of biculturalism and imagine the future.

Moral imagination is a critical component of leadership ethics, but for Trilling it is an inherent part of the artist's character and responsibility. The function of art and literature can be defined in many ways, but ultimately artists are the bearers of culture because "they do not submit to serve the ends of any one ideological group."[131] Their purpose is nonpartisan, and their goal is the creative expression of human nature, allowing audiences to find trust in these leaders. Even if authors work towards a particular cause or evoke a specific ideology, their works are of persuasion, not of policy: "American intellectuals, when they are being consciously American or political are remarkably quick to suggest that an art which is marked by perception and knowledge, although all very well in that way, can never get us through gross dangers or difficulties."[132] Trilling asserts that conventional American wisdom precludes art from inspiring innovation and change. Trilling's judgment that art and literature do serve a material purpose is accurate. The words will always remain on the page, but as an audience we can carry them with us: to set us on a course, inform our actions, and inspire hope. Leaders who ignore the importance of moral imagination can only see the problems that authors present, not the potential for transformation. Works of fiction and their authors provide unique perspectives in direct response to social and cultural issues. Alvarez and Díaz undoubtedly imagine bicultural communities in different ways. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* draws a portrait of what exists between two cultures, while *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* interrogates the reality of multiculturalism and the implications of bounded communities. Both texts have a

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[131] Trilling, 7.
[132] Ibid., 10.

creative authority that should be recognized because they challenge conceptions of culture and civil society in ways that also foster both.

How the García Girls Lost Their Accents and *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* narrate the lives of families struggling to reconcile and fulfill the expectations of both Dominican and American identities as they attempt to find a place of belonging. Alvarez's characters assimilate into mainstream American culture, but they continue to maintain the need for the recognition of their Dominican heritage. Díaz's characters, who live on the outside of both American and Dominican constructions of identity, challenge the very foundations of what those definitions mean. Both authors, however, advance a hopeful vision of the future for bicultural Americans despite the violence that frames their experiences.

Alvarez shapes the narrative of *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* through a series of fragmented stories repeated in reverse chronological order. The reading experience is disorienting, much like the experience of migration has been for the characters in the text. Time becomes difficult to follow, and the nonlinear nature of the narrative makes it nearly impossible to understand how and why the girls end up where they are. The audience must have their own experience of disorientation to fully understand the world Alvarez has created. For the girls, Carla, Sandi, Yoyo, and Fifi, the violence faced in their narratives is often spiritual or psychological, and they find themselves at odds with the world around them when their identities undermine their community belonging. Within the first section of the novel, Carla and Yoyo's marriages end in divorce, Fifi becomes pregnant out of wedlock, and Sandi has an eating disorder; these stressful events are then seen in the next two sections as manifestations of the fear and struggle that define their story of dislocation. Even though the girls have their conflicts, as

the story progresses time moves backward, but only in memory; the girls sharing their story wisely reflect and come to terms with who they are through this process.

Díaz begins his novel with a warning of the *fukú* and he acknowledges the prevalence of this curse in Dominican memory, noting that everyone has a *fukú* story. He emphasizes the immediacy of *fukú* for the audience by referring to his own: "mine ain't the scariest, the clearest, the most painful, or the most beautiful. It just happens to be the one that's got its fingers around my throat." [133] The *fukú* is threatening to the bearer: its fingers have such a grip that suffocation could happen at any moment. But there is also a sense here that the inevitability of *fukú* makes it somehow more pedestrian and less mythological. Díaz does not stand out because of his *fukú*, it is merely a fact that he has to deal with. Because the *fukú* is so strong for Díaz and his characters, it implicitly becomes a threat for the audience, as well, as they face the consequences of the history set in motion centuries ago.

The expression of violence through language becomes the way in which Alvarez and Díaz communicate with their audience, following a literary tradition that acknowledges the powerful relationship between language and violence. In his discussion of historical influence on literature, Trilling refers to Charles Dickens's disdain and exhaustion of the phrase, "the tyranny of words."[134] Dickens felt that we abuse words far more than they abuse us: our words do not cause troubles, our wills do. The phrase emerged from those who felt constrained by language, unable to express their internal sentiments adequately. Alvarez and Díaz overcome language in the controlling way that Trilling describes and intentionally apply it for their specific ends. They shape narratives with multiple meanings, where linguistic violence affects their characters and the audience; the freedom with which authors like these use language emphasizes

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[133] Díaz, 6.
[134] Trilling, 187.

the importance of reader reaction and interaction with the text. The way in which language is interpreted then affects how it is internalized by readers. As audience members, reading *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* allows us to uncover our preconceptions in regards to immigration and biculturalism and how we define our communities in order to reframe a new understanding.

The fragmentary pieces of Alvarez's novel make it a puzzle her audience must assemble in order to understand the García girls. In the very first piece, Yolanda returns to the Dominican Republic and appears as lost in that world as her audience is in the novel. Upon seeing Yolanda, her family comments on her American experience, but Alvarez makes the point of emphasizing the importance of language at the very beginning when Yolanda cannot remember what "*antojo*" means: "Actually it's not an easy word to explain," her aunt begins, "an *antojo* is like a craving for something you have to eat."[135] Unable to fully capture the meaning of the word, other aunts chime in with their own explanations, and as an audience we must quickly accept a limited understanding of what it means to be Dominican and Dominican-American, because we do not share the language which communicates that experience. More importantly, though, it becomes clearer that the pieces of the novel will attempt to define the García girls, and their experience of *antojo* – the desire that cannot be explained.

Violence in *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* appears more physically for Díaz's characters; Beli and Oscar both suffer beatings in the cane fields of the Dominican Republic, and Oscar ultimately dies as the result of a final violent confrontation. In the novel's forward, Díaz addresses the cause of this violence which haunts his characters as the result of *fukú*, "generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the

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[135] Alvarez, 8.

New World."[136] The curse began in the beginning, when the first African slaves were brought to the New World – the Fall of innocence for the Western Hemisphere: "it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles. *Fukú americanus.*"[137] The cracking of the door is like the opening of Pandora's Box; imperial powers initiated a doom and let out an evil for all who occupy the landscape of the Americas. [138] But Díaz also presents the solution for this conflict before the narrative begins. He acknowledges that this story is a zafa, his "very own counterspell," which gives hope that doom is not inevitable. [139]

When Díaz introduces *fukú* at the beginning of his novel he also initiates his relationship with audience that is both antagonistic and inclusive. In the course of the short section, Díaz employs the pronouns "I" and "you" in order to draw boundaries and the pronoun "we" to cross them. The accusation that appears on the first page, "that the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the *fukú* on the world," immediately implicates his audience as complicit in Western Imperialism.[140] Those who do not know of the *fukú* also do not know about the abuse of the Dominican Republic at the hands of imperial powers: the massacre of the Tainos, slavery, the mining of resources, and military interventions. Díaz invokes the history of the Dominican Republic and its cultural mythology to divide his audience between those who understand that cultural memory and those who are strangers to it. This segregation represents the differences in how we will understand the rest of the novel, but Díaz does not believe that that division is the most important feature in understanding his work. He continues, "Santo Domingo might be *fukú's* Kilometer Zero, its port of entry, but we are all of us its children, whether we know it or

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[136] Díaz, 1.
[137] Ibid., 1
[138] In Greek mythology, hope also comes out in Pandora's Box, along with woe and grief.
[139] Díaz, 7.
[140] Ibid., 1.

not." [141] According the mythology that Díaz shares, everyone is a victim of the *fukú*; we are all inheritors of its burden and the responsibility to break the curse.

These introductions by Alvarez and Díaz begin to reveal the creative, political, and social motivations, such as sempiternal time, violence, family, and memory which compel their work and find expression in narrative form. When it comes to leadership, these foundations also support the authors' moral imagination as they express original interpretations of reality and visions for the future. In some cases, an author's clear narrative will directly challenge or lend support to established authority, while other texts require the reader to carefully consider the text to determine the author's motivations. Structurally, both Alvarez and Díaz employ nonlinear projections of time in their novels, which signal readers to scrutinize how each author leads them through the text, because deciphering the relationship between action and consequence becomes more tenuous. The authors and works compel readers to challenge accepted modes of authority and participate in a unique form of leadership. Alvarez and Díaz challenge the authority which attempts to bind their characters identities and communities. Overcoming these cultural rules serves to free their own identities as well.

Díaz has explicitly stated his interest in textual authority and he has discussed his use of footnotes as an exploration of this idea. Díaz explains that that the purpose of the footnotes is not to teach Dominican history: "to me it seems like a bad idea to learn history from a novel," he explains.[142] Rather he wants to examine "how we as audiences respond and require certain kinds of authority." [143]He pursues the limits of trust, asking why readers will trust written texts. Yunior, Díaz's narrator, is the mode through which he questions sources of authority. The audience relies upon Yunior to tell Oscar's story and he is often unquestioned when it comes to

[141] Díaz, 2.
[142] Díaz, "Book Tour."
[143] Ibid.

his historical notations, which Díaz admits are nearly all wrong.[144] When an audience experiences the text, however, if they are not already familiar with Dominican history, they also will not be able to realize when they have been misled; if the historical truth is ever revealed, these individuals must scrutinize why they gave authority to Díaz's text. Díaz, however, makes sure to note that "Yunior's discussions and his insights on science fiction and fantasy because they are considered frivolous genres is left almost entirely unexamined, but he is utterly dead on there," and that is the more useful framework for understanding the novel.[145] For Díaz, science fiction and fantasy are relevant because these genres are worlds built around mutants, outcasts, and racism, the experiences with which he most closely identifies. Not only does Díaz want his audience to be critical of whom they accept knowledge from and question where they get the authority to impart it, but he also wants them to analyze the type of knowledge they value. Dominican mythology, *fukú*, and fantasy become the legitimate language of *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,* and, when recognized, subvert the cultural hegemony of which Said is so critical.

Language in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* serves as a landscape that the girls must navigate in order to understand their world and the vocabulary is always tied to emotions. Yolanda has the most difficulty trying to interpret love; it is the feeling that assaults her most continuously. Her final relationship, which the audience witnesses first, ends because she does not share a vocabulary with the man she loves. Yo, the poet, in an intimate moment with her husband, becomes frustrated with his inability to rhyme her name: "'*Yo* rhymes with *cielo* in Spanish.' Yo's words fell into the dark, mute cavern of John's mouth. *Cielo, cielo,* the word

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[144] Similarly, T.S. Eliot includes completely fictional footnotes in his poem, "The Wasteland."
[145] Díaz, "Book Tour."

echoed."[146] As Yolanda tries to communicate with him, he smothers her with a kiss and she is silenced. Yolanda, who in the first chapter cannot communicate in Spanish, retreats "into the safety of her first tongue, where the profoundly monolingual John could not catch her, even if he tried."[147] Here, Alvarez describes a world where there is no satisfactory language – Yolanda has no words to effectively describe her reality to her monolingual and monocultural husband. Unable to communicate, she leaves John "because he believed in the Real World, more than words, more than he believed in her."[148] Alvarez vividly expresses the emotion of her liminality to connect with those who share her experience and introduce it to those who are unfamiliar with it. Yolanda, like her sisters, is more than the discrete cultures that define her; together her Dominican and American selves merge to create something new and unique, which Alvarez believes has the potential to improve both.

The world Díaz creates occupies the same liminal space that Alvarez introduces as he challenges the significance of the boundaries which separate Dominicanness and Americanness. Díaz uses language to create the texture, or surprise, within the narrative. Spanish words are dropped into sentences without introduction, without distinction, and without translation to impress how interchangeable they are to his characters. When Yunior talks about Oscar and Oscar's curse, he notes that had he

> really been old-school Dominican I would have (a) listened to the idiot, and then (b) run the other way. My family are surenos, from Azua, and if we surenos from Azua know anything it's about fucking curses. I mean, Jesus, have you ever seen Azua? My mom wouldn't even have listened would have just run. She didn't fuck with fukús or guanguas no way no how. [149]

The language Díaz provides is an unfamiliar landscape for those both in a Spanish and an English world; it is both languages and it is neither. For a reader who cannot understand Díaz's

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[146] Alvarez, 72.
[147] Alvarez, 72.
[148] Ibid., 73.
[149] Díaz, 171.

vocabulary, reading the novel can be a disorienting experience because it shifts rapidly and without notice; we are not sure whether we understand the action. Yunior reveals details about his family here that are obscured for an English language reader without any sense whether those specifics are important or not. We are lost. This particular disorientation compels the audience to rely on Díaz to navigate them through the turmoil. Díaz gains trust from the readers because they now share a similar experience with his characters, even if it is on the most basic emotional level.

Ultimately, Alvarez and Díaz's authorial and narrative leadership serves James McGregor Burns' transformational model of leadership as they directly address the actual needs of their communities.[150] Authorial and narrative leadership resembles Burn's definition of moral leadership, which "emerges from, and always returns to the fundamental wants and needs, aspirations, and values of followers ... the kind of leadership that can produce social change and satisfy followers' authentic needs."[151] The worlds created by Alvarez and Díaz emerge from their true experiences of living in New York and New Jersey as Dominican-Americans. In an autobiographical impulse, they draw upon the violence of their national histories and personal lives to define the harsh landscapes of immigrant America, accepting the challenge of translating how their lives fit into both the Dominican and the American experience. Their characters are shaped by authentic needs, concerns, and hopes which every member of their communities and audiences share.

The theoretical basis of authorial and narrative leadership presents practical importance for community leaders. Continuing his discussion of how literature remains vital for social change, Trilling argues that Americans resist scrutinizing and evaluating society: "They appear

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[150] James McGregor Burns, "Moral Leadership," in *The Leader's Companion: Insights on Leadership Through the Ages*, ed. Thomas Wren (New York: Free Press, 1995), 481.
[151] Ibid., 481.

to believe that to touch accurately on the matter of class, to take full note of snobbery, is somehow to demean themselves." [152] Doing so would force us to deconstruct a false perception of reality, created specifically to satisfy our ego. Acknowledging the problematic ways we have defined our communities admits failure. If we ignore acute social issues in order to preserve a constructed and false reality, we actively disengage from the leadership which seeks to improve our world. Díaz discusses the harm that disengagement produces and the need to express trauma in order to heal its wounds:

> So much of our experiences as Caribbean Diasporic peoples, so much of it exists in silence. How can we talk about our experiences in anyway if both our own local culture and the larger global culture doesn't want to talk about them and actively resists our attempt to create language around them? Well my strategy was to seek my models at the narrative margins.[153]

Díaz acknowledges in his communities, and in our world, the fear of recognizing difficulties and talking about them. In their novels, Alvarez and Díaz actively complicate our notions of what it means to live as an immigrant in America. In Díaz's novel, Oscar is the most marginalized character, but the novel would have no purpose without him - no shape nor soul. Even after his death, Yunior comments, "all we ever talk about is Oscar," as he represents the marginalization being criticized.[154] Oscar's identity as a writer, indeed, Yolanda's as well, becomes supremely important as they explore the potential of language to heal the wounds violence has marked on their lives in an echo of the authors who have created them.

When Alvarez wrote *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* her mother stopped speaking to her after the novel was published. Alvarez explains, "my mother, who had grown up silenced and terrified in a dictatorship, could only pass that legacy on to me."[155] Her mother felt silenced in the way that Díaz explains above, as though her daughter's words were a violation of

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[152] Trilling, 207.
[153] Junot Díaz, interview by Edwidge Danticat,"Junot Díaz," *BOMB*, no. 101 (Fall 2007): 91.
[154] Díaz, 327.
[155] Alvarez, 295.

a private experience. While the violence of Trujillo's dictatorship and the trauma of migration are personal experiences, they are shared by many. Alvarez found inspiration and the courage to rewrite her experience through literature: Maxine Hong Kingston's bicultural experience in *The Woman Warrior* kept alive a faith in Alvarez that what she "had done by giving voice to the silences was raise furies, yes, but to transform them into the better angels of our nature." [156] Alvarez uses the language Abraham Lincoln employs in his First Inaugural Address as he attempts to reconcile the enmity between the North and South before the Civil War broke out: the "better angels of our nature" have the potential to transform how we discuss and understand experiences of trauma.

Alvarez recognizes the damage that occurs during migration needs to be discussed, and her novel inspires that discussion through the García girls' tribulations. Barak's essay on language in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* notes the first person narratives of the novel's final section as the brave voices in this dialogue: "everyone wants to be in control of her own version of her history, and these first person narratives in the last section become, in effect, a defense offered by each girl in her own words, an explanation of who they have become in the present, of why they 'turned-out' the way they have."[157] The sisters take turns breaking the silence which keeps them trapped between cultural communities in their adulthood. They use their agency to shape a narrative, which defines their experience and gives insight to those who want to relate to them. Yolanda's story of removing the kitten from its mother is terribly moving especially in the context of her own identity:

> I grew up, a curious woman, a woman of story ghosts and story devils, a woman prone to bad dreams and bad insomnia. There are still times I wake up at three o'clock in the morning and peer into the darkness. At that hour and in that loneliness, I hear her, a black furred thing lurking

[156] Alvarez, 295.
[157] Barak. 162.

> in the corners of my life, her magenta mouth opening, wailing over some violation that lies at the center of my art.[158]

Yolanda confesses her childhood misjudgment and how that has remained with her. Her art is a creation of her trauma – the trauma she perpetrated and the trauma she experiences herself, because they are intertwined. She writes this experience because she is an immigrant, but she writes because she has the voice and power to do it for those who cannot.

Díaz acknowledges the power that Alvarez employs as the way of wrestling with the question of what defines us. For Díaz, being American means being many things – "one can carry inside of them both the country of their origin and the country that has received them ... the idea that has been popularized that one must choose between your home place and the new place is cruel and absurd." [159] Díaz denies the singularity of identity, and accepts the multiplicity of identity and citizenship. His writing reflects a belief in diversity by incorporating many meanings into his narrative. After Oscar tries to commit suicide, Yunior looks for understanding: "That fall after the Fall was dark (I read in his journal): dark. He was still thinking about doing it but he was afraid. Of his sister mainly, but also of himself." [160] He still considers suicide to escape the world which tries to force his identity to a bounded definition, but Díaz allows his audience to read Oscar's fear in a number of different contexts. The first fall Oscar refers to is his own fall from the train platform in his failed suicide. The Fall to which Oscar refers is Adam and Eve's fall from Grace; the fruit from the tree of knowledge cursed them just as the *fukú* dooms Oscar. Díaz also draws a parallel between Oscar's fall and the fall of his grandfather, Abelard Cabral, and the fall of Trujillo. Religion, literature, history, and family memory are linked together as the forces that shape and occupy Oscar's and his community's identity.

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[158] Alvarez, 290.
[159] Junot Díaz, interviewed by Steve Inskeep, "Becoming American," NPR, November 24, 2008.
[160] Díaz, 200.

Those disciplines that Díaz calls upon to define Oscar, he also uses to draw a picture of hope. The novel, which he has already admitted is a zafa, actively works against a sense of unequivocal doom. In their family, Lola's daughter, Isis, represents that future which has reconciled history. Yunior notes that Isis already speaks both English and Spanish; she learns how to navigate both worlds and the space in the middle; Yunior anticipates, "if she's her family's daughter – as I suspect she is – one day she will stop being afraid and she will come looking for answers." [161] Isis is the Egyptian goddess that saves the world, and Yunior expressly places in Isis, Lola' daughter, the hope that she will understand the narrative of her history and her family as atonement with the potential for healing. The last lines of the narrative, which are Oscar's words in a letter to Yunior, he sees that same hope: "If only I'd know. The beauty! The beauty!" [162] Oscar, author that he is, recalls the famous last words of Kurtz in *The Heart of Darkness*, "the horror, the horror." Kurtz, an imperialist, was commenting on the oppression he had perpetuated and the bleak outlook for the future, but Oscar, speaking from the position of the oppressed believes in a promising vision of the future. His hope uplifts the audience when nothing else will do.

Alvarez wrote *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* in a historical moment in which multiculturalism was the rule of the day. Education was, and continues to be, all about understanding, acknowledging and accepting cultural differences. The García girls exemplify the other side of this experience, what it means to be received and what they must do to fit in. Alvarez knows this experience because she has lived it as well. She never denies the conflicts diaspora causes; all of the García girls suffer in some way but there is still the impression that they are better off because of it.

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[161] Ibid., 330.
[162] Ibid., 335.

Díaz's writing is much more confrontational than Alvarez's work, and he does not believe that either community is better off. *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is simultaneously more pessimistic and more hopeful than Alvarez's novel. Oscar is a sympathetic character to anyone who has ever been misunderstood, judged, or ostracized. Díaz's narrative reveals his incredibly human desires for love and acceptance, all of which are repeatedly denied to him. His death, then, is a tragic moment in which our world seems hopeless. Oscar's life and his death are unfair and yet he maintains hope; an emotional reaction to his fall and faith inspires in us a desire to change the circumstances that led Oscar to the Dominican cane fields.

How can we broaden our definition of citizenship to include all men and women? How can we extend the borders of our communities to draw in more people like us, even though they may not appear that way? And how can we organize our world to unite people and recognize influence rather than deny these relationships? I believe those questions can be answered and so does Díaz – that is why he challenges his audience to see the consequence of the failure to answer these questions already. We are not doomed by the *fukú* forever, because we hold the zafa, the power to undo it.

The resolution of hope that resounds so strongly through Díaz's voice in *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and that guides Alvarez's motivations in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* is also the answer that Díaz, as a leader, gives to the Texan man in the small Washington bookstore:

> We do what we do, whether it's raising children or writing books, because we believe without question that things can get better … I think that in a sense, without that feeling of hope there's no reason to have children and there's no reason to produce art. It's this utopian promise that the pieces that we are, will be put together in a better way in the future that keeps us going.[163]

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[163] Diaz, "Book Tour."

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