

The Hemispheric Approach of Julia Alvarez's Novels

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses three novels by Julia Alvarez—*How the García Girls Lost their Accents* (1991), *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994), and *In the Name of Salomé* (2000)—through the lenses of Hemispheric American Studies. Inspired by the teachings of Antonio Benítez-Rojo's theoretical work *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective* (1992), I contend that the categorisation of these novels as Latino literature is not enough to describe all of their richness. These novels portray throughout their pages social, political, and artistic relations that tie all of the Americas together, and their analysis benefits from the essays written by Caribbean post-essentialist critics who developed, during the 1990s, a discourse based on the cultural supersyncretism of the islands that helps us to understand the postmodern globalised worlds as it stands. The novels by Alvarez reflect these theories, as they portray the realities of a New World constricted by the workings of race and racism, capitalism, and postcolonialism.

Key Words: Julia Alvarez; Caribbean literature; Caribbean discourse; Hemispheric American Studies; multiculturalism.

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The Saint Lucian Nobel Prize winner Derek Walcott claimed in his essay “The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry” (1974) that, despite the shadow of empire being inescapable, Caribbeans “were American even while [they] were British” (3). Furthermore, the insistence on national identification is a result of power intentions in an “archipelago [...] broken up into nations, and in each nation we attempt to assert characteristics of the national identity” (ibid). This is absurd, according to Walcott, since it cannot be denied that West Indian culture is American “not because America owes me a living from historical guilt, not that it needs my presence, but because we share this part of the world, and have shared it for centuries now, even as conqueror and victim, as exploiter and exploited” (4). Such approach to Caribbean literature became popularised in the 1990s thanks to essays such as Édouard Glissant’s, Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s, and Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s. Florencia Bonfiglio explains that the irruption of these texts transcending linguistic and national barriers was the result of an effort on the part of the authors to create a discourse “independent from its ‘mother’ literatures/Euro-North-American hegemonic paradigms” (149). The most clearly postmodern approach to is expressed in Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s *The Repeating Island* (1992), where he explains that the Caribbean way of being and acting serves to transcend the very colonial violence which gave birth to the region as we know nowadays: a culturally heterogeneous place (27-28). If Caribbean cultural productions, as Walcott explained, are indeed American, what about Caribbean migrants in the United States? Can we trace back the Caribbean roots—or routes—of their works? That is what Benítez-Rojo indeed suggested, as he claims that mobility is a characteristic feature of “the Peoples of the Sea” (25).

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A postcolonial perspective has indeed been taken by some critics in their analyses of cultural productions written by minorities in the United States. Jenny Sharpe’s much quoted phrase from her article “Is the United States Postcolonial?” (1995) expresses that: “given its history of imported slave and contract labor, continental expansion, and overseas imperialism, an implication of American culture in the postcolonial study of empires is perhaps long overdue” (181). After the student protests of the 1960s Third World Movement in American campuses, the state of ethnic minorities in the United States started to be considered a postcolonial matter (114), which still serves to challenge the 1980s multicultural model that ultimately serves to portray a static image of cultures as endangered objects to protect but paradoxically enters into conflict with the country’s capitalist demands (Piper 15-18). While such approaches are accurate, specially in dismantling the exoticist—in Salman Rushdie’s view (67)—notion of multiculturalism, this is not the desirable approach to Julia Alvarez’s works, since her literature is not relegated to a United States setting; it also includes many chapters dealing with the locus specific situation of the characters’ homeland: the Dominican Republic.



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Because of the popularity experienced by Latino literature in the United States, one often forgets that places such as the Dominican Republic are Caribbean nations with their own Caribbean specificities such as the inescapable neo-colonial relationship with the United States. Caribbean islands have always been a bastion of the economic powers at work because of their strategic geographical position. Furthermore, such popularity has turned Latino literature into an exotic desirable commodity (Bost & Aparicio 3). As Suzanne Bost and Frances R. Aparicio claim, while some novels adapt to the “fetishized traits” traditionally ascribed to Latinos—“vibrant colored book covers, recipes for spicy food, or traditional spiritual practices”—and have thus turned into best sellers, others have been deemed to oblivion (3). Even when the Latino category considers “layers of conquest, colonialism, and cultural mixture” (Bost & Aparicio 2), it has also worked as an oppositional practice. In Marta Caminero-Santangelo’s words: “Latino’ as an ethnic label thus suggests a contrast with some ‘other’ people understood to be ‘non-Latino’” (13).

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The heterogeneity of the locations, timelines, characters, and historical episodes present in the works of Julia Alvarez makes them quite aligned with Benítez-Rojo’s claim against the binary implications of *mestizaje*: “The literature of the Caribbean can be read as a mestizo text, but also as a stream of texts in flight in intense differentiation among themselves and within whose complex coexistence there are vague regularities, usually paradoxical” (27). A clear example of this is Alvarez’s 1994 novel *In the Time of the Butterflies*, which is completely set in the Dominican Republic. It narrates a fictionalised account of the Mirabal Sisters’ lives and their assassination by the Trujillo dictatorship. But we will get to that later. To understand Alvarez’s position as a Caribbean writer let us retort to her 1998 collection *Something to Declare*. One of them, “Doña Aída, with your Permission,” is an answer to an incident that took place at the Caribbean Studies Association annual meeting, where Alvarez was asked to deliver a plenary talk alongside the Dominican poet Aída Cartagena Portalatín. Cartagena Portalatín criticised Alvarez for speaking English, and the latter’s answer—this essay—is deeply rooted in the previously mentioned 1990s Caribbean discourse characterised by anti-essentialism. Alvarez explains in the essay that: “Doña Aída embraced [her], but then in front of the mikes, she reamed [her] out. ‘Eso parece mentira que una dominicana se ponga a escribir en inglés. Vuelve a tu país, vuelve a tu idioma. Tú eres dominicana.’” (“Doña Aída” 171) After explaining that she decided to write this essay because the moment did not seem adequate to offer an answer, she claims that the cultural situation she inhabits is “a world formed of contradictions, clashes, cominglings—the gringa and the Dominican, and it is precisely that tension and richness that interests her.” (“Doña Aída” 173) Whereas this

claim is quite specific of migration experiences to a country with a different language—and she mentions other migrant writers claiming that their belonging to several cultures has created very interesting literary works—she then continues to justify her language choice in this way:

Think of it, the Caribbean... a string of islands, a sieve of the continents, north and south, a sponge, as most islands are, absorbing those who come and go, whether indios in canoas from the Amazon, or conquistadores from Spain, or African princes brought in chains in the holds of ships to be slaves, or refugees from China or central Europe or other islands. We are not a big continental chunk, a forbidding expanse that takes forever to penetrate, which keeps groups solidly intact, for a while anyhow. Our beaches welcome the stranger with their carpets of white sand. In an hour you reach the interior; in another hour you arrive at the other coast. We are islands, permeable countries. It's in our genes to be a world made of many worlds. ¿No es así? ("Doña Aída" 175)

This final paragraph adds a Caribbean perspective to her argument, as what she describes is characteristic of the history of postcolonial peoples, a history made up of clashes, confluences, and confluences, especially in the Caribbean.

Alvarez's claim that "we are islands, permeable countries" takes up the rhetoric on the aquatic worldview expressed by Edward Kamau Brathwaite in his aesthetic theory of Tidalectics (as opposed to Dialectics). The Barbadian poet believes that Western conceptualisation, epistemology, and philosophy do not work when defining the lives of the islanders and goes on to suggest alternative ways of reading and interpreting reality (Hessler). In particular, Brathwaite "is concerned with a sense of relation that is expressed in terms of connecting lines" (Reckin 2). According to Anna Reckin, it is the layers which "[open] up the work to new contexts and to wider and deeper [...] signification" (3) included in a narration that resemble the movement of the sea. The fragmented and multilayered, in terms of time and space, nature of Alvarez's novels embraces this philosophy.

The 1991 novel *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* has an inverse chronological order with time lapses between its chapters. It begins with the journey back to the Dominican Republic of one of the protagonist sisters, Yolanda, who has the intention of staying there. Then, as the novel progresses, we move on to the sisters' previous time in the United States, their acculturation and identity struggles, such as racist attacks, and the political exile that made them leave their country. Despite the title, this is not only a fiction of migration and acculturation in the United States, since the description of the girls' typical second-generation struggles is only part of the book. It must be considered that the book opens and closes in the Dominican Republic and portrays the characteristic rhythms, colours, and aquatic lifestyle of the Caribbean. During the narrative, mental health is also given big importance, stressing the double, triple, or quadruple consciousness experienced by the sisters living in between worlds, that which was described by Alvarez in her essay as typical of the Caribbean. This is also a narrative of return, not only of migration, as Yolanda,

who has multiple cultural identities according to Ana M^a Manzanás—“Yo, Joe, Yoyo, Joey, as the occasion requires” (38)—finds living in this multiplicity only possible in the Caribbean (also meaning in the aquatic epistemology): “This time, however, Yolanda is not so sure she’ll be going back [to the United States]. But that is a secret” (Alvarez, *García Girls* 7). The narrative coming and going from the United States to the Dominican Republic and *vice versa* across the Caribbean Sea depicted in the *García Girls* novel reminds contemporary readers that the hybrid nature of these characters does not start on the land but in the sea, reflecting the different waves of migration that have created America.

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In the Time of Butterflies is in fact, as already mentioned, completely set in the Dominican Republic, and tells a fictionalised account of an important chapter of the history of this country which has made a big impact on the cultural identity of its inhabitants: the assassination of the Mirabal Sisters by the Trujillo regime (recognised by the United States). The issue at stake is that the novel is completely written in English (using some words in Spanish as is characteristic of Latino literature in the United States) while its subject is certainly Dominican: it tells Anglophone readers of an important chapter of the history of a non-Anglophone country. This inserts into the United States cultural scene a history of the country’s hegemony presented from another perspective, the perspective of those affected by the neo-colonial imperialist relations the United States establishes with the countries of the Caribbean. In fact, the story of the Mirabal sisters has had an influence worldwide: the date of their assassination has been chosen for the date of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, the 25th of November.

In *In the Name of Salomé* (2000) there is also more than one setting: the United States, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba. The main character of the Dominican Republic plot, which is set in the second half of the 19th Century, is Salomé Ureña, the national poet who wrote patriotic verses in order to arouse nationalist sentiments for encouraging revolutions against corrupt, colonial, and institutional power. The American setting protagonist, her daughter Camila, a 66 years old university professor, does not feel at home in the United States, like the *García Girls’* Yolanda, and writes a pros and

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cons list for any possible decision she will take once she retires. She feels only convinced by the idea of going to Cuba to join the Revolution. Cuba is not her homeland but part of the Caribbean archipelago which, according to Benítez-Rojo, is “a group of American nations whose colonial experiences and languages have been different, but which share certain undeniable features” (1). The protagonist also reflects this kind of thought when she recalls Jose Martí’s teachings: “why speak of Cuba and Santo Domingo, when *even* the underwater cordillera that runs from island to island knows they belong together” (Alvarez, *Salomé* 164; emphasis mine). The word “even,” which I have emphasised, suggests that it is not only the cordillera which makes the islands belong together.

Camila’s decision to join the Cuban revolution can be analysed through the lens of another Caribbean discourse representative, Édouard Glissant, in terms of his poetics of Relation, as he claims that

Errantry [...] does not proceed from renunciation nor from frustration regarding a supposedly deteriorated (deterritorialized) situation of origin; it is not a resolute act of rejection or an uncontrolled impulse of abandonment. Sometimes, by taking up the problems of the Other, it is possible to find oneself [...] That is very much the image of the rhizome, prompting the knowledge that identity is no longer completely within the root but also in Relation. (18)

This novel is characterised by the heterogeneity of the historical situations it relates, key moments in the story of the Americas, in a hemispheric sense: the Cuban revolution, the Trujillo dictatorship, the Ku Klux Klan attacks, and the colonial enterprises of Spain in the Caribbean, among others. It establishes the sometimes ignored notion that, as Derek Walcott has put it, that part of the world is shared and most of its culture comes from its past of “ghettos, its river-cultures, its plantations” (4). The metaphor of the archipelago, of a culture creating itself by the heterogeneous experiences of colonialism, is what can also be called the metaphor of America (Walcott 5). Glissant’s already mentioned theoretical book on a poetics of Relation makes use of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s concept of

the rhizome. As an image of multiplicity, the rhizome, “chang[ing] its nature as it expands its connections” (Deleuze & Guattari 8), is something characteristic of the Caribbean since, unlike the Mediterranean, it is “a sea that explodes the scattered lands into an arc. A sea that diffracts. Without necessarily inferring any advantage whatsoever to their situation, the reality of archipelagos in the Caribbean [...] provides a natural illustration of the thought of Relation” (Glissant 33).

Camila’s errantry is opposed to the idea of the monolingual root characteristic of the conquests that happened across the Americas: “Conquerors are the moving transient root of their people” (Glissant 14). There are two kinds of nomadism, arrowlike (as in the conquerors example) and circular, endogamous and “overdetermined by the conditions of [its] existence” (Glissant 12). Errantry, standing not as an opposition but completely differing from these notions, is best understood when Caribbean migrant writers in the United States like Julia Alvarez continue adopting an epistemology which is deeply postcolonial and Caribbean. The errant, “prompting the knowledge that identity is no longer completely within the root but also in Relation,” (Glissant 18) transcends borders.

CONCLUSIONS

While much has been written about the American perspective of Caribbean texts and essays, such relationship has not been actively endorsed in order to look at Caribbean Latino novels in the United States even when considerations such as Benítez Rojo’s approach to chaos and multiplicity are reflected in the the fragmented nature of works like Julia Alvarez’s. The three novels analysed above deliberately and fluidly change settings between the United States and the Caribbean islands—often the Dominican Republic but also Cuba—, emphasising the connections between the different nations of the Americas.

The transnationalism, rather than biculturalism, portrayed in Julia Alvarez’s novels is an attempt to recover José Martí’s approach to America—our America—as mentioned in *In the Name of Salomé*: “the America our poor, little countries are struggling to create” (121). As Walcott points out when he claims that American culture is that of the plantations and ghettos, this analysis of Alvarez’s works brings back to mind the idea that identification according to nation-states is a mechanism which serves to ignore other socio-cultural realities that have led to shared historical injustices. In contrast, Julia Alvarez and the anti-essentialist Caribbean essayists acknowledge the reality of specific landscapes, geographies, and migration routes which have been the real agents in shaping an American identity.

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