

MIGRANT MEMORIES IN THE WRITING OF JULIA ALVAREZ

Tito Matias-Ferreira, Jr. (Doutor em Estudos da Linguagem pela UFRN)

ABSTRACT

The main objective of this paper is to analyze, at first, the uses of family memories as one of the main strategies immigrant writers possess to recall their identities. Julia Alvarez (1950 –) in her novel *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* (1991) genealogically reflects upon the immigrant condition of the García family for she depicts not only the memories of the García girls either in the U.S. or in the Dominican Republic, but she also recalls stories the girls “heard of” from their aunts, uncles, grandparents, etc. Moreover, there will be a discussion about how Literature ties the private and the collective memory up through writers’ testimonials; effectively speaking their many stories to make the history of the contemporary world.

Keywords: Memory, Writing, Julia Alvarez.

RESUMO

O principal objetivo deste estudo, primeiramente, é investigar o uso das memórias da esfera familiar como uma das estratégias essenciais empregadas por escritores imigrantes para rememorar sua(s) identidade(s). Julia Alvarez (1950 –) em sua obra *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* (1991) reflete genealogicamente sobre a condição imigrante da família García uma vez que ela não descreve somente as memórias das irmãs García seja nos EUA ou na República Dominicana. A autora também se lembra de histórias que as García ouviram de suas tias, tios, avós etc. Do mesmo modo, leva-se também em consideração como a literatura vincula a memória privada e a coletiva por meio dos testemunhos de escritores; que contam suas muitas histórias de forma efetiva para fazer a história do mundo contemporâneo.

Palavras-chave: Memória. Escrita. Julia Alvarez.

I wonder about the future of the book, but I have faith in the future of narrative. It seems to be something that we need to do to understand who we are. The random things in our lives, memory puts together as a narrative of what's happened to us, which might not really have happened, but it's what we remember. And it's also what we've constructed out of what happened, out of which we tell ourselves the story of who we are. I think that the need to make meaning through telling stories will continue.

Julia Alvarez

Remembering and imagining are crucial actions performed by immigrants in the search to understand where they belong within the territories of the new location they live in and the place they originated from. Remembering, on the one hand, makes immigrants travel back to what has once happened to them as well as to what they have been once. On the other hand, imagining allows immigrants to project themselves to what is ahead, to what their future may be. And, it is in this constant dialogue between remembering and imagining that immigrants might find a secure place, an environment where they may feel at ease with their hyphenated condition: the realms of memory. Memory becomes the limen which joins what they were once and what they are yet to be, and, thus, reinforces the liminal state immigrants seem to live in: the state of in-betweenness.

In contemporaneity, immigrant writers make their memories one of the main repertoires of their writing, once they do not nostalgically glimpse the past, but instead use their reminiscences to attempt to figure out their current situation in the world. Writing, thus, emerges as a possibility to delineate a place where immigrants do not feel “unhomed” (BHABHA, 1998), for they are allowed to remember what they want to, and forget what they might please: they forget because they desire not to remember it. It is one of the few moments when immigrants have the control of what they are, as they do not find themselves subjugated to issues such as whether they have to adjust to certain customs, whether they have to speak a certain language, whether they have to behave in this or that way according to the mainstream society. Therefore, writing is provided with a possibility of healing the open wound of immigration.

The main objective of this paper is to analyze, at first, the uses of family memories as one of the main strategies immigrant writers possess to recall their identities. The significance of the writing of such family reminiscences as a means to mirror the collective will also be

investigated and, most importantly, as a means immigrant writers from various places may feel connected to each other once the transcription of their private memory may resemble. Finally, there will be a discussion about how Literature ties the private and the collective memory up through writers' testimonials; effectively speaking their many stories to make the history of the contemporary world.

Using memory as one of the devices for writing their stories, immigrant writers make use of their reminiscences and knowledge. The first is related to what the immigrant writer him/herself has actually lived and, for this reason, is able to rationalize upon. The latter, has a relation to something he/she happens to know because he/she has been told by somebody from his/her family, usually a fact that the writer has "heard of" from his/her father, mother or a relative but he/she has not taken part. And, it is through this "family gossip"¹ (MOLLOY, 2003, p.258) that the identity of an immigrant writer starts to be built. In their narratives, immigrant writers take advantage of knowing what has happened to their family and themselves, even though they are not able to remember it. Immigrants feel they come from somewhere – a place they once belonged, and which by hearing such "family gossip" they are reconnected to. Molloy defines this "family gossip" as a genealogical reflection² (MOLLOY, 2003, p.255), once it happens to be an action of evoking the past of the writer's family not only to describe the story of their family, but, most importantly, to portray the issues of the place they came from through their family daily situations. Thus, as Molloy has pointed out: "(...) nestes trechos de fofoca familiar, o ilustre torna-se cotidiano, fala-se do pai da pátria no mesmo plano em que se fala do aguadeiro com seus barris carregados por cavalos" (MOLLOY, 2003, p.258).

Julia Alvarez genealogically reflects upon the immigrant condition of the García family for she depicts not only the memories of the García girls either in the U.S. or in the Dominican Republic, but she also recalls stories the girls "heard of" from their aunts, uncles, grandparents, etc. The characters of *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* are often reminded of where they come from and that, back in the Dominican Republic, they have a family they belong to and, due to being a García, they have to honor. Pages one and two of Alvarez's novel show readers the family tree of the García girls, in which its origin is drawn from the main branch self-called "The Conquistadores" and, then, is forked into two other branches: the "de la Torre" family, the family of Laura García, the girls' mother, and "the García"

¹ My translation of the term "fofoca familiar".

² My translation of the term "reflexão genealógica"

family, the one from their father's. Being the descendants of a wealth group of people in the Dominican Republic, Carla, Sandra, Yolanda and Sofia García develop a great sense of family and connection to their ancestors, a feeling they take to the United States and are repeatedly made aware of so they are hindered to do anything that will 'dishonor' or 'stain' their family's name either in the U.S. or in the Dominican Republic.

Holding the heavy lot of being a García in the Dominican Republic, the characters in Alvarez's novel also start to struggle with what it means to be a García in the United States. Having to keep the tradition of their "native" home, they are expected to behave in the way of their mother's raising, strongly Latino manners which are farfetched in the U.S. Therefore, respecting the family they came from is above all, and, according to the Latino tradition, family is what makes one understand who he/she is at whatever place as well as whatever time. Americans, on the other hand, will never be able to figure such a dependency on the family, as they are apparently much more individualists than the Latinos:

"Why put up with it?" our American friends counseled. "Be your own person!" But how could we survive outside our family? We had been raised as members of a family, not just individuals. It's as if our faces, our hands, feet would disappear if we cut ourselves off from their originals. In fact, the ultimate threat my parents could hurl at us was that they would "disown" us. (ALVAREZ, 1998, p.121).

As it has been pointed out in the quotation above, the García girls can not imagine themselves as an individual in the U.S., and there is strong reinforcement of respecting *la familia*³. In a country where relationships among people, connections at work, etc. are not established by family matters, Americans see the association the García girls have with their family as something prejudicial of their personality. As Alvarez further states:

"How would you disown a child" a therapist once asked me, and she didn't mean the question rhetorically, in a plaintive way; she was truly curious. In English, in the United States of America, such a threat sounded implausible; in fact, it sounded operatic and old-world and un-American. There was also the tinkle of money in the phrase, disowning as disinheriting, as if we were still connected to old money whose flow would stop coming to us now that we had done the unthinkable. But my sisters and I knew exactly what was meant. It meant if we went off with male friends for a weekend, we didn't have a mother and father, or by extension, *la familia*, to come back to. It meant if we moved in with boyfriends, we were no longer "part of the family"; we were "dead to the clan"; we

³ My italics.

couldn't come and ask our father's blessing on this deathbed ...
(ALVAREZ, 1998, p.121).

Therefore, the sense of still belonging to the Dominican Republic despite exiled in the United States with no further familial reference but their father and mother themselves, the García girls grow older with a strong cultural Dominican upbringing:

They had been raised in a culture where this was what parents did to a child who broke their hearts. They clipped off that branch from the family tree in order to protect the honor of the larger family. Or at least they threatened to do so – the branch would soon discover that it could not survive detached from its progenitors. (ALVAREZ, 1998, p.122).

Thus, the necessity to tell what has been going on with the García family and, in a certain way, to describe what she has been going through is what is deeply portrayed in Alvarez's writing: her immigrant status.

But it has not always been that the past in Latin America was a genealogical reflection, or a family matter. In the 19th century, Latin American writers were more worried to transmit what, in fact, had really happened to their people, their country in general; not what particular subjects had undergone, for instance, the writer him/herself. A little room would be given to the memories of the personal, and the history, or historical facts, would be given more importance than the story. Nevertheless, the stories of the individuals taken for granted in the 19th century are the ones which make the History in the 20th one. Parameters in the 20th century start to change and the notion of history mingles with the notion of our own existence: the memories of our past, whatever our nationalities are, are combined with who we are. Thus, when telling the stories of girls who immigrated to the U.S. and, somehow, depicting her own family history, Alvarez's past acquires the significance of the past of a group, a group which might have dealt with issues other immigrants might also have had to come to terms.

Using the argument above that the past of some immigrant writers may encompass issues other immigrants might face when moving to another country, I attempt, at this point, to justify the use of some of the epigraphs the readers have read and will read throughout my analysis in this paper. Julia Alvarez herself has been questioned about the similarities the discourse of immigrant writers may possess, even though they come from a different locus of enunciation. In her non-fictional book entitled *Something to Declare* (1998), Alvarez presents essays she has written as answers for the loads of questions her readers have been addressing

her to deeply understand Julia Alvarez – the writer. In the section “Doña Aída, with Your Permission”, Alvarez describes the moment she had been invited by the Caribbean Studies Association to lecture about her status as a “Dominican-American writer”. In contrast, there would be the presence of Aída Cartagena Portalatín, a famous writer from the Dominican Republic, considered the “pure” Dominican writer for she wrote in Spanish only. Due to the fact that she is labeled as a “Dominican”-American writer, Julia Alvarez writes in English and, for this reason is questioned by Aída: “eso parece mentira que una dominicana se ponga a escribir en inglés. Vuelve a tu país, vuelve a tu idioma. Tú eres dominicana.” (ALVAREZ, 1998, p.171).

As an attempt to justify her reasons to write in English and, once in a while to insert English words in her writing, Julia Alvarez gives particular attention to the questioning Aída had made at the conference and, thus, writes the passages which gives name for the section from where the aforementioned quotation was taken. Alvarez, then, answers back:

Doña Aída, con su permiso. Doña Aída, with your permission. I am *not* a Dominican writer. I have no business writing in a language that I can speak but have not studied deeply enough to craft. (...) And though I have read Pablo Neruda and César Vallejo and Julia Burgos and Ana Lydia Vega and Aída Cartagena Portalatín, I can only admire what they do in Spanish. I cannot emulate their wonderful mastery of that language. No, I am not a Dominican writer or really a Dominican in the traditional sense. I don't live on the island, breathing its daily smells, enduring its particular burdens, speaking its special dominicano. In fact, I would tell a different story and write poems in a different rhythm if I lived and worked there, ate there, made love there, voted there, dried my tears there, laughed my laughter there. If daily what I heard was *Ay* instead of *Oh*, if instead (...) what I saw were colors so bright I'd have to look twice at things to believe they were real. (ALVAREZ, 1998, p.172, grifo no original).

Thus, Julia Alvarez enlists, through the previous quotation, the various reasons she believes do not allow herself to be considered a Dominican writer. But, Aída's comment about Julia Alvarez writing in English enables Alvarez to appraise that although she had been schooled in English, had read Emily Dickson, Toni Morrison, William Shakespeare, she is not an American writer either. Not an American writer who was born in the U.S. with roots and traditions from a small American city such as Kentucky or Illinois (ALVAREZ, 1998, p.173). Therefore, Julia Alvarez agrees in taking the advantages of standing on the both sides of the hyphen when labeled as a “Dominican-American” writer:

It's a world formed of contradictions, clashes, cominglings – the gringa and the Dominican, and it is precisely that tension and richness that interests me. Being in and out of both worlds, looking at one side from the other side (...) These unusual perspectives are often what I write about. A duality that I hope in the writing transcends itself and becomes a new consciousness, a new place on the map, a synthesizing way of looking at the world. (ALVAREZ, 1998, p.173).

And it is this new consciousness proposed by Julia Alvarez in the past quotation that I believe immigrant writers share and, so allow me to make use of some quotations written by different Immigrant Writers in my master's thesis. As Julia Alvarez has also argued:

(...) I would propose that this multicultural perspective (...) is the perspective of some of the most interesting writers of the late twentieth century: Salman Rushdie in London, Michael Ondaatje in Toronto, Maxine Hong Kingston in San Francisco, Seamus Heaney in Boston, Bharati Mukherjee in Berkeley, Marjorie Agosin in Wellesley, Edwidge Danticat in Brooklyn. We're a mobile world; borders are melting; nationalities are on the move, often for devastating reasons. A multicultural perspective is more and more the way to understand the world. (ALVAREZ, 1998, p.173).

Therefore, differently from what it was promoted by the writers in the 19th century, 20th century immigrant writers recollect their private memories to gain the ground of the collective, once

de um lado, [há] a memória individual, auto-abastecedora e por vezes solipsista, que guarda detalhes da vida pessoal, como relíquias, (...) de outro lado, a memória coletiva que deseja preservar o passado de uma comunidade da qual, como testemunha auto-designada, o autobiográfico é sempre privilegiado. (MOLLOY, 2003, p.265).

In this sense, the past of a writer becomes, somehow, the past of his/her community. Thus, immigrant writers wisely exploit their memories, once it enables people from the same background to relate to the writer's past and, through this way, to identify themselves with the writers.

One of the main factors that allow groups of immigrants to identify with the writers who argue about their diasporic condition is the distance from their place of origin. This geographic dislocation is what enables immigrant writers to use their recollections to move from their new home to their homeland, from one continent to another. According to

Molloy, “este distanciar-se do lugar de origem, (...), deve ser visto conjuntamente com um sentido muito particular de história, aquele que leva, (...), a privilegiar os “últimos olhares” a um passado pessoal no qual se busca incorporar o leitor.” (MOLLOY, 2003, p.271). And, to be able to see what last happened to them in their home country, immigrant writers have to constantly dislocate themselves to a place in their reminiscences.

It is, thus, the movements emerged by the distance from the place immigrants come from that, as Salman Rushdie proposed, make immigrants acquire a new perception towards their home: through the metaphor of the cinema screen, immigrants gain a new perception of their home, a perception which is mainly recollected by their reminiscences:

Suppose yourself in a large cinema, sitting at first in the back row, and gradually moving up, ... until your nose is almost pressed against the screen. Gradually the stars' faces dissolve into dancing grain; tiny details assume grotesque proportions; ... it becomes clear that the illusion itself is the reality.” The movement towards the cinema screen is a metaphor for the narrative's movement through times towards the present, and the book itself, as it nears contemporary events, quite deliberately loses deep perspective, becomes more 'partial'. (RUSHDIE, 1990, p.13, grifo no original)

The act of thinking or rethinking of his/her past is something that brings human beings close, for past might be a lost territory in everyone's mind, which will be restored by their memories. But, “the writer who is out-of country and even out-of language may experience this loss in an intensified form” (RUSHDIE, 1990, p.12). And, according to the metaphor of the cinema screen, people who are distanced from their country for whatever reasons, may perceive it through different eyes, which attempt to look for a starting point in their past, a point that will give them the impulse to understand who they are using the pieces of memories they have from their past.

This starting point from their memories has to be a common place not only for the writer him/herself, but for the people they are somehow related to as well. In the family realm, the house the writers inhabited is a recurrent area for their reminiscences, for “abrigar o passado sob um teto significa que já se tem um teto para começar” (MOLLOY, 2003, p.272). This roof, though, may not be solely connected to the physical space the writers once lived in – the house itself –, but their neighborhood, their street, their country become a starting point to the act of remembering. Interesting to say that, when distancing themselves from where they come from, immigrants and, consequently, immigrant writers tend to view their “native” location and also their past with nostalgia. They believe that a safe place to

come back to is their past, but forget that the place they left, which is safely kept in their memories, has undergone changes just like the transformations the writes themselves have been through.

As a result, immigrants, even though possessing the ability to see their house with different eyes, do it nostalgically, most of the times. This romanticized view of their house is what brings the clash immigrants may experience when returning home. The idea that everything was kept the same way just like the day they left enhances the feelings of misplacement of the immigrant, insofar as immigrants preserve the home in their memories “contra a mudança, retirando-a da circulação histórica, ao mesmo tempo em que celebra o fato de que, por esta mudança, ele[s] e as novas gerações que representa agora habitam a casa e hão de forjar a nova história, (...)” (MOLLOY, 2003, p.276). It is with this contradictory feeling that immigrant writes construct their truth, the one made possible by the use of their reminiscences, but due to the fact that they use their memory to restore what they were and what they are, immigrant writes refer to their imaginative truth (RUSHDIE, 1990, p.10).

Although they are not going to be able to recover what they lost when quitting their native land, this imaginative truth provides the feeling of belonging to immigrants, once they create a new place in their memory where they feel they are a part of. Needless to say, the imaginative truth of the immigrant writers, awakened by their memories, is full of mistakes: as a natural characteristic of human beings, we do not perceive things as a whole, we have fractured perceptions of the world and, for this reason, there are not any writers who display universal truth; their truth is the description of the way the writers themselves perceive the world they live in.

In this sense, the immigrant writer realizes he/she will never get the accurate truth of his/her past. As a matter of fact, they will never reach universal truth since their fragmented vision and fallible memory will allow them only to bring back remains of what they once were. In this movement of going back to the past to figure out the present and, seemingly, their own selves, any remain of memory acquires a great value:

The shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were *remains*, fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired minimum qualities. There is an obvious parallel here with archeology. The broken pots of antiquity, from which the past can sometimes, but always provisionally, be reconstructed, are exciting to discover, even if they are pieces of the most quotidian objects (RUSHDIE, 1990, p.12, grifo no original).

Therefore, any recollection immigrants may be able to attain is treasured. The partial nature of memory permits them to recall only fragmented parts of a broken mirror. Interestingly, even though using the fragmentation of their broken mirror, the mirror as a metaphor to their memory, immigrants can reconstruct their past when they effectively write what has been going on with them.

In conclusion, when writing about trivial happenings that gain a meaningful perspective in the search of their identity, immigrant writers use their words as a testimonial. Through the recollection of the broken pieces of their memories, the immigrant writer can testify about what has occurred to him/her, something that he/she attests to have lived or something that has happened to him/her. Thus, memory as a testimonial enables the immigrant writer to gradually trespass the place of the private memory to the local of the collective memory to connect him/herself to the ones of his kind (RICOUER, 2004). And the mediation through this intimate memory and the communal one happens through the means of Literature.

Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* is built with the recollections of the memories of the Dominican family in the U.S. Julia Alvarez relates the reminiscences of her characters to testify the effect of immigration on her characters and their position in the United States. Writing and Literature enable her to make visible the stories that have been so frequent in the history of the United States. Julia Alvarez herself discovers that, using Literature, she can see there are other immigrants who share their same experiences through writing:

(...) Alma Gómez, Cherrie Moraga, and Mariana Romo-Carmona came out with *Cuentos: Stories by Latinas*. It was an uneven collection, but the introduction, titled "Testimonio", was like a clarion call: "We need a literature that testifies to our lives, provides acknowledgement, of who we are: an exiled people, a migrant people, mujeres en la lucha ...". The very next year Sandra Cisneros published her collection of linked stories, *The House on Mango Street*; Ana Castillo published her book of poems, *Women Are Not Roses*; (...) Lorna Dee Cervantes, Helena María Viramontes, Denise Chavez. Suddenly there was a whole group of us, a tradition forming, a dialogue going on. And why not? (...), why couldn't we Latinas and Latinas have our own made-in-the-U.S.A. boom? (ALVAREZ, 1998, p.168/169).

Accordingly, the dialogue of their memories, being portrayed through their testimonials, gives a sense of belonging to the so-called group of immigrant writers, no matter where they may come from: East, West, North, South. Their testimonial is the declared

memory of their past, which can be represented through their writing; the images of describing what they have undergone help them to figure out their current position in the world.

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