

Translating Psycho-linguistic Subjectivity

in Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*

By Allison N. Harris

Told in reverse chronological order, Julia Alvarez's 1992 novel *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* performs a temporal revision that begins with the girls' adult state of bifurcated, agitated subjectivity and traces it back to the trauma of their immigration. Arguably the novel's main narrator, Yolanda demonstrates the difficulty of understanding one's subjectivity as an immigrant in the United States, especially between two different language systems. Yolanda suffers from an excess of other internalized and externalized subjects to which she must relationally re-form her own identity after immigration, not the least of which is her understanding of her own subjectivity in her natal linguistic system.¹ Having moved to the United States under the threat of the violent Trujillo regime when she was just a little girl, the Dominican Republic (DR) has become a place of vacations and longing, so as an adult, Yolanda struggles to understand where she belongs. She wants to return to the DR, but she has been away so long that she no longer understands her identity through her Dominican origins, nor does she seamlessly integrate into an American identity. Turning to theories of translation and psychoanalysis helps to explicate the rupture and dislocation that Yolanda experiences in order to consider the state of psychic liminality immigrants experience between two different linguistic systems. After immigration, the girls, especially Yolanda, must begin to think about their subjectivities in an entirely new way, a way wrapped up in cultural degradation and psycho-linguistic abjection. Ultimately, the loss of cultural capital, the property violence of immigration, plays out in the language, in the translation from Spanish to English and the re-formation of subjectivity that requires. Though Yolanda and her sisters do the work of re-formation, this does not guarantee an integrated self.

Much of the scholarship on Alvarez's novel has focused on the relationship between language and identity for the girls, and critics can be divided into two camps: the possible hybrid and the failed hybrid. Juan Pablo Rivera and Joan Hoffman both advocate reading the novel through a positive bilingual hybrid identity in which the girls are able to identify as Dominican-American. On the other side, Helen Atawube Yitah argues that "the profound linguistic dislocation and the resultant disorientation that the young girls experience in the United States combine to erode their self-assurance and deny them any stable sense of self" (234). Fatima Mujcinovic reads the father's experience and notes that although for most of the novel the family is no longer in political exile and could physically return to the island, a psychological return is harder to imagine. Jacqueline Stefanko connects the novel's polyphonic narrative form to a hybridity that illustrates the fracturing of identity in the diaspora. For me, Yolanda's psycho-linguistic breakdown firmly signifies the failure of hybridity. Here I differentiate between hybridity as the absorption of both/and identities and liminality, which I read as a threshold outside of either dichotomous position. In the case of Alvarez's characters and many other characters negotiating immigrant identities, forming a both/and identity through hybridity does not offer the political efficacy that Homi Bhabha theorized. Indeed, Yolanda fails so significantly that she falls outside of language completely and into a liminal space where meaning breaks down. I posit that her desire to return to the island mirrors a desire to return to the state of *jouissance*, a proposition both impossible and dangerous. In failing to build a new subjectivity in a new language system, Yolanda actually embraces the state of abjection.² In exploring this abjection, I reject romanticized hybridity; in this novel, Yolanda's interrupted subjectivities do not present the possibility for positive hybridity.

Even though entering language is universal for human subjects as social beings, immigrants must always negotiate an identity somewhere in between their natal linguistic system and the new system into which they have moved.³ Therefore, they occupy a space rooted in neither one nor the other system, a liminality that complicates subjectivity. I turn to translation theory to justify reading the transition from one linguistic system to another as creating a new subjectivity. Ultimately, subjectivity is a linguistic creation, and the act of understanding oneself as an *I*, a political agent, and a subject, depends on language. Jacques Derrida notes, “[e]very culture institutes itself through the unilateral imposition of some ‘politics’ of language. Mastery begins, as we know, through the power of naming, of imposing and legitimating appellations” (39). This act of naming differentiates the subject position from the predicate, the subject from the object, the self from the other. Yolanda’s trouble with naming emblemizes her identity trauma. In the beginning of the novel, Yolanda tells the reader that she is “Yolanda, nicknamed *Yo* in Spanish, misunderstood *Joe* in English, doubled and pronounced like the toy, *Yoyo*—or when forced to select from a rack of personalized key chains, *Joey*” (Alvarez 67). Yitah claims, “Yolanda’s task of piecing together her fragmented identity is one that proves impossible to accomplish in America, where her name cannot be found in a display of supposedly personalized key chains” (238). I would argue that this “piecing together” is not only impossible in the United States, but also in the Dominican Republic, as Yolanda’s naming problems cross borders, as Yolanda’s name and identity must be pieced together in both Spanish and English. This problem proves especially interesting because the García girls transition from Spanish to English. In Spanish grammar, the subject position is implied in the declension of verbs as opposed to English grammar’s simple agreement of verb count. Thus, Descartes’s statement *I think, therefore I am* might translate to *Pienso, entonces soy*. Both *pienso* and *soy* contain the subject tacitly represented. Additionally, the word *soy* comes from the infinitive *ser*, which translates as *to be* indicating the state of being of an essential quality or static identification. However, *estar* is also a verb of being, used to represent a condition that can change over time. Comparatively, Standard English grammar limits subjectivity to a single verb of being and always needs syntactic representation of the subject position.⁴ Therefore, the García girls must not only learn a new language, but also think about themselves in a different way. Even though *Yo* signifies the personal pronoun in Spanish, Yolanda cannot create a cohesive identity in either language.

The translation theories of Derrida and Walter Benjamin, in conjunction with Julia Kristeva’s theory of psycho-linguistic subjectivity, provide language to read the immigrant situation as an act of translation into a new symbolic system. Kristeva theorizes that subjectivity is constructed by the transition from the semiotic chora into the thetic phase, where the semiotic chora is “a nonexpressive totality” and the thetic phase is the recognition of the social censorship, or the construction of syntax and grammar that dictates the rules of the linguistic system that determine how subjects understand their position to others (*Revolution* 25). In other words, the semiotic chora exists outside of language, pre-linguistic, occurring before consciousness of the Symbolic system. Thus, while in the semiotic chora a child uses holophrastic utterances – *up* to ask to be held, *food* to indicate hunger. At this time, the child’s needs are assuaged by the caregiver, and the child experiences the jouissance of being completely fulfilled with no differentiation between their own subjectivity and that of the caregiver. The process of establishing subjective differentiation develops when the child enters the thetic phase. Linguistically, “syntax registers the thetic break as an opposition of discrete and permutable elements but whose concrete position nevertheless indicates that each one has a definite signification” (*Revolution* 55). Consequently, entrance into the Symbolic through the thetic phase depends on the ability to use syntax, instead of simply making holophrastic gestures. The immigrant child forced to learn a new language

system must return to the semiotic chora, even after creating subjectivity in their previous language system, to begin to learn new words and phrases. This process creates chaos in the psycho-linguistic subjectivity.

Merging Kristeva with translation theory allows us to read the desire to return to the natal linguistic system as the desire to return to the semiotic chora. Both W. Benjamin and Derrida theorize an originary loss that results in the need for translation. Benjamin writes,

In all language and linguistic creations, there remains in addition to what can be conveyed something that cannot be communicated, ... that very nucleus of the pure language; yet though this nucleus remains present in life as that which is symbolized itself, albeit hidden and fragmentary, it persists in linguistic creations only in its symbolizing capacity. ... To relieve it of this, to turn symbolizing into the symbolized itself, to regain pure language fully formed from the linguistic flux, is the tremendous and only capacity of translation. (W. Benjamin 261)

Putting Benjamin in conversation with Jacques Lacan, we can identify that which cannot be communicated, which Lacan theorizes as an endless chain of signifiers that come close to meaning but never express the *real*. The *real* haunts the Symbolic like Benjamin's pure language, and linguistic expression becomes a constant act of translation of the *real* by the Symbolic. Benjamin argues that translation attempts to return to the state of pure language. Although Benjamin defines pure language as the lost Biblical-historical language of the people before the Tower of Babel, I read, through Lacan and Kristeva, Benjamin's nucleus of pure language found in each expression as the desire for the semiotic chora haunting subjectivity after the originary loss of the jouissance of undifferentiation. The constant work of translating the *real* and constructing syntax in language systems exhausts the subject and can lead to a desire to return to non-expressive totalities, especially when, as for the immigrant, the act of translating the *real* must go through multiple linguistic systems. Therefore, both Derrida and Benjamin describe the process of translation in a manner similar to Lacan's and Kristeva's descriptions of the process of psycho-linguistic subject formation, and these connections illustrate how moving from one linguistic system to another necessitates a person's reconstruction of an already formed subjectivity into a new subjectivity when learning a new language.⁵

This constant triangulation of identity, a literal translation between two languages, often results in the deep desire for a return to the natal tongue, just as the weary experience of constantly defining subjectivity results in a desire to return to jouissance, as Kristeva theorizes. However, this return, both to the semiotic chora and the natal tongue, is impossible. Each of the García girls at some point in the novel tries to return to the Dominican Republic, searching for not only a return to their way of life but also the security of a return to their original subjectivity. Although Yolanda desperately wants to make the DR her home, she cannot go back to the time before her immigration; she has already been irreversibly interpellated in the American English linguistic system. Yolanda's attempted return pushes her back to the semiotic chora in both Spanish and English. Her aunts ask her what she wants to do on the island, "any little *antojo*" (Alvarez 8). Yolanda does not recognize the word, which the family goes on to define as her one desire. Subconsciously, Yolanda's one desire is to form an authentic subjectivity, but she relates that desire through the guava, a product not as readily available in the Yolanda's home in New York as in the DR. As an *antojo*, guavas represent both the fruit of her motherland and a complete entrance into Yolanda's natal symbolic system. William Luis argues, "[e]ven though ... Yolanda desires that her country of origin be her home, ... She cannot return to the past of her innocence,

... the guavas will [only] allow Yolanda to return to the past of her memory, which initiated her voyage to her origin, the womb” (847). In this case, the impossible return to the womb results instead in a return to the semiotic chora, that nonexpressive totality of holophrastic utterances, that stymies any chance at hybridity. When she goes out into the countryside, alone and against the advice of her aunts, she gets a flat tire in the guava grove, implying once again the difficulty of establishing her subjectivity. She encounters two campesinos who help her, but she is afraid of them and “feels so trapped by the situation in which she finds herself that she becomes once again inarticulate, appropriately losing her original language in a situation that demands that she be a dominicana rather than an americana” (Gomez Vega 91). Although being a de la Torre in the DR positions her in a class and racial hierarchy over the campesinos, the fact that she does not remember enough Spanish to speak with them marks out her anxiety in this identity. She cannot speak even remedial Spanish to the campesinos, nor can she articulate herself in English, but instead babbles incoherently, a non-syntactic non-expression. This failure of translation highlights Yolanda’s marginalization and isolation, not as an opportunity to create new means of identifying in the interstices, but rather as a third-space liminality outside of both the natal and new linguistic systems that stands as antithesis to hybridity.

Immigrants entering a new system must re-form subjectivity, creating a situation where they must understand themselves in relation to both the natal and new subjectivities. Therefore, they experience intersubjectivity, or the experience of subject formation through relational identification theorized by Jessica Benjamin, not only with children in the old and new systems, but with their own previous subjectivity. I use intersubjectivity here to emphasize the act of recognition of both other subjects in relation to one’s own subjectivity and the relationship to the liminal third-space of marginalization in an immigrant subjectivity as now distanced from both the natal linguistic system and the newly learned linguistic system.⁶ Immigrant children often experience the relationality of intersubjectivity through exclusion and isolation in the new linguistic system, facing extreme hostility from others during this period of language acquisition meant to form a new subjectivity, specifically because they are perceived as being developmentally behind their peers because the new language acquisition places them back into the semiotic chora, only able to use holophrastic phrases for a time. Lacan states that “[the] moment in which the mirror-stage comes to an end inaugurates, by the identification with the *imago* of the counterpart and the drama of primordial jealousy ... the dialectic that will henceforth link the *I* to socially elaborated situations” (5). For immigrant children, the *imago* is not themselves in the mirror image – which has already helped the children form subjectivity in the natal system – but the image of children integrated into the new system who represent the self they should be now. The child must find a way to understand his or her subjectivity in relation to the natal understanding of self, to the nascent forming self, and to the others, both in the natal and new systems. At the same time, the hegemony of the new system and those who already inhabit that system put pressure on the newcomers to conform, and immigrant children learn that they must find a way to create subjectivity quickly to achieve social integration. This fraught triangulation requires immigrant children to be constantly code-switching not only their language but their psycho-linguistic identities to fit the situation, often different at home than at school.

The immigrant child must identify with these other children, who are at the same time threatening alienation and annihilation, especially in cases of racial difference. The white American children that the García girls encounter signify the new ideal subject and yet also represent the racism and nativism of anti-immigrant rhetoric. Carla, the oldest García daughter, experiences this threat as a young girl in Catholic school. A group of boys taunts her, throwing rocks at her and telling her to “[g]o back where you came from, you dirty spic!” (Alvarez 150).⁷

When she compares herself to the other students, she thinks that the boys look “blank and unknowable, the way all Americans did. Their faces betrayed no sign of human warmth. Their eyes were too clear for cleaving, intimate looks. Their pale bodies did not seem real but were like costumes they were wearing” (Alvarez 151). The images of blankness highlight the impossibility to identify with the imago that the boys represent. Carla’s claim that the boys do not look real echoes Lacan’s formation of the *real* in interesting ways, as he argues that the *real* intrudes in the traumatic break of the Symbolic order. For Carla, the trauma of immigration has disrupted her natal linguistic system and caused her to question what is indeed real. Beyond the racist hostility that prevents her from desiring subjectivity in the new system, she cannot imagine a way to fashion her identity into the blank and unknowable. This instead underlines her isolation and alienation by the society formed by the proper use of the new linguistic system. Looking at the imago of the other children and finding “blankness” breaks down chances of intersubjectivity and disturbs the process of identification.

Clearly, this process of identification is fraught with danger for immigrant children, who must sublimate their original selves created in the natal system under a new hostile subjectivity. Moreover, this aggression and exclusion can result in the violent rupturing of meaning, a breakdown of language. The García girls experience the collapse of their subject formation in the difficult transition from the Dominican Spanish linguistic system into an American education system where they must use Standard English to negotiate a new identity based on perceived American ideals, alienated from their natal linguistic identity and forced to internalize a new symbolic system.⁸ As the immigrant child begins to learn words and phrases in the new linguistic system, they must transition from re-entering the semiotic chora, as the only way to learn language seems to be one word and holophrastic utterance at a time, and then slowly begin to form subjectivity in the new system by appropriately using syntax in the thetic phase. Adult language learners often express frustration at this infantilizing feeling; for a child, this struggle becomes even more fraught with insecurity. In the chapter “Snow,” Yolanda explains that when she enters school, she is separated from the other students in her class, “put in a special seat in the front row by the window, apart from the other children so that Sister Zoe could tutor me without disturbing them” (Alvarez 163). This physically positions her on the outside of the system, indicating her psychological positioning as well. The hegemony of Standard English cannot accommodate her among the other students because she does not fit into the linguistic system. The earliest vocabulary she learns revolves around the Cold War and the Cuban Missile Crisis: “*nuclear bomb, radioactive fallout, bomb shelter,*” marking her new world with danger and the threat of annihilation – an even greater fear for Yolanda because she already feels alienated in the face of the failure of her language (Alvarez 163). As Yolanda sits at her desk one day, she mistakes the newly falling snow for ash. Unable to articulate her fear, Yolanda simply yells “Bomb! Bomb!” to warn the other students of nuclear doom (Alvarez 163). Yolanda has never seen snow in the Dominican Republic and therefore has no language by which to label and understand the phenomenon. Her holophrastic utterance of *bomb* to represent her fear of obliteration once again attests to her isolation, as she cannot enter the thetic phase with her limited knowledge and vocabulary. The holophrasis precludes both meaning and subjectivity and illustrates the impossibility of effective participation in the new linguistic system for the immigrant child.

Yolanda’s shame at these holophrastic utterances reveals her desire to return to the jouissance of undifferentiation, but return is impossible, both in English and in her natal linguistic system. Even when Yolanda’s vocabulary develops, she cannot find the words to express her self. Thinking about the snow, Yolanda writes, “Each flake was different, Sister Zoe had said, like a person, irreplaceable and beautiful” (Alvarez 163). The uniqueness of the snowflakes exemplifies

Yolanda's creative originality, but she grapples with mixed messages concerning her development of subjectivity and individualism. The new linguistic system in which she must re-form her identity tells her both that she is unique and that difference is bad and she must conform. The episode "Daughter of Invention" highlights this paradox, as Yolanda encounters strong resistance to her efforts at demonstrating her mastery of the social censorship through grammatical authenticity in English. The nuns of her school commission her to give the Teacher's Day address, and at first writer's block stymies her, once again illustrating the impossibility of efficacy in the new linguistic system. She finally finds inspiration in the poetry of Walt Whitman – poetry being a holophrastic usage of language according to Kristeva. Whitman, the great American poet, would seem to connect her to an assertive articulation of a unified American identity, so she molds his words into a speech, writing "recklessly, three, five pages, looking up once only to see her father passing by the hall on tiptoe. When Yoyo was done, she read over her words, and her eyes filled. She finally sounded like herself in English!" (Alvarez 140). But her father rejects her efforts to enter the thetic phase and be true to herself, calling it "insubordinate ... improper ... disrespecting of her teachers" (Alvarez 142). His reaction reflects his interpretation of American ideals of authority that would construe her immigrant authenticity as insolence. He rips up the speech, and her carefully chosen words lie on the floor like the pieces of her identity; Yolanda learns that she cannot and should not communicate her authentic self in English. She and her mother write a new speech, appropriately pandering to the egos of the nuns, and she receives a standing ovation, culturally reaffirming that she does not fit the new linguistic system.

When the subject cannot position itself into the thetic phase because of its desire to remain in or contemplate a return to the semiotic chora, the psycho-linguistic subjectivity becomes disrupted by the intrusion of the death drive. Kristeva writes, "when the semiotic chora disturbs the thetic position by redistributing the signifying order, we note that the denoted object and the syntactic relation are disturbed as well. The denoted object proliferates in a series of connoted objects produced by the transposition of the semiotic chora and the syntactic division (modified-modifier, NP-VP, or the placement of semantic features) is disrupted" (*Revolution* 55). Thus, the use of holophrasis symbolizes the disruption of subjectivity, and the attempted return to the semiotic actually implies a move to the dangerous space of the abject. As a poet, Yolanda embraces holophrasis, and her embodied abjection is linked to her poetry. As a child, Yolanda's parents accidentally leave her on a city bus as they are travelling to a doctor because Yolanda has been losing her hair. Her hair loss reveals the abjection of her body caused by the stress of her efforts at assimilation. When her parents chase down the bus, they find her surrounded by strangers "like Jesus and the elders ... listening to her reciting a poem" (Alvarez 49). The poem she recites turns out to be Edgar Allan Poe's "Annabel Lee," associating her again to a line of American poets, but also to a kingdom by the sea in which she is trapped. This kingdom could be either New York or the Dominican Republic. However, this embrace of holophrasis, along with the difficulty of establishing her subjectivity in either linguistic system, results in Yolanda's failure to enter the thetic phase, which causes the breakdown of both bodies and meanings. Kristeva notes,

All poetic 'distortions' of the signifying chain and the structure of signification ... yield under the attack of the 'residues of first symbolizations' (Lacan), in other words, those drives that the thetic phase was not able to sublimate by linking them into signifier and signified. As a consequence, any disturbance of the 'social censorship' – that of the signifier/signified break – attests, perhaps first and foremost, to an influx of the death drive. (*Revolution* 49)

The social censorship represents the enforcement of the signifier/signified split, and thus the subject/object split, through standardized grammar and the expectation of society for intelligible communication from an articulated subject position. For immigrants, the residue of the first symbolization is their originary, natal subjectivity that can never be fully sublimated, even after internalizing the social censorship of the new linguistic system. This constant disturbance of the social censorship from the natal self corresponds to the drives that push immigrants towards the seduction and annihilation of Kristeva's death drive, shown in Alvarez's novel through Yolanda's anxiety around language and her eventual mental breakdown.

In Yolanda's case, the failure of intersubjectivity causes a concerted break with language, a return to the holophrastic utterances of the semiotic chora and the dissolution of her psycholinguistic subjectivity. She cannot fully internalize the semiotics and grammar of the new linguistic system, so she tries to reject the Symbolic altogether. The chapter entitled "Joe" describes her institutionalization, exacerbated by her attempts at failing to form intersubjective relationships. Narrated through flashbacks from a mental hospital, Yolanda tells the reader that "[i]n the beginning, [she and John] were in love. ... He came to my door. I opened it. My eyes asked, *Would you like to come in out of the rest of the world?* He answered, *Thank you very much, just what I had on the tip of my tongue*" (Alvarez 69). This non-verbal communication places Yolanda in the semiotic chora, "at the beginning of time ... [where] [a]t night as the lovers lay in bed and connected the stars into rams and crabs and twins, they heard the barks and howls of the happy mating beasts" (Alvarez 69). At first, she seems happy in this state, a state marked by a connection to the natural and animal that communicates non-linguistically. But when John reasserts language by saying "I love you," then "Yolanda was afraid. Once they got started on words, there was no telling what they could say" (Alvarez 69). John's thetic statement creates a social censorship based on syntax and an explicit subject position separate from the object *you*. Yolanda's fear signifies a fear of the failure to construct a unified subjectivity in a linguistic system where language must take the place of her loving non-linguistic space. Yolanda would rather create a totally new linguistic system with John, a new language not always already complicated by the weight of an endless chain of substitutions provided by a social censorship.

However, she and John experience a failure of translation that cannot resist John's enforcement of grammatical subject splitting or manifest new ways of communicating. As their relationship goes on, Yolanda realizes that she and John are not speaking the same language. She plays rhyming games with his name, but he refuses to play along, telling her "[n]ot everyone can be as goddam poetic as you!" (Alvarez 70). He resists her use of holophrasis and her role as the poet. She asks him to give her a new pet name; looking for something by which to identify herself, thus returning to her original problem of naming, she states, "'Sky,' she tried. Then, the saying of it made it right: 'Sky, I want to be the sky'" (Alvarez 71). She makes these poetic statements, trying to find an identifier, but John calls foul, claiming that sky does not rhyme with her name. Even though *I* rhymes with *sky* and *Yo* rhymes with *cielo*, John refuses to allow her this moniker, again causing her to feel disconnected in his linguistic system. As they break up, she argues, "Words? Wasn't I the one always saying, *Don't say it. Don't say it?* I was the one who tried to keep words out of it" (Alvarez 73). She indicates to him her desire to remain outside of the Symbolic, in the semiotic chora, pre-thetic. When he tries to make up with her, Yolanda experiences this desire to remain in the semiotic chora as abjection, a dissolution of all linguistic and intersubjective constructions in a liminal space where bodies and meanings break down. His words become "clean, bright sounds, but they meant nothing to her. ... He spoke kindly, but in a language she had never heard before" (Alvarez 76). She loses the ability to communicate in any linguistic system and thus tries to communicate in gestures, but John refuses to forgo his linguistic

system in order to communicate with her. She thinks, “He is saying *I love you*, ... ‘Babble,’ she mimicked him. ‘Babble babble babble babble.’ Maybe that meant, *I love you too*, in whatever tongue he was speaking” (Alvarez 77). The complete breakdown of Yolanda’s language of love also indicates the breakdown of her identity, harkening back to her incoherent babbling in the guava grove at the beginning of the novel that signposts the failure of her hybridity. For Judith Butler, the abject is the “‘constitutive outside’ – the *unspeakable*, the unviable, the *nonnarrativizable* that secures and, hence, fails to secure the very borders of materiality. ... And in the case of bodies, those exclusions haunt signification as its abject borders or that which is strictly foreclosed: the unlivable, the nonnarrativizable, the traumatic” (188, my emphasis). Yolanda, in giving up language, moves into that constitutive outside where the trauma of immigration renders her own subjectivity as unspeakable. She has always already been relegated to that outside space, that liminal space, but in choosing to remain in that space, she recognizes the dissolution of her subjectivity. When she leaves John, she writes him a note that says, “*I’m going to my folks till my head-slash-heart clear*. She revised the note: *I’m needing some space, some time, until my head-slash-heart-slash-soul*—No, no, no, she didn’t want to divide herself anymore, three persons in one Yo” (Alvarez 77). These slashes illustrate her consciousness of the intersubjectivity of the multiple psycho-linguistic subjectivities warring inside her.

She strives to reconcile her identity in the space of the semiotic, but instead she is further isolated and alienated from society in a mental institution, believing she has an allergy to language. This physical isolation reflects the psychological exclusion of the abject on the borders of society, both repeating and foreshadowing, because of the backward chronology of the novel, her physical isolation in the classroom of her childhood. Instead of silence and non-Symbolic communication, here she talks non-stop; “[s]he quoted Frost; she misquoted Stevens; she paraphrased Rilke’s description of love” (Alvarez 78). These poets once again align her with holophrastic poesis and symbolize a disruption of grammatical imposition. Nothing that she says has meaning or articulates her own subject position, especially as she misquotes and paraphrases and thus fails to accurately relay the poets’ words. However, rejecting the social censorship of an enforced grammatical subjectivity, not as active resistance but as altogether denial, proves impossible and results in an equal and opposite rejection from the social structure. She cannot stay in this state of abjection and return to society, so she must internalize the social censorship of one or both of her subjective languages through treatment and re-enter a proper linguistic system. Slowly, the doctor helps her find her words, reintegrating her into the Symbolic through the thetic phase, so that her first original, authentic statement during her treatment is “I love you guys” (Alvarez 80)—a fully formed sentence with subject and object, emotion and meaning, revising and redefining John’s imposition of the social censorship by building intersubjectivity with her parents. When Yolanda tells her mother that she and John could not speak the same language, she has a fleeting moment of perfect unified subjectivity. Her mother embraces her and says, “‘*Ay, Yolanda.*’ Her mother pronounced her name in Spanish, her pure, mouth filling, full-blooded name, Yolanda. But then, it was inevitable, like gravity, like night and day, little apple-bites when God’s back is turned, her name fell, bastardized, breaking into a half dozen nicknames—‘*pobrecita Yosita*’—another nickname.” (Alvarez 80). Alvarez’s image of the little apple bites calls to mind the Fall of Man that later precipitates Walter Benjamin’s Tower of Babel. The infantilization of her mother’s compassionate nicknaming once again returns Yolanda to the state of the child. By refusing to name her properly, her mother problematizes Yolanda’s subjectivity, causing her to relapse back into a non-linguistic state.

Yolanda’s relapse takes her full circle to her mother’s favorite story. She imagines that there is something inside of her stomach, not a child, but an utterance. She feels it rise “up through

her trachea—until Yo retches ... she feels ticklish wings unfolding like a fan at the base of her throat. They spread her mouth open as if she were screaming a name out over a great distance. A huge, black bird springs out; it perches on her bureau, looking just like the etching of the raven in Yo's first English poetry book" (Alvarez 82). In a kind of backwards birth, reminiscent of the chronology of the novel, Yolanda brings forth a raven, which relates back to Poe and Yolanda's prophetic childhood. The bird springs from her body and floats through the window, down to the lawn, where she imagines it attacks the doctor, ripping his chest open. As she bangs on the window in distress, the doctor looks up and inquires into the disturbance. He first misrecognizes her as someone named Heather and then misinterpellates her as "Joe." This misrecognition causes her to feel the onset of her linguistic allergy, this time to her own name, but which she resists by filling the "empty nest" of her heart with the sounds of words, first *love* and then her full, unique, and authentic name, Yolanda. From there, words come pouring forth, and although they do not fall into a grammatical structure, she realizes that "there is no end to what can be said about the world" (Alvarez 84). She begins to re-enter the linguistic system through an active self-recognition and self-interpellation.

Yolanda's treatment and subsequent release, and her attempts at building subjectivity after her institutionalization, manifest what I theorize as intersubjective abjection. All of Yolanda's attempts in adulthood at subject formation, including the incident in the guava grove that opens the novel, are formed through and against her abjection experienced in the mental hospital. Yolanda's abject self becomes yet another representation of fraught subjectivity that she must recognize through intersubjectivity. She must embrace the thetic, must create utterances with both subject and object, with socially acceptable syntax and definite signification. Julie Barak asserts that Yolanda is "too much a heteroglot being to survive in a poetic world [because poetry] denies and suppresses what she needs to embrace and express to be healthy" (174) and that "Yolanda's recovery is directly connected with her return to writing – but this time in prose. And the language of prose, of novels – heteroglot, polyphonic, multilingual – is what she needs to heal" (175). Rather than a heteroglot, I would argue that Yolanda is more of an anti-glot. Although she does begin to write a novel, her lived experience destabilizes any chance of hybridity and multilingualism. As an adult among her sisters, Yolanda, "acknowledging that she had not written much of anything in years, ... announced to her family that she was not a poet anymore" (Alvarez 46). After Yolanda's treatment in the mental hospital, she denounces her possible return to the semiotic chora in order to remain in the thetic phase and thus a part of the social censorship and the social structure. However, even in the present narration in the novel, Yolanda does not fully achieve the thetic, evidenced by her experience in the guava grove. Because of her immigrant status, she must constantly deal with the intersubjectivity of her natal subjectivity and her new immigrant subjectivity; therefore, the possibility of hybridity fails.

The chaotic structure of the novel's reverse chronology acts as a metaphor for the repeated attempts at returning that signify the impossibility of Yolanda's hybrid psycho-linguistic subjectivity. Yolanda's narration works backward to her moment of traumatic exile from the DR, and the opening and closing images of the novel elucidate Yolanda's struggle with intersubjectivity. In the beginning of the novel, as she leaves the guava grove after having failed to communicate effectively in either English or Spanish, Yolanda looks back and sees an advertisement "above the picnic table on a near post, [in which] the Palmolive woman's skin gleams a rich white; her head is still thrown back, her mouth still opened as if she is calling someone over a great distance" (Alvarez 23). The Palmolive poster, with its connotations of cleanliness, whiteness, and American consumerism, calls to Yolanda. The novel ends with the chapter "The Drum," which Yolanda narrates as a young girl. She tells the story of stealing a young

kitten from its mother, hiding it in her American toy drum and banging on the head to cover the mewling of the distressed kitten. Full of remorse for taking the kitten away from its mother, Yolanda eventually throws the kitten out of the open window and watches it limp away. That night, and for many nights after, Yolanda dreams that the mother cat sits at the foot of her bed, haunting her for taking the kitten. In a way, Yolanda is the kitten, taken away from her motherland too soon and limping away, trying to find her way on her own. The novel ends with Yolanda coming back to the present, writing,

Then we moved to the United States. The cat disappeared altogether. I saw snow. ... I read books. You understand I am collapsing all time now so that it fits in what's left in the hollow of my story? I began to write, the story of Pila, the story of my grandmother. ... 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 in the corners of my life, her magenta mouth opening, wailing over some violation that lies at the center of my art. (Alvarez 285-6)

The cat's open mouth, calling to Yolanda, mirrors the Palmolive woman, but this call comes from the Dominican Republic, calling her back to her childhood. The Palmolive woman, the cat, and Yolanda's own mouth forced open by the raven all wail over the violation that lies at the center of her art – Yolanda's inability to form a cohesive subjectivity because of her status as an immigrant. These wails are the ultimate non-expressive totality, the non-linguistic, non-syntactic.

Yolanda fails as a hybrid because she must hold simultaneously in relation her natal psycho-linguistic self, her new psycho-linguistic self, and the precarity that constant triangulation causes. Even though Yolanda is haunted by her abjection, Kristeva, W. Benjamin, and Derrida all argue that haunting is necessary in language whether through translation or through the transition from the semiotic chora and holophrasis to the thetic and syntax. The desire to return will always be there for Yolanda, but she resists the urge to give herself up to the death drive and remains in the thetic. Yolanda's novel highlights an immigrant artist's constant struggle to form subjectivity through intersubjectivity, to accept the social censorship and remain in the thetic, no longer a poetic distortion but a denoted subject in a series of connoted objects. Perhaps Alvarez's sequel, *Yo!*, which by its title suggests an explicit, celebratory subjectivity for Yolanda, offers hope for her integration into the linguistic system and identification as a totalized whole. But *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* offers critics an opportunity to consider the psycho-linguistic subject formation of immigrants and question the narrative of hybridity, which is ultimately assimilative. Instead, Alvarez requires us to remain in the uncomfortable pressure of subjectivity constantly in reformation. Translating psycho-linguistic subjectivity is messy and incomplete and fraught with danger, but necessary.

¹ I align with linguists who use the adjective *natal* here purposefully, as I believe the term *native tongue* implies something natural to the body. I would argue that, since language is a construct, no one language is any more natural to a body than any other is. Alvarez's novel certainly demonstrates that just being born and spending your formative years in a specific language does not make it native. I also use *natal tongue* over *mother tongue*, although discussing subject formation through psychoanalysis, in order to decouple the gendered implications here, since the return to the mother tongue, like the return to the mother, is impossible.

² Based on a Kristevan definition, the abject stands outside of the subject/object dichotomy as a third space left over in the process of subject formation that both threatens and defines the subject. She offers an expansive and dynamic definition of abjection that includes corporal rot and death (the corpse offers the perfect representation of death infecting life), physical and metaphorical boundaries (a border that one approaches but tries to avoid), and psychological third-space (the failure to establish psycho-linguistic subjectivity). Moreover, the abject, according to Kristeva, degrades and is degraded (*Powers* 3-5). Kristeva contends, "refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live" (*Powers* 3). Kristeva's language of borders suggests that there are political fault lines between subject, object, and abject which cannot be crossed without one occupying that space. Those who are subjects avoid these fault lines. Those who are abjects haunt the edges, threatening subjects to keep away. When a subject approaches the abject border, that space in which the refuse of life has been marginalized, the subject must come to terms with its own biological frailty, and, I would add, their psycho-linguistic frailty.

³ This is most prevalently observed in the United States in immigrants moving from a non-English language system into English, but this can also be true of those moving within varieties of English. As globalization continues to spread English as a global language, different Englishes with different politics form, and moving among those systems does not guarantee facility within each disparate system (e.g., between American English and Australian English). Moreover, this can be true of American immigrants moving into new language systems, assuming that they do not hold on to American exceptionalist practices that resist learning the language of their new country.

⁴ Carlos Decena introduces this idea in *Tacit Subjects*. However, Decena's work makes use of the grammatical anomaly as a metaphor for self-representation. I am interested in how the grammar informs the psychology of self.

⁵ This is different than a child being raised bilingual from birth, in which the child can internalize a hybrid identity during the original subject construction.

⁶ Lacan and Kristeva both assume a universal experience of subjectivity in which one transitions from the pre-Symbolic to the Symbolic through the mirror phase and the threat of castration, thus forming a subject identity that defines itself in opposition to the object. Intersubjectivity provides a way for psychoanalysis to update the construction of the subject/object dichotomy, rejecting the idea that identity forms in the isolation of a single mind recognizing its ego and instead insisting that the way people understand their subjectivity is in relationship to others. The field of relational psychology attempts to address the breakdown of the dichotomy of self and other and self and object. The term intersubjectivity originates with Husserl. He makes a departure from Descartes statement "I think, therefore I am." The subject cannot simply think itself into being but must understand itself both in relation to objects (as in traditional psychoanalysis) and to other subjects (as in relational psychology). See Jessica Benjamin.

⁷ Interestingly, the Irish appear in this novel as a cultural connection to the racialization of whiteness. Alvarez writes that the girls "were trying to fit in America among Americans; they needed help figuring out who they were, why the Irish kids whose grand-parents had been micks were calling them spics" (138). Irishness stands as a marker for the hope but failure of inter-racial intersubjectivity.

⁸ Castells notes, “The sisters repeatedly find themselves at odds with their bicultural surroundings, experiencing a form of alienation that is often symbolized by either silence or by an absolute failure to communicate with the other characters” (34). I agree with his assessment of the girls’ alienation and their failure to communicate, but I diverge from his focus on bilingualism to turn to the psychological root of the García girls’ problems. I do not privilege the girls’ Spanish language as the pre-Symbolic state, but as their natal linguistic system in which they have developed subjectivity that is disrupted when they are forced to reconsider their subject positions through the new linguistic system.

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