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## JULIA ALVAREZ

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(B. 1950)

Born in New York City, Julia Alvarez spent her childhood in the Dominican Republic until 1960, when her family returned to New York, exiled because of her father's participation in a plot to overthrow the dictator Rafael Trujillo. In the Dominican Republic, Alvarez attended the Carol Morgan School. All the classes were taught in English, and even before immigrating to the United States she felt the cultural tensions that she would explore in her writing. Her knowledge of English could not lessen the feelings of displacement and awkwardness that she experienced after she and her family fled to New York. "Overnight, we lost everything," she remembers, "a homeland, an extended family, a culture, and . . . the language I felt at home in."

Yet Alvarez was nonetheless attracted to books, and her teachers encouraged her gift for storytelling. After graduation from high school in 1967, she attended Connecticut College for two years and then transferred to Middlebury College, where she graduated *summa cum laude* in 1971. She went on to earn an M.F.A. from Syracuse University in 1975. Married and divorced twice in her twenties, she spent her years after graduation from Syracuse moving from university to university, earning her living on one-year teaching appointments. In fifteen years Alvarez had eighteen addresses. Stability finally came with the publication of her first poetry book, *Homecoming*, in 1984, the advent of a tenured job at Middlebury College in 1988, and a third marriage in 1989. Since resetting in Middlebury, she has published novels, additional books of poetry, and a book of essays, *Something to Declare* (1998).

Alvarez's widely read novels—*How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994), *Yo!* (1996), and *In the Name of Salome* (2000)—are often autobiographical, and like her poetry, they explore her dual cultural heritage. In her essay "Of Maids and Other Muses" she contemplates her sources of inspiration, finding them in the tradition of English and American poetry, and above all in her Latin heritage, especially among the women who encouraged her during her childhood:

English was my second language. I was a newcomer in this literature, tradition, way of making meaning. And so I overcompensated for my feeling of literary and linguistic insecurity by making myself learn and master everything I could about the tradition. There is a saying in the old country that the traitor always wears the best patriot uniform.

Alvarez's poetry often concerns domestic matters distinguished by her unaffected use of traditional forms, as in the sonnet sequence "33" written when the poet was thirty-three years old. *The Homecoming* uses as its epigraph a statement from the Polish poet Czesław Miłosz: "Language is the only homeland." And in *The Other Side/El Otro Lado* (1995) Alvarez uses both of her languages and multiple forms to explore the complexities of her family heritage.

"So Much Depends," the essay reprinted below, appeared in Alvarez's prose collection *Something to Declare* (1998). As that title suggests, the essays are about borders and immigration, bilinguality and divided loyalties, speech and silence. Here Alvarez mixes memoir with literary criticism, reading William Carlos Williams as one key to *becoming* American.

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### SO MUCH DEPENDS

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I remember discovering William Carlos Williams's poetry in my anthology of American literature over twenty-five years ago. It was love at first sight:

So much depends  
upon  
a red wheel  
barrow  
glazed with rain  
water  
beside the white  
chickens.

"What a curious syntactic structure," our teacher noted, "'So much depends . . . ?' So much *what* is depending on the wheelbarrow and the chickens?" But the syntax seemed familiar to me. I had heard a similar expression all my life, *todo depende*. Everything depended on, well, something else. It was our Spanish form of "maybe."

Scanning a collection of his poetry in the library, I found a half-dozen Spanish titles—even a volume named *Al Que Quiere!* But there was no mention in my anthology of the why of these Hispanicisms. It was only later that I came to find out

Originally published as "On Finding a Latino Voice," *Washington Post Book World* 14 May 1995. Collected in *Something to Declare* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1998) 163-170.

that William Carlos Williams was—as he would be termed today—“a Hispanic American writer.”

His mother was Puerto Rican—upper-class Puerto Rican with a Paris education, but still. . . . She married an Englishman who seems to have lived everywhere, including some years in the Dominican Republic, my homeland. The two moved to Rutherford, New Jersey, where they raised their two sons. Growing up, William Carlos never had a close association with Puerto Rico. In fact, he did not see the islands until he was almost sixty and had a deep longing to try to understand what his own roots really were. His was an American boyhood indeed, but with the powerful and sometimes baffling presence of his mother, who spoke Spanish in the home and who terrified and embarrassed her sons by going into trances and speaking to her Caribbean dead, especially while she played the organ during Unitarian church services. Williams did not phrase or even seem to understand his divided loyalties in terms of ethnicity. Still, as a first-generation American, he often felt “the islandness in him, his separateness,” as his biographer Whittemore has described it.

His friend Ezra Pound didn't help things. “What the hell do you a blooming foreigner know about the place,” Pound taunted. “My dear boy, you have never felt the swoop of the PEEarates.” But it was Pound who jumped ship and fled to Europe in search of classical models. Williams stayed, in New Jersey, and struggled to set down “the good old U.S.A.”

As an adolescent immigrant, I, like Williams, wanted to be an American, period. I was embarrassed by the ethnicity that rendered me colorful and an object of derision to those who would not have me be a part of their culture, at least not without paying the dues of becoming like them. And I was encouraged to assimilate by my parents and teachers, by the media and the texts I studied in school, none of which addressed the issues I was facing in my secret soul. So much of who I was seemed to have no place in this world and culture—and so I started to have a secret life, which no doubt contributed to my becoming a writer.

My family did not move into a *comunidad* in this country, where a concentration of Dominicans or Latinos would have kept alive and affirmed the values and customs, the traditions and language that were an increasingly hidden part of me. Jamaica Estates was a pretentious—back then, anyway—area in Queens for solidly middle-class families and for up-and-coming white European immigrants—many Germans, some Italians, some Jews, and a couple of us Hispanics.

My father did have the other *comunidad* in his work life. Every morning he left the Estates for his Centro Médico in a Latino area in Brooklyn, a place my mother called, “a bad neighborhood.” The summers I worked at his office, I drove with him through block after block of brick apartment buildings bracketed by intricate fire escapes, a city of concrete. But the lively and populous street life was a lot more enticing than the lonely, deserted lawns back in Queens. At the Centro Médico the nurses were all Dominicans or Puerto Ricans with sometimes an Argentinian or Chilean lording it over us with her Castilian lisp and blond hair. No matter. Papi was boss, and I was la hija del doctor. His patients brought me pastelitos and dulce leche. The guys flirted with me, tossing out their piropos. (“Ay, look at those curves, and my brakes are short!”) I loved the place, though I admit, too, that I was very aware of my difference. At night, we drove back home to a welcome of sprinklers

waving their wands of water over our lookalike lawns. We were of another class, in other words, a difference that was signaled the minute I walked into our house and my mother instructed me to wash my hands. “You don't know what germs you picked up over there.”

But any *comunidad* we might have joined would have been temporary anyway. Worried about the poor reception and instruction we were receiving at the local school, my mother got scholarships for us to go away to school. We were cast adrift in the explosion of American culture on campuses in the late sixties and early seventies. Ethnicity was in. My classmates smoked weed from Mexico and Colombia and hitchhiked down the Pan American highway and joined the Peace Corps after college to expiate the sins of their country against underdeveloped and overexploited countries like, yes, the Dominican Republic. More than once I was asked to bear witness to this exploitation, and I, the least victimized of Dominicans, obliged. I was claiming my roots, my Dominicanness with a vengeance.

But what I needed was to put together my Dominican and American selves. An uncle who lived in New York gave me a piece of advice embedded in an observation: “The problem with you girls is that you were raised thinking you could go back to where you came from. Don't you see, you're here to stay?”

He was right; we were here to stay. But the problem was that American culture, as we had experienced it until then, had let us out, and so we felt we had to give up being Dominicans to be Americans. Perhaps in an earlier wave of immigration that would have sufficed—a good enough tradeoff, to leave your old country behind for the privilege of being a part of this one. But we were not satisfied with that. The melting pot was spilling over, and even Americans were claiming and proclaiming, not just their rights, but the integrity of their identities: Black is Beautiful, women's rights, gay rights.

What finally bridged these two worlds for me was writing. But for many years, I didn't have a vocabulary or context to write about the issues I had faced or was facing. Even after I discovered female models and found my own voice as a woman writer, I did not allow my “foreignness” to show. I didn't know it could be done. I had never seen it done. I had, in fact, been told it couldn't be done. One summer at Bread Loaf, a poet started categorically that one could write poetry only in the language in which one had first said *Mother*. Thank God, I had the example of William Carlos Williams to ward off some of the radical self-doubt this comment engendered.

How I discovered a way into my bicultural, bilingual experience was paradoxically not through a Hispanic American writer, but an Asian American one. Soon after it came out, I remember picking up *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston. I gobbled up the book, and then went back to the first page and read it through again. She addressed the duality of her experience, the Babel of voices in her head, the confusions and pressures of being a Chinese American female. It could be done!

With her as my model, I set out to write about my own experience as a Dominican American. And now that I had a name for what I had been experiencing, I could begin to understand it as not just my personal problem. I combed the bookstores and libraries. I discovered Latino writers I had never heard of: Piri Thomas, Ernesto Galarza, Rudolfo Anaya, José Antonio Villarreal, Gary Soto. But I could not find any women among these early Latino writers.

The eighties changed all that. In 1983, Alma Gómez, Cherríe 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 una literatura that testifies to our lives, provides acknowledgement of who we are: an exiled people, a migrant people, mujeres en la lucha. . . .

What hurts is the discovery of the measure of our silence. How deep it runs. How many of us are indeed caught, unreconciled between two languages, two political poles, and suffer the insecurities of that straddling.

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*; I published *Homecoming*. At Bread Loaf, I met Judith Ortiz Cofer and heard her read poems and stories that would soon find their way into her books of poems, stories, and essays, and her novel *The Line of the Sun*. Lorna Dee Cervantes, Cherríe Moraga, Helena María Viramontes, Denise Chavez. Suddenly there was a whole group of us, a tradition forming, a dialogue going on. And why not? If Hemingway and his buddies could have their Paris group, and the Black Mountain poets their school, why couldn't we Latinos and Latinas have our own mad-in-the-U.S.A. boom?

Still, I get nervous when people ask me to define myself as a writer. I hear the cage of a definition close around me with its "Latino subject matter," "Latino style," "Latino concerns." I find that the best way to define myself is through the stories and poems that do not limit me to a simple label, a choice. Maybe after years of feeling caught between being a "real Dominican" and being American, I shy away from simplistic choices that will leave out an important part of who I am or what my work is about.

Certainly none of us serious writers of Latino origin want to be a mere flash in the literary pan. We want to write good books that touch and move all our readers, not just those of our own particular ethnic background. We want our work to become part of the great body of all that has been thought and felt and written by writers of different cultures, languages, experiences, classes, races.

At last I found a comunidad in the word that I had never found in a neighborhood in this country. By writing powerfully about our Latino culture, we are forging a tradition and creating a literature that will widen and enrich the existing canon. So much depends upon our feeling that we have a right and responsibility to do this.

1998

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## DANA GIOIA

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(B. 1950)

Michael Dana Gioia (pronounced JOY-a) was born in Los Angeles, the oldest child in a working-class family of Italian, Mexican, and Native American heritage. His father, Michael Gioia, was a cabdriver who later owned a shoe store. His mother, Dorothy Ortiz, was a telephone operator. "I was raised in a tightly-knit Sicilian family," he once told an interviewer. "We lived in a triplex next to another triplex. Five of these six apartments were occupied by relatives. Conversations among adults were usually in their Sicilian dialect." In the same interview Gioia recalled his Catholic education: "I was in the last generation that experienced Latin as a living language." Although he was expelled three times from his all-boys Catholic high school for bad conduct, Gioia graduated in 1969 as valedictorian.

Receiving a scholarship to Stanford, Gioia became the first person in his family to attend college. At Stanford he wrote music and book reviews for the *Stanford Daily* and later edited the literary magazine, *Segnoia*. He also spent his sophomore year in Vienna, Austria, studying German and music. After taking his B.A. with highest honors in 1973, he went to Harvard, earning an M.A. in comparative literature in 1975, and studied with two influential poet-teachers, Robert Fitzgerald and Elizabeth Bishop, as well as the critics Northrop Frye and Edward Said. At Harvard Gioia decided his ambitions to be a writer had little to do with an academic career. Leaving the doctoral program, he returned to Stanford to earn an M.B.A. "I am probably the only person in history," he has remarked, "who went to Stanford Business School to be a poet." Moving to New York after graduation in 1977, Gioia worked for the next fifteen years as an executive for General Foods, eventually becoming a vice president. In 1980 he married Mary Hiecke, whom he had met at business school.

Despite his arduous career, Gioia devoted several hours a night to writing poetry and essays. His poems, essays, reviews, and memoirs gradually appeared in such magazines as the *Hudson Review*, *Poetry*, and the *New Yorker*. His first full-length collection of poems, *Daily Horoscope*, appeared in 1986. Although the book contained poems in both free verse and metrical forms, Gioia's formal work caught the attention of critics who began debating the merits of what they termed the "New Formalism," and the