

Jun-2016

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## Recommended Citation

Mayock, Ellen (2016). Julia Alvarez and Haiti: Transgressing Imposed Borders in In the Time of the Butterflies, A Wedding in Haiti, and Protests against Ruling 0168-13. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 17(3), 80-90.  
Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol17/iss3/7>

**Julia Alvarez and Haiti: Transgressing Imposed Borders in *In the Time of the Butterflies*,  
*A Wedding in Haiti*, and Protests against Ruling 0168-13**

By Ellen Mayock<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract**

Throughout her writing career Julia Alvarez has been examining definitions of the “Americas” and rethinking conceptualizations of the nation. Her multiperspectivist literary works have given voice to women of the Dominican Republic, Haiti, the United States, and to those who, as Alvarez says, “shift from foot to foot.” This article looks at Alvarez’s recent activism along the Haiti-Dominican Republic border and calls upon Alvarez’s *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994) to establish how the author uses the feminist and activist transgressions of the Mirabal sisters to speak against the Dominican legacy of anti-Haitian sentiment and political action, so firmly entrenched by Rafael Trujillo and by subsequent Dominican leaders. It then examines Alvarez’s travel memoir, *A Wedding in Haiti* (2012), to analyze how she uses memoir as her own *testimonio* of the possibility of redefined relationships across Hispaniola’s national borders. These relationships eschew masculinist, dictatorial, and anti-Haitian vitriol and embrace person-to-person encounters and grass-roots activism, core elements of Alvarez’s notion of *comunidad*.

*Keywords:* literary criticism; Dominican Republic-Haiti; migration; memoir; activism

*When we have seen a thing, we have to tell the story.*  
Julia Alvarez (*A Wedding in Haiti* 127)

In her travel memoir, *A Wedding in Haiti*, author Julia Alvarez sees many “things” in the Dominican Republic’s fraught relationship with Haiti. In the following example, she recounts a labor matter that arose on the Dominican coffee farm she runs with her husband Bill Eichner:

One time a contingent of Dominican workers on the farm came to us protesting the fact that Haitian workers got the same daily wage as they. And yet, were it not for Haitian labor, Dominican agriculture, in addition to many other sectors of the economy, would come to a standstill. But no matter our interdependence, and

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I say this with shame, a poor Haitian can't count on having rights on Dominican soil. (111)

Published in 2012, these words recall the long history of Dominican oppression of Haitians and presage the activism that Alvarez will undertake in late 2013 surrounding the trans-Caribbean tensions between these two nations that share an island. Alvarez's developing notion of "Caribbeanness," focused in her earlier works on navigating Dominican-U.S. cultures and in the later works on Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and their diasporas in the United States, is encapsulated in her humanist notion of *comunidad*. Alvarez's creative and theoretical conceptualization of *comunidad* crosses from the fictional to the non-fictional, from the literary to the real, and back again. Alvarez disrupts borders and questions patriarchal and colonial divisions of race and nationality by engaging in political activism and generating creative works in multiple genres, including narrative, testimonial, and travel memoir.

This article looks at Alvarez's recent activism along the Haiti-Dominican border and then calls upon Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994) to establish how the author uses the feminist and activist transgressions of the Mirabal sisters to speak against the Dominican legacy of anti-Haitian sentiment and political action, so firmly entrenched by Rafael Trujillo and by subsequent Dominican leaders. It then examines Alvarez's travel memoir, *A Wedding in Haiti* (2012), to analyze how she uses memoir as her own *testimonio* of the possibility of redefined relationships across Hispaniola's national borders. These relationships eschew masculinist, dictatorial, and anti-Haitian vitriol and embrace person-to-person encounters and grass-roots activism, fundamental elements of Alvarez's notion of *comunidad*. 2014 National Medal of the Arts winner Alvarez, through her individual and collective projects, aims to improve relations between the two nations of Hispaniola and among the residents of these nations and their diasporas. Throughout her writing career Alvarez has been examining definitions of the "Americas" and rethinking conceptualizations of the nation. Her multiperspectivist literary works have given voice to women of the Dominican Republic, Haiti, the United States, and to multicultural peoples who, as Yolanda García says in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, "shift from foot to foot" (107).<sup>2</sup> While Ylce Irizarry characterizes Dominican-American writer Junot Díaz's short stories in *Drown* to be a "narrative of fracture" (90), Alvarez's oeuvre might well be characterized as narratives of parts and wholes, fractures and repairs, and a consistent journey towards, and sometimes with, those considered 'other.'<sup>3</sup>

Along with writers Mark Kurlansky, Junot Díaz, and Edwidge Danticat, Alvarez wrote a Letter to the Editor of *The New York Times* on October 29, 2013, condemning the Dominican Republic court order, effective in September, 2012, "to audit all of the nation's birth records back to June 1929 to determine who no longer qualifies for citizenship" (Archibold). Alvarez and her literary cohort begin their letter by asserting that, "For any who thought that there was a new Dominican Republic, a modern state leaving behind the abuse and racism of the past, the highest court in the country has taken a huge step backward with Ruling 0168-13" (*The New York Times*,

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<sup>2</sup> See the 2013 volume of essays titled *Inhabiting La Patria. Identity, Agency, and Antojo in the Work of Julia Alvarez* for a rich array of analyses of Alvarez's works up to *A Wedding in Haiti*. For a nuanced examination of space and place in Alvarez's works, see Kelli Lyon Johnson's *Julia Alvarez. Writing a New Place on the Map*. Silvio Sirias's *Julia Alvarez. A Critical Companion* does a careful job of tracing for students Alvarez's earlier works. Finally, Alvarez's 1998 *Something to Declare*, her 1998 volume of essays, is a useful tool for mapping Alvarez's world view up to 1998.

<sup>3</sup> See Lucía M. Suárez's "Julia Alvarez and the Anxiety of Latina Representation" for a further examination of the representation of "'broken' memories" (117) in the works of Julia Alvarez.

Oct. 31, 2013). Alvarez, Danticat, Díaz, and Kurlanksy go on to link the current racial profiling to dictator Rafael Trujillo's legacy: "Such appalling racism is a continuation of a history of constant abuse, including the infamous Dominican massacre, under the dictator Rafael Trujillo, of an estimated 20,000 Haitians in five days in October 1937." Their letter is a call to action to the world (they explicitly ask, "How should the world react?") and demonstrates the extent to which well-known writers can often do what individual nations and states do not (or choose not to)—bridge political, hegemonic, and cultural gaps that are so often reinforced through nationalist rhetoric and warfare. Cuban-born writer Achy Obejas contributed an opinion piece on "Citizens of Nowhere" to *The New York Times* in February of 2014. In this piece, Obejas implicates the United States in its lack of response or action to the Dominican ruling: "At 1.5 million strong, Dominicans are the fifth-largest Latin American immigrant group in the United States. So one might think that the U.S.—led by its first black president—might have, at the very least, issued a few words of protest."<sup>4</sup> Given the United States' long history of heavy-handed intervention (to say the least) in the region—from the Monroe Doctrine to the Roosevelt Corollary to the training of military troops in Caribbean nations (just to name a few examples)—Obejas' admonition is certainly warranted.

At the same time, the *The New York Times* Letter to the Editor by Dominican Ambassador to the United States Aníbal de Castro, published alongside the Alvarez group letter, reveals the degree to which the Dominican Republic purposefully ignores the racist import of Ruling 0168-13. The Ambassador writes: "The Dominican government is fully aware of the plight of the children of illegal Haitian migrants born in the country who lack identity documents. This does not, however, render them stateless. As your article says, Haiti's Constitution bestows citizenship on any person born of Haitian parents anywhere in the world." This statement reinforces the Dominican Republic's state rejection of Haitians, even those born on Dominican soil to parents who may have spent decades in the Dominican Republic, and highlights the revolutionary nature of the Haitian Constitution. In his letter, Aníbal de Castro acknowledges that Haiti and the Dominican Republic "*may* have a fractious history" (italics mine), but goes on to insist that the two nations have worked together since the 2010 earthquake to find "joint solutions to common challenges." After the publication of these letters in the United States, intense international pressure (from, for example, the United Nations, the Caribbean Community [CARICOM], and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States [CELAC]) influenced the Dominican Republic to engage in talks with Haiti to ease the situation for the "stateless" peoples of Haitian descent living in the Dominican Republic (Agyapong, COHA, February 27, 2014).

*The New York Times's* decision to juxtapose these two letters reinforces the Manichean ways in which the Haiti-Dominican Republic split is often portrayed. At the same time, however, the publication reveals the power of a literary collective to make concrete statements that have an impact on political and diplomatic actions in the region. The letter demonstrates the world view of Alvarez, a well-known Dominican-American author who is always reaching across the divide, the aisle, the border to embrace other individuals, groups, and nations.

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<sup>4</sup> In "Making It Home: A New Ethics of Immigration in Dominican Literature," Ylce Irizarry makes the excellent point that the Spanish Caribbean and its diasporas have different histories with and receptions in the United States, and that these differences can be seen in the varying notions of "arrival" (or lack thereof) in terms of national and/or migrant status. (See, in particular, p. 91.)

In the PBS documentary, “Black in Latin America,” Henry Louis Gates stands by “Massacre River,” which marks the border between the Dominican Republic and Haiti.<sup>5</sup> As he signals the importance of the river, site of the 1937 Parsley Massacre of tens of thousands of Haitians by order of Rafael Trujillo, Gates addresses the typical dichotomies drawn between the two nations: Dominicans celebrate their European (Spanish) heritage, while Haitians proudly see their nation as African; Dominicans practice Catholicism, while Haitians practice Vodou; Dominicans identify as brown (“café con leche”), and Haitians as black.<sup>6</sup> These divisions and distinctions are certainly relevant, but what Alvarez accomplishes through her fiction, travel memoir, and activism is a recognition of these divisions *and* an analysis of the commonalities between and among the peoples of these two nations. She subtly reaches across national lines, across the Massacre River, the scar of Hispaniola, in order to effect change through one person or family at a time.

*In the Time of the Butterflies*, Alvarez’s complex testimonial novel, which recounts the lives and political struggles of the four Mirabal sisters during the Trujillo regime, is clearly a literary-historical-political project that overlaps with the genre of the Latin American *testimonio* and seeks some form of solution and/or reconciliation. While in this work Alvarez does not focus on the Haiti-Dominican Republic split, she does, through a multivoiced narrative centered on the four Mirabal sisters, examine the dangers, threats, violence, and insidious cultural change imposed by the Trujillo regime. These violent acts recall the dictator’s pedophilic abuse of Dominican women and racist massacre of thousands of his Haitian neighbors. Alvarez begins *In the Time of the Butterflies* from Dedé Mirabal’s point of view:

“You and Trujillo,” Papá says loudly, and in this clear peaceful night they all fall silent. Suddenly, the dark fills with spies who are paid to hear things and report them down at Security. *Don Enrique claims Trujillo needs help in running the country. Don Enrique’s daughter says it’s about time women took over the government.* Words repeated, distorted, words recreated by those who might bear them a grudge, words stitched to words until they are the winding sheet the family will be buried in when their bodies are found dumped in a ditch, their tongues cut off for speaking too much. (10)

This passage begins and ends with silence, a silence that Alvarez breaks through the testimonial cycle of her writing.<sup>7</sup> Alvarez also alludes to the Dominican Independence Day, February 27, 1944, without making clear that this independence was from Haiti and not Spain. Minerva Mirabal as narrator recounts the tale of the “big loyalty performance” (24) at her school, in which, “Our history now followed the plot of the Bible. We Dominicans had been waiting for centuries for the arrival of our Lord Trujillo on the scene. It was pretty disgusting” (24). The timing (the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dominican independence from Haiti) and the physical setting (a girls’ school from

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<sup>5</sup> Kelli Lyon Johnson provides additional history surrounding this river: “Together, Haiti and the Dominican Republic form the island named Hispaniola, and between Haiti and the Dominican Republic runs the Massacre River, named for the slaughter of thirty buccaneers by Spanish colonials in 1728. The river earned its name again in 1937, when Generalísimo Rafael Leonidas Trujillo ordered the massacre of thousands of Haitians living on the border in the Dominican Republic” (“Both Sides” 75).

<sup>6</sup> See also Chapter 8 of Peter Winn’s *Americas* volume to learn more about racial and cultural perceptions on the island of Hispaniola.

<sup>7</sup> See Jessica Wells Cantiello’s article on Julia Alvarez’s “testimonial cycle” to understand the trajectory of Alvarez’s testimonial-style writing up to the time of her trip to Haiti.

which Trujillo plucks more young women to abuse) reinforces Trujillo's racial and sexual domination of the island. In this sense, Alvarez here is undoing—through Minerva Mirabal's scornful words—national messages of religion and supremacy, messages that reinforce the fractured relationship with Haiti.

In her article on master narratives in *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Katie Daily-Bruckner examines the incorporation of María Teresa Mirabal's diary as another multivoiced technique by Alvarez to make manifest the violence and sexual torture of the Trujillo regime. Daily-Bruckner emphasizes that the pages torn from Maté's diary underscore the physical torture Maté suffered and the censorship of her attempts to record her experiences (242). María Teresa's diary has the most direct *testimonio* feeling of all of the narrators and narrations in the novel, in part because it is a first-person diary and particularly because it reinforces the silences imposed by the dictatorship.

Patria Mirabal, originally the most saintly and obedient of the four sisters, also experiences a political epiphany as she realizes the personal and collective damage wrought by Trujillo during his thirty-one years in power:

That moment, I understood her [Minerva's] hatred. My family had not been personally hurt by Trujillo, just as before losing my baby, Jesus had not taken anything away from me. But others had been suffering great losses. There were the Perozos, not a man left in that family. And Martínez Reyna and his wife murdered in their bed, and thousands of Haitians massacred at the border, making the river, they say, still run red--¡Ay, Dios santo! (53)

Patria, whose name means 'fatherland,' significantly ruptures the notion of Trujillo's fatherland—his conceptualization of a Dominican nation based on religious, military, and patriarchal might—as she joins the revolutionary cause of her sisters and their compatriots. Patria's narration of her loss of faith is both personal and political, individual and collective, as she enumerates the incidents of violence produced by Trujillo. Last in her list, but certainly not least, is the memory of the murdered Haitians, whose blood in the border river serves as testimony for future generations. In fact, it is to this river that Alvarez returns in 2012 to commemorate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Haitian Massacre and to join with both Dominicans and Haitians at the site of their greatest violence to attempt to recognize and reconcile. In her interview with the blog Shelf-Awareness, Alvarez announced that, "On October 6, 2012, a Saturday, we will gather at the border—writers, artists, farmers, people in solidarity from both sides and from around the world are invited to come together—to create a Border of Light, filling that 'no man's land' of the border with poetry, music, dancing, storytelling, conversation, communion" (n.p.). These are the specific ingredients of Alvarez's activism, and they contribute more often and more convincingly to her literary works as she writes, works, and involves others in her quest for increased harmony between these two Caribbean nations.

What Alvarez decries in her fiction, she later takes on as an activist who is aware of the complex position she often occupies—a Dominican-American with roots in both the Dominican Republic and the United States, a woman who experienced in both nations the gender revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s, and an individual who can move easily and travel widely and must acknowledge that privilege. Literary critic Silvio Torres-Saillant theorizes that Dominican recognition of the nation's African roots can be enhanced quite possibly through a greater race consciousness of the Dominican diaspora in the United States (qtd. in Heredia, 208). Juanita

Heredia astutely states that Torres-Saillant is suggesting that “the Dominican diaspora can play a crucial role in fomenting a new consciousness of what it means to be Afro-Dominican, a double diaspora, which consists of a two-part journey from Africa to Hispaniola (present Haiti and the Dominican Republic) and then to the United States” (208). In this sense, transnational currents can effectively agitate the concepts of nations and their political, racial, and cultural hegemonies, thus gesturing towards Caribbeanness as a means to understand regional cultures and their diasporic manifestations.

In an interview about *A Wedding in Haiti*, Alvarez says, “One of the questions and quests in the book concerns what the role is of the storyteller in the circle of social justice and transformative change. What can a story do for us that nothing else in our human experience can do in this same stirring, powerful way?” (Shelf Awareness, n.p.). Alvarez’s winking eye recaptures some of the spirit of the *testimonio* of *In the Time of the Butterflies* in this entirely non-fiction travel memoir, *A Wedding in Haiti*. Alvarez remarks, “There is a tradition in Latin American countries known as *testimonio*. It is the responsibility of those who survive the struggle for freedom to give testimony. To tell the story in order to keep alive the memory of those who died” (cited in Wells Cantiello, 142). In the case of *A Wedding in Haiti*, Alvarez shares the testimony of those who lived (Piti and his relatives), as well as that of those who died (the over 100,000 who died in the 2010 earthquake in Haiti). In so doing, she makes a feminist-humanist move to work against the patriarchally imposed and long-standing hegemony of the Dominican Republic over Haiti. Alvarez breaks through imposed binaries by listening, questioning, valuing a plurality of voices, and taking action in her writing and life. One glance at the Duke University Press’s 2014 *Dominican Republic Reader* reveals the degree to which women’s voices—in historical, political, and cultural realms—are close to non-existent.<sup>8</sup> Alvarez’s prolific career works to undo this silencing of women as writers and citizens of the world.

“The cultural production of Caribbean authors,” writes Myriam J.A. Chancy, “whether inside or outside of the region, is such that it bears a responsibility to its multiple audiences: one debt to history and another to memory” (xi). This weighty double-debt emphasizes the importance of historians’ scholarship with primary documents and that of novelists’, poets’, and essayists’ production surrounding memory and testimony. Certainly, these debts are well paid in the works of Alvarez. *A Wedding in Haiti*, which tells of Alvarez’s and (her husband) Bill Eichner’s promise to go to their friend Piti’s wedding, focuses on the concept of transnational *comunidad* and international consciousness of Haiti’s unique needs after the devastating 2010 earthquake. In her 2002 article “Transnational feminisms in question,” feminist theorist Breny Mendoza warns that a continued dependence upon notions of “global sisterhood” (via Robin Morgan) and transnational feminisms (key theories of the 1990s and early 2000s) has the power to diminish advancements made by Latin American feminists in real, on-the-ground practices in specific locations, to privilege again “First-World” and middle-class “Third World” feminists over other voices, and to bow to globalized media powers.<sup>9</sup> This astute critique of the advantages and disadvantages of

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<sup>8</sup> Readers might observe, too, that all of the featured color photographs on the cover and in the middle of the book are of men, except for the vaunted photograph of the Virgin of Altigracia.

<sup>9</sup> Mendoza enumerates the principal ways in which the transnational feminist movement has contributed to critiques of patriarchy, colonialism, racism, and heterosexism: “The major contributions that transnationalist postcolonial feminists have made to both masculinist versions of transnationalism and previous feminist globalism can be seen in their unveiling of the gendered, patriarchal, racialized and (hetero)sexualized character of nationalism. The use of the iconography of the family and blood ties to construct the national imaginary and ‘the metaphoric use of “woman” as “nation” (Grewal and Kaplan, 1994:22) stands in the middle of this feminist transnational post-colonial critique which demystifies and dismantles anti-colonial and nationalist liberation struggles as male heterosexual

transnational feminisms and of the romanticized nature of a global sisterhood is pertinent in the case of Alvarez's travel memoir. Alvarez is the owner of the Dominican coffee farm and employs there Dominican and Haitian workers and does certainly come from a position of economic privilege. Nevertheless, Alvarez consistently acknowledges the power of her position while also insisting that it is still acceptable, maybe even imperative, for her to have a voice in change. Her use of the rhetoric of global sisterhood ("Haiti is the sister I never knew") actually comes directly from a friend she quotes in the memoir who speaks of Haiti as "the brother he never knew" (14). They are referring very explicitly to a history of violent separation of Dominicans and Haitians but also to a physical proximity that foments real familial links and engenders family metaphors. In short, the family metaphor also gestures towards a notion of Caribbeanness across Hispaniola.

In the Fall, 2014, issue of *Ms. Magazine*, there is a piece by Alvarez titled "To Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz After Reading Her Poems" (the article is an excerpt from Alvarez's introduction to Edith Grossman's 2014 *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Selected Works by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* [Norton]) and is followed by Edith Grossman's translation of Sor Juana's famous *Redondilla 92* ("Hombres necios que acusáis"). In this article, Alvarez celebrates the broad interest in 17<sup>th</sup>-century writer-superstar-feminist Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Ultimately, in Sor Juana, Alvarez recognizes another *comunidad* and greater hope for gender equality. This search for *comunidad*—as defined by literary production that advocates for equality across gender, race, class, national origin, and religion—through the generations and across national borders (U.S.-Dominican Republic-Haiti) undergirds *A Wedding in Haiti*.

The strengths of Alvarez's transnational feminism in this memoir are many: she gets to know people and speaks specifically about the plights of real individuals and families, and she goes to the source. She does the real work of travel and documentation that many have chosen not to do; she is physically present and literarily active in order to advocate for change, always conscious of her position and its potential perception.

Piti, a young employee on Alvarez's and Eichner's coffee farm in the Dominican Republic, becomes friends with the couple, who learn that he has a girlfriend back in Haiti and that they will soon have a daughter. The subtitle of the work is "The Story of a Friendship," and the memoir is dedicated to "los pitouses and all the Ludys," which is to say, Piti's immediate and extended family in Haiti. In the opening pages of the narration, Alvarez recounts how her friendship with the young Piti developed:

What I felt toward the boy was unaccountably maternal. Somewhere in Haiti, a mother had sent her young son to the wealthier neighbor country to help the impoverished family. Maybe this very moment she was praying that her boy be safe, earn good money, encounter kind people. Every time I spotted the grinning boy with worried eyes, I felt the pressure of that mother's prayer in my own eyes. (4-5)

This familial link becomes a metonymy of *comunidad*, for it allows Alvarez, her husband, and her parents to come to know well the friends and family of Piti both from and in Haiti. The trek across Massacre River to get Piti to his own wedding, harrowing in and of itself because the group (which

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constructs and as reconstitutions of male national power in the aftermath of colonialism. Interestingly, what this kind of analysis has enabled, at the same time, is the uncovering of the complicity of white women in the history of colonialism and imperialism" (320). Certainly, this critique is applicable to the family metaphor at the center of *A Wedding in Haiti*.

includes Alvarez, Eichner, Piti, and four of their friends) is not sure how the undocumented Piti will make it back into the Dominican Republic with a Haitian wife and child, represents Alvarez's unique brand of *comunidad*, which is person-to-person, heart-to-heart, and, significantly in the case of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, nation-to-nation. Alvarez ruminates early in the memoir, "Sometimes a conscience is an inconvenient thing to have, and costly. But not to follow it exacts an even greater cost, having to live with the hobbled person you become when you ignore it" (12). These words resonate well beyond the Alvarez-Piti link and remind Alvarez's readers how much peacemaking and community-building remain to be done. Later in the narration, Alvarez warns, "There is a bottom line below which you cannot go and still call yourself a human being" (85). This line from the travel memoir links to Alvarez's activism surrounding the "stateless" peoples in the Dominican Republic and her exhortations to her readers to effect positive change. Her use of such absolute terms as "bottom line" and "human being" implies again a broader, more global notion of *comunidad*.

The maternal weight of Alvarez's relationship with Piti evolves into a more multidimensional family metaphor which is sustained in the memoir. Dominican friend Homero wants to join the group on the trip to Haiti because, as he says, "Haiti is like a brother I've never gotten to know" (14). As mentioned previously, Alvarez's numerous interviews about *A Wedding in Haiti* include references to Haiti as "the sister I hardly knew," again demonstrating Alvarez's longing to travel through and become more familiar with Haiti as neighbor, nation, and Caribbean culture. The photographs that dot the narration help readers to get to know Alvarez and her relatives, Piti and his relatives, the Hispaniola landscape, and some snapshots of daily life on the island both before and after the earthquake. Another paratextual element of the memoir is a map of the journey from Alvarez's parents' house in Santiago, Dominican Republic, to the homes of Piti, his mother, his wife Eseline, and their friend Charlie, all in or near Moustique and Haute Moustique in the northwestern corner of Haiti. These visual markers make the reader feel like she is flipping through a family album, temporarily a part of this group or community, and thus extends the *comunidad* metaphor beyond the pages of the memoir itself. Alvarez consistently reminds her readers of the importance of language(s) in individual and collective identities. In one lovely section, she speaks of a saying that exists in Dominican Spanish and in Haitian Kreyòl: "*Dos montañas no se juntan pero dos personas sí,*" the Dominicans like to say, a saying that also exists in Kreyòl: '*Dé mònpa janm kontré, min dè moun vivan kontré.*' Two mountains never meet, but two people can meet again" (194).<sup>10</sup> The linguistic commonalities across these two languages signal cultural proximity, a type of Caribbean community, while the sayings themselves demonstrate that human beings can at least partially overcome what appear to be vast differences.

Most of Alvarez's assertions are about Haitian-Dominican history, memory, and relations, but she sometimes extrapolates from that specific geopolitical location to highlight similar phenomena among other nations: "Since then [1937], relations between the two countries have never again erupted into outright violence. But conflicts persist, as undocumented Haitians cross over into their comparatively richer neighbor country, willing to do work Dominicans won't do, often underpaid and poorly treated, a situation not unlike Mexicans who come to El Norte in search of a better life" (27). Alvarez not only raises consciousness about Haitian-Dominican relations, but she also points to other borders and limits, for example of her own father's escape from the Dominican Republic to the United States and then to Canada to find work as a medical doctor (18-

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<sup>10</sup> In an opinion piece in *The New York Times*, Michel DeGraff and Molly Ruggles write of the importance of the Kreyòl language to Haitian and Haitian diasporic cultures and advocate for an expansion of the use of the language in formal realms as "a tool for economic empowerment."

19). Her own family's story of migration speaks to similar migratory patterns throughout the Hemisphere that need attention and care.

While the first half of the memoir treats the road trip to Piti's wedding in 2009, the second half tells of the group's return to Haiti after the earthquake in 2010. Alvarez refers to the January 12, 2010, date as "the end of the world" (143). This section opens with a description of the geographic location of the earthquake, its distance from Alvarez's parents' house in Santiago, and a geologic-literary rumination about how the North American plate "is jamming itself under the other, the Caribbean plate, which has nowhere to go" (144). The author then provides the staggering statistics of devastation wrought by the natural disaster (144-145), followed immediately by Piti's poignant words, "We are thankful and we are mourning" (147). Alvarez does not shy away from the question of what is natural about this kind of disaster, as she associates the expansive loss of human lives and structures with the profound poverty of the nation (149). In this sense, Alvarez identifies with Haiti and delves into the depths of its history, society, culture, and economy to understand better the observations she makes during the course of her travels.

The activist literary collective I mentioned at the beginning of this article also appears in the pages of *A Wedding in Haiti*. Edwidge Danticat, author of so many great works, including *The Farming of Bones* (1998), which details the Trujillo massacre of Haitians from a Haitian perspective, is quoted in a section late in the book in which Alvarez is looking at the relative nature of suffering, according to social class. Alvarez writes: "In her essay, 'Daughters of Memory,' the Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat asks, 'Is all suffering equal...when the people who suffer are not considered equal?'" (224). In this literary nod to a Haitian-American writer with origin in, love of, and devotion to a part of Hispaniola, Alvarez again reaches across the border(s) (Haiti-Dominican Republic, Haiti-United States, Dominican Republic-United States) to testify, credit, and make change. She later invokes Dominican-American writer Junot Díaz's name: "We should be held accountable for our fears, be forced to journey to the hearts of darkness of our own imaginings. We might find ourselves surprised, uttering not 'The horror! The horror!' with Joseph Conrad, but 'The Beauty! The Beauty!' with Junot Díaz" (261). And so Alvarez establishes the contours of a literary-political activism that will be enacted in the protests against Ruling 0168-13.

Alvarez's notion of *comunidad* relates to what Daynalí Flores-Rodriguez calls a "Trans-Caribbean Poetics" (2). *Comunidad* accomplishes the following: (1) It establishes a feminist-humanist cosmivision that breaks with patriarchally imposed norms of paradigms of superiority based on economic status, national borders and histories, race, sex, gender, and religion; (2) It offers to the world both a warning about the effects of individual and collective selfishness and greed and an optimism about how generosity of spirit *and* resources can effect change; (3) It reminds us of our coexistence with the world: "How we respond to Haiti is perhaps more critical than we imagine: a preview of where we are likely to end up as a human family" (282); (4) It reinforces the power of both the reality and the metaphor of the journey, which can help us to "[go] against the currents of history, headed—so I hope—in a new direction" (30); (5) It gives powerful nods to other writers of various diasporas, thus allowing Alvarez to realize aspirations mapped in her 1995 essay "On Finding a Latino Voice": "At last, I have found a *comunidad* in the word that I had never found in the 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" (133). This "community in the word" of Alvarez's literary works has clearly evolved into a community of the world in her group activism and literary production of the past several years.

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