

Copyright © Antonia Domínguez Miguela

· This online article may be cited or briefly quoted in line with the usual academic conventions. You may also print it for your own personal use. This paper must not be published elsewhere without the author's explicit permission. But please note that if you copy this paper you must include this copyright note.

· You should observe the conventions of academic citation in a version of the following form: Domínguez Miguela, Antonia. "Growing Up Latina in the United States: Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* and Judith Ortiz Cofer's *The Line of the Sun*." *US Latina Women's Narrative*. 15 January 2002. <Date of access> <<http://www.uhu.es/antonia.dominguez/latinas/growing.pdf>>

**Growing Up Latina in the United States: Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*,  
Judith Ortiz Cofer's *The Line of the Sun*.**

Antonia Domínguez Miguela

*Universidad de Huelva*

The writings of Latina authors represent an excellent illustration of how issues of gender, race, culture, and class become intertwined when individuals from a marginalized group try to define their own identity in relation to US mainstream society. The works by Julia Alvarez, Sandra Cisneros and Judith Ortiz Cofer are a conscious attempt to describe the experience of growing up Latina between two different worlds and their search for a new self. They try to reconcile both worlds by keeping the best of them even when that implies revisioning and sometimes condemning those aspects of each culture which oppress women. We will notice how these three writers address the same kind of issues though each of them may emphasize one issue over the other due to their different backgrounds and experiences. For the sake of a richer analysis, I have chosen Latinas from different Latino communities (Chicano, Puerto Rican and Dominican) and from different social classes (working class, middle and upper class).

Any human being experiences a series of developmental stages until they reach maturity becoming social subjects. The first contact a child experiences is that within the private sphere of the family and the extended unit of the community or neighborhood.. For Latinos, the home is the sanctuary of their ethnic heritage which can range from moral values to food and music. But while growing up they have to face the world outside the home and may experience the encounter as a clash in terms of race, customs, language, color and cultural values. This clash between cultures provokes a tension and confusion that usually has negative consequences for the development of the child as a person. For a Latina the tension is even greater when trying to resolve the conflict between her family’s and community’s expectations and her individual need to adjust to American society and make the best of herself.

The main problem for Latinas is the fact that though they want to keep their Latino heritage, they realize that it is also defined by rituals and roles which make women prisoners inside their culture. Some Latino values are no longer valuable or justifiable because of the way women are bound to them. They don’t want to follow models they find at home but they don’t want to become outsiders inside their community either. Why is the family and the community so important for young Latinos and most especially for young Latinas? As Jean Franco says “Family is the place where the wounds of immigration are suffered and sometimes healed” but

even so, “‘becoming a women’ can turn into tragedy” (Fernandez xviii).

Even when they are not immigrants but native born minorities (as in the case of Cisneros), Latina writers stress the idea of belonging to a community to a greater or lesser extent. We also have to notice that the sense of belonging to a community has a close relation to social background. For instance the Chicano community is really important for Esperanza in *Mango Street*: she stresses her intention to come back for the people who could not go and find a house of her own. For the Garcia girls, their sense of community is restricted to their own family without contact with other Latinos. In Ortiz Cofer’s book, the movement from working to middle class as Marisol grows up also implies a progressive distance from El Building which is the symbol of the Puerto Rican community in Paterson.

Although, all these texts can be considered *Buildungsromane*, they, in different ways, subvert the male version of a *buildungsroman*, usually characterized by personal introspection, and search for individual achievement and self-discovery. One of these ways is their emphasis on the role of community. Susan Stanford Friedman notes that, for these writers, “Isolate individualism is an illusion. It is also the privilege of power. A white man has the luxury of forgetting his skin color and sex. He can think of himself as an “individual.” Women and minorities, reminded at every turn in the great hall of mirrors of their sex and color, have no such luxury” (Qtd. in Gutierrez-Jones 15). In Cisneros’ text Esmeralda finally realizes that she

can’t escape and find a place for her in society by forgetting “the ones who cannot leave as easily as you” (105). That conclusion is foreseen by the three sisters: “When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street” (105).

Though both Cisneros and Ortiz Cofer emphasize the importance of belonging to a community, they also criticize its negative aspects: Cisneros stresses the gender oppression within the Chicano community, Ortiz Cofer calls attention to the inappropriateness of turning El Building “into a bizarre facsimile of an Island barrio” (220) in the USA and the shortcomings that this can bring to its members. Among the Garcías a sense of community is only to be found in the island since the Garcia family is literally isolated from other Latinos in the US. In some ways, this makes the process of growing up for the Garcia girls even more difficult since they do not have contact with other young people going through the same problems. It is necessary to notice how there is a conscious attempt not to mix with other immigrants because the Garcías feel themselves different and of a higher status than the common immigrant. Their isolation comes to reinforce the idea that they are the only ones who think that they still belong to the upper class, even though they do not in American society: “We met the right kind of Americans all right, but they didn’t exactly mix with us” (108). When Yolanda comes back to the island after having lost her social “pride” she experiences a new clash of cultures at the social

level. She has progressively forgotten that she belonged to the upper class and is not supposed to get mixed up with lower class people: “Maybe I can pick some [guavas] when I go north in a few days...I’ll take the bus.” “A bus!” The whole group bursts out laughing...”Yolanda, *mi amor*, you *have* been gone long,” Lucinda teases. “Can’t you see it!?” She laughs. “Yoyo climbing into an old *camioneta* with all the *campesinos* and their fighting cocks and their goats and their pigs!” (9)

Some social theories can help us understand the interrelation between ethnic consciousness, social and economic circumstances. Sociologist Milton Gordon distinguished cultural (adoption of language, cultural values, norms) and structural assimilation (equal member of society in terms of economic situation, social mobility, etc.). For racial minorities, cultural assimilation did not always imply structural assimilation. William Tabb and Robert Baluner present as a possible cause “internal colonialism:” “The maintenance of subordinate racial minorities provided the capitalist power structure with a cheap and easily exploitable reserve labor force. The weapons of internal colonialism were both economic and ideological. Racial minorities were kept subordinate economically by denying them access to such social goods as quality education, employment and housing. Continued denial of access was justified on the grounds that they were inferior to the dominant white society and lack the cultural capacity to assimilate into American society” (139). When trying to apply these theories to the texts we are analyzing, we

come to some interesting observations: In the Chicano community of *Mango Street* and in El Building, in *The Line of the Sun*, the sense of “ethnic enclosure” (greater ethnic identity among groups failing to assimilate because of their socioeconomic difference) permeates Esperanza’s and Marisol’s narrations (though the latter to a lesser extent because of the movement from El Building to the suburbs).

Though Esperanza is the character who most eagerly wants to escape from the House on Mango Street, she is also the one most worried about those left behind. The house and Mango street are symbols of the situation of the Latino community and general social markers: “Which one is your house?... That one?” She [Sister Superior] said, pointing to a row of ugly three-flats, the ones even the raggedy men are ashamed to go into. Yes, I nodded even though I knew that wasn’t my house and started to cry. I always cry when nuns yell at me, even if they’re not yelling.” (45). Esperanza’s longing for a white house “with trees around it, a great big yard and grass growing without a fence” is her plea for justice in a society which denies the victims of racism and poverty a decent living space. The last quotation contrasts with this one from *The García Girls*: “Only a month ago, they [the Garcia Family] had moved out of the city to a neighborhood on Long Island so that the girls could have a yard to play in” (151).

Esperanza’s attachment to the Chicano community contrasts with the Garcia girls easier assimilation facilitated by their better standard of living because their

father had an education and because of his high social standing in the island could get good “contacts” among Americans to improve his economical situation. We find statements by some of the girls (even the mother who grew up in the island!) that are rarely found in the other texts: “Laura had gotten used to the life here [USA]. She did not want to go back to the old country where, de la Torre or not, she was only a wife and a mother” (143); “We began to develop a taste for the American teenage good life, and soon, Island was old hat, man... By the end of a couple of years away from home. We had *more* than adjusted” (109), “my sisters and I had been pretty well Americanized since our arrival in this country a decade before” (87). They are so Americanized that the trips to the island are “met with annual resistance from all four of us” (109) or seen as a punishment: “Winter whenever one of us got out of line, Mami and Papi would march out the old ‘Maybe what you need *right now* is some time back home to help set you straight.’ We’d shape up pretty quick, or pretend to” (109).

Marisol is somewhere in the middle between the Garcia girls and Esperanza. Though she is really conscious of the situation of Latinos in the US, she has the privilege of going away to the suburbs thank to her hardworking father. But, she assimilates only to the extent that she thinks is necessary to live decently and escape racism and discrimination: “I learned something during those days: though I would always carry my Island heritage on my back like a snail, I belonged in the world of

phones, offices, concrete buildings, and the English language” (273). Ortiz Cofer is not so much concerned about social responsibility. Her main goal is to present a model of adjustment and improvement and at the same time presenting a case against the prevalent stereotypes about Puerto Rican immigrants. Her social concerns are reduced to denouncing the problems that immigrants face when they try to adjust and make a better living in the United States.

These three writers share an attempt to recover traditional practices which give a distinct identity to a people. Each of them, however, also criticizes some of these traditions because of the difficulties that their own inappropriateness to the new environment can bring to the new generation growing up in its hostility. Cisneros emphasizes those patriarchal values that entrap women in lives that they do not chose to live. This is the case of Rosa Vargas, mother of many kids, whose husband “left without even leaving a dollar or a note explaining how come” (29), of Earl’s wife, “a skinny thing, blond and pale like salamanders that have never seen the sun” (71), of Rafaela who is “locked indoors because her husband is afraid Rafaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at” (79), of Minerva “with two kids and a husband who left and keeps leaving” (85).

One of the problems Latinas face once they decide to fight against any kind of social, racial or sexual discrimination is to find appropriate alternative models. They do not have any. They have to invent a new role; as Sandra Cisneros says: “I

went through great trauma in my twenties trying to figure out that my life had no role model, so I had to invent that. I don’t know if Rolando Hinojosa went through the trauma of wondering if he should have children in his twenties and should he get married. I don’t think he did” (Dasenbrock and Jussawalla 295). It is interesting to notice that the models or advisers these Latina girls usually feel attracted to are those outcast women or storytellers who in some way or another went against the forces that oppressed them (openly or by re-inventing ‘subtle’ stories). In *The Line of the Sun* the most attractive models, also outcasts from society, are Rosa ‘La Cabra’, and Guzmán. In *The House*, Esperanza does not find any appropriate model for herself but she finds advisers like the three witches about whom Esperanza says “They had the power” or agonizing aunt Guadalupe who tells her “You must remember to keep writing, Esperanza. You must keep writing. It will keep you free” (61).

In the first part of *The Line of the Sun*, though syncretic religion is described respectfully as a distinct feature of Puerto Rican life, in the USA the clash between cultures, racism, the unwillingness of American society to understand other cultures transforms santería and spiritism into a sort of escapist device: Marisol asks, “was this all just fantasy-making, an escape from the dreary cycle of factory work, tenement living, second-class citizenship.” (262) and an useless attempt to reconstruct Puerto Rican life in the island while trying to survive in the USA by reproducing the

island’s traditions: “They [Puerto Rican women living in El Building] believe that we have invisible friends, these spirits... They mean well, but here in America their hocus-pocus only complicates things. Can you imagine trying to explain to our crewcut *policía*, the one giving us the third degree at Cheo’s, that the meeting Saturday is to ask for assistance from the dead?” (246). The old world resources against negative forces does not work at all in the States as is evident in the fire in El Building. Escapism proves not to be the solution for the Latino population. As Bruce Novoa perceptively notes: “It is the non-traditional protagonists who break with the island tradition, in which they literally cannot breathe, in order to impose on their fellow Puerto Ricans a recognition of the mainland environment’s material reality and to force an exodus into that besieging reality.” (65”).

Religion is a powerful factor which interrelates with almost all Latino traditions: family, education, sexuality, etc. It is no coincidence that most female characters in the three texts go to Catholic schools. Religion and education are very closely linked. Religion indeed permeates the way Latinas are brought up within Latino traditions. Most immigrant parents are deeply concerned for the education of their children in the sense that they want to stick to the ‘old ways’ and avoid an American way which lacks the strict rules and “roles” imposed by Catholicism and where racism becomes another ‘subject’. A religious education unfortunately helps to justify and reinforce many roles imposed on Latinas.

For the Garcia Girls, Catholicism is at once something to grab on to in moments of desolation and something which interferes with their process of assimilation, especially in relation to the discovery of their sexuality. While for Yolanda, Catholicism had been a "security blanket", for one of Yolanda’s boyfriends she is “worse than a fucking Puritan”. She ultimately realizes that she can’t be as catholic as she was before nor embrace the liberal idea of “sex is fun”: “I saw what a cold, lonely life awaited me in this country. I would never find someone who would understand my peculiar mix of Catholicism and agnosticism, Hispanic and American styles.” (99)

For Ortiz Cofer, religious sentiment swings from the Holy Rosary Society of the island with ladies as “watchful guardians of the moral status of the town” (76) to the nuns of Paterson. The school's catholic practices only make Marisol feel even more out of place when they encourage her to accept humility as her fate but her “humble demeanor... was nothing more than fear of being exposed for the total alien I felt myself to be in that environment of discipline and order” (232).

Religion can also be a crucial source of misinformation in a girl’s discovery of her own body and sexuality, something that is so important for the adolescent girls but that is usually hidden as almost sinful and impure. Religion only brings insecurity and even self-hatred. Ortiz Cofer points out that condemning any pleasure that comes from the body perpetuates a patriarchal view of sexuality, in

which the woman is not supposed to think about sex as anything but an act of procreation. We can see this in the education received by the Garcia Girls in the island: “In religious instruction classes, Sor Juana had told how God clothed Adam and Eve after they had sinned. ‘Your body is a temple of the Holy Ghost.’ At home, the aunts had drawn the older girls aside and warned us that soon we would be señoritas who must guard our bodies like hidden treasure and not let anyone take advantage.” (234) This is in clear contrast with the information they receive from the exterior. An example is Rudy (one of Yolanda’s boyfriends), who had to be the one to introduce her to her own anatomy (for his own convenience but still useful to her!): “I was beginning to acknowledge my body’s pleasure,” she notes. (98) But she still has to fight against what she was taught in the island and what she is feeling now. She feels confused, especially because of ignorance: “Now there was a worry. I’d just gotten over worrying I’d get pregnant from proximity, or damned by God should I die at that moment, and now I started wondering if maybe my upbringing had disconnected some vital nerves.” (97)

Education is also a way to get away from El Barrio, not only as a liberation from the miseries of class oppression but also from patriarchal oppression. All the authors share the idea that it is necessary for Latinos to break the class barriers which confine them to the lower classes of society. Education is the most powerful tool to achieve this and break the “internal colonialism” society imposes on all minorities.

Cisneros, Alvarez and Ortiz Cofer further stress the fact that a woman needs economic independence to liberate herself from the ties imposed by patriarchy. The only way to achieve this is again by getting an education which will enable them to become economically self-sufficient.

In *The house*, Alicia is one of the positive models available to Esperanza, though she is afraid of ending up in the kitchen or in the factory. In the next quotation we can see how women are threatened by both, class oppression in the public sphere of American society and by the patriarchy of Latino men in the private sphere. Alicia “studies for the first time at the university. Two trains and a bus, because she doesn’t want to spend her whole life in a factory or behind a rolling pin... Is afraid of nothing except four-legged fur. And fathers.” (32)

Regarding the influence of education of young Latina women, Tedy Diana Rebolledo reminds us of an old ‘dicho’ which says “Mujer que sabe Latin no tendrá marido ni buen fin.” She comments: “ This dicho, prevalent in Spanish, represents symbolically some of the cultural constraints which affect Hispanic women ... Knowing Latin... was a symbol of the formally educated person... It was believed that education of this sort would be an obstacle to the perceived real role of women: devotion to husband and family and to good work” (Introd. ix). A quotation from the Garcia comes to support this dicho, presents its assumptions as another latent constraint for women: “Mimi was known as 'the genius of the family' because she

read books and knew Latin and had attended an American college for two years before my grandparents pulled her out because too much education might spoil her for marriage. The two years seemed to have done sufficient harm, for at twenty-eight, Mimi was an ‘old maid’” (229).

The way these Latina girls were educated was especially confusing and difficult in their adolescence. The information they received about sexuality, the change their bodies were going through and the way they should behave, dress, from then on and what they saw in the outside American world were not things easy to reconcile. The Latina dilemma was always which way to go? Ortiz Cofer notes the persistence of this clash: “At home my mother constantly reminded me that I was now a ‘senorita’ and needed to behave accordingly... The nuns kept a hawk eye on the length of the girl’s skirts, which had to come to below the knee at a time when the mini-skirt was becoming the micro-skirt out in the streets” (*Silent Dancing* 125).

To please their father who does not understand that Latino values are completely opposed to those of the times in which they were living in, the Garcia girls have to live a double life:

“I don’t want loose women in my family.” He had cautioned all his daughters...His daughters had to put up with this kind of attitude in an unsympathetic era. They grew up in the late sixties. Those were the days when wearing jeans and hoop

earrings, smoking a little dope, and sleeping with their classmates were considered political acts against the military-industrial complex. But standing up to their father was a different matter altogether. Even as grown women, they lowered their voices in their father’s earshot when alluding to their bodies’ pleasure. (28)

The information they receive about their bodies and about their sexuality mainly comes from the outside or from the popular American culture in which they live during adolescence. Because of absence of information from their people, they are misinformed. As a result, they can become the easy sexual prey of young men, as we see in this ironic and playful passage narrated by the ‘innocent’ Yolanda: “He was worn down with frustration, he said. I was cruel. I didn’t understand that unlike a girl, it was physically painful for guys not to have sex” (99). Even so, in the new world of the United States, though still a patriarchy, women enjoy more freedom and sex is not something to be ashamed of. It is interesting to notice how parents’s instruction differ between the two cultures.. In Garcia, Yolanda is faced with a different attitude from her boyfriend’s parents, completely opposite to that of her parents: “His parents looked so young and casual-like classmates. My own old world parents were still an embarrassment at parent’s weekend... They encouraged him, his parents, to have experiences with girls but to be careful” (98). On the contrary, when the García girls’s father discovers Sophia’s love letters from one of her boyfriends he reacts in a quite different way: “Has he deflowered you? That’s

what I want to know. Have you gone behind the palm trees? Are you dragging my good name through the dirt, that is what I would like to know!... Are you a whore?” (30). For Latinas like the Garcia Girls becoming a woman surely was a traumatic experience, especially putting up with comments related to their going behind the *palm trees* (no image could be more out of place in New York!).

Conventional Latino culture regards sex as a taboo topic so that these girls do not receive enough information about sex, about a man’s or a woman’s body. We can find clear examples of this in *The Garcia* when Carla tries to explain what the man that assaulted her was doing: “Carla thought hard for what could be the name of a man’s genitals. .. Now she was learning English in a Catholic classroom, where no nun had ever mentioned the words she was needing” (163). Ortiz Cofer also dramatizes how a girl gets information about human anatomy from a classmate (who represents the American-non-catholic world) who explains human reproduction to her: I finished the eighth grade in Paterson, but Ira and I never got together to study... In the fall, I was enrolled at the Catholic high school where everyone believed in the Virgin Birth, and I never had to take a test on the human reproductive system. It was a chapter that was not emphasized” (*The Latin Deli* 127)

In the process of growing up, the physical changes provoke a series of disturbances in the girl’s view of herself. These changes are the ones which are going to definitely distinguish her from a man. From then on, she is going to be

defined always with reference to what men are or do. In Cisneros’ text, hips are closely connected with motherhood and sexuality. Hips are also a physical difference between the sexes; they become necessary to have children and to provoke desire in men, so a girl has to learn how to use them or move them, as the girls relate: “They’re good for holding a baby when you’re cooking...If you don’t get them you may turn into a man... It’s the bones that let you know which skeleton was a man’s when it was a man’s and which a woman’s... You gotta know how to walk with hips, practice you know - like if half of you wanted to go one way and the other half the other” (50). Esperanza is becoming aware of the new world she is coming into, the world of grown-ups. Her voice becomes nostalgic (as if speaking from her adult experience?): “Nenny, I say, but she doesn’t hear me. She is in a world we don’t belong to anymore. Nenny. Going. Going” (50).

Latinas are not merely scared of the negative effects of their womanhood in relation to men; they also don’t consider their bodies as something to be proud of, as source of pleasure and self-confidence. They learn about this latter from the other culture, the American environment in which they live. We find instances of this influence of American culture in *The García Girls*. In the following passage the girl’s mother’s ideas about a woman’s sexual life and body (always understood from the male’s perspective) contrast with the information the girls gather from the outside world:

“Yoyo was on for bringing a book into the house, *Our Bodies, Our Selves*. (Mami couldn’t put her finger on what it was that bothered her about the book. I mean, there were no men in it. The pictures all celebrated women and their bodies, so it wasn’t technically about sex as she understood it up to then. But there were women exploring “what their bodies were all about” and a whole chapter on lesbians. Things, Mami said, examining the pictures, to be ashamed of). (200)

In general, adolescence is the time when a girl discovers her own sexuality but always from an external perspective. Her sexuality is interpreted by outside factors, always using men as referents to define her sexuality. Women begin to be controlled by patriarchal rules: “an adolescent girl was watched every minute by the women who acted as if you carried some kind of time bomb that might go off at any minute; and worse, they constantly warned you about your behavior around men: don’t cross your legs like that when a man is in the room, don’t walk around in your pajamas” (Silent Dancing 141).

These Latina adolescents experience how gender roles are imposed on them and how they have to readjust their idea about themselves as they become women who begin to be controlled by patriarchal rules. Here is an example from *How the García Girls...:* “ My American cowgirl outfit was an exact duplicate -except for the skirt- of Mundin’s cowboys one. My mother disapproved. The outfit would only encourage my playing with Mundin and the boy cousin. It was high time I got over

my tomboy phase and started acting like a young lady *senorita*. ‘But it *is* for girls,’ I pointed out. ‘Boys don’t wear skirts’” (228) In *The Line of the Sun* the proximity of Marisol’s bodily changes also becomes a family issue: “One night assuming I was asleep, they discussed me. ‘Marisol is a ‘*señorita*’ now Rafael. I am sure she will begin menstruating soon.’ ‘You were not much older than she when we got married, Ramona. We have to be very careful with her. Have you seen her with any boys?’” (180). As we can see, Marisol’s physical changes are seen as a threat directly related to male power over women in a passage from *The House on Mango Street* in which the girls are wearing high-heel shoes, symbols of womanhood and of the danger of sex for women: “Your mother know you got shoes like that?...They are dangerous, he says” (41).

The first opportunity for the Latina girls to have direct contact with the politics of sexual domination in the public sphere comes in “The Family of Little Feet” in *The House on Mango Street*. The episode where the girls wear high-heeled shoes becomes for them the first time they have to face the roles that are imposed on them by the patriarchal society they live in. At first, they feel different and attractive in their role as grown up, seductive women even as they are still dreaming of fairy tales and charming princes: “ Hurray! Today we are Cinderella because our feet fit exactly... [Rachel] teaches us to cross and uncross our legs, ... Down the corner where the men can’t take their eyes off us” (40).

They are told that sex (symbolized here by high heel shoes) is dangerous if it is not controlled. This control is more obvious when their romanticized feeling is suddenly endangered by men treating them as sexual objects: “Rachel, you are prettier than a yellow taxicab... If I give you a dollar will you kiss me? ... Bum man is yelling something to the air but now we are running fast and far away, our high heel shoes taking us... We are tired of being beautiful” (42). Their running away indicates their awareness of the importance of sexuality in their own development and to their future selves. As Annie O. Eysturoy points out “it is exactly through the control of female sexuality that women are socialized into accepting culturally prescribed roles of wives and mothers” (98).

These Latinas grow up fearing their own bodies and the destructive effects they can have for them as women and not knowing them We can notice this in this passage from *Silent Dancing*: “Somehow my body with its new contours and new biological powers had changed everything: half of the world had now become a threat, or felt threatened by its potential for disaster” (*Silent Dancing* 141).. Carla, one of the Garcia girls also suffers the same kind of embarrassment as her own body changes, when she remembers that the man who tries to assault her was almost bald: “‘Bald, yes.’ Carla nodded. The sight of the man’s few dark hairs disgusted her. She thought of her own legs sprouting dark hairs, of the changes going on in secret in her body, turning her into one of these grownup persons. No wonder the high-voiced

boys [policemen] with smooth, hairless cheeks hated her. They could see that her body was already betraying her” (162).

The issue of sexual violence appears in the Garcia and in the House though in the latter it assumes a much more tragic dimension for the development of Esperanza. Like a symbolic descent into hell, Esperanza loses her innocence dramatically by experiencing in her own skin the annihilating power of racism and sexual violence simultaneously: “I couldn’t make them go away. I couldn’t do anything but cry... Only his dirty finger against my skin, only his sour smell... He wouldn’t let me go. He said I love you, I love you, Spanish girl” (100). She despairingly fights to understand the unjustifiable situation of oppression that women themselves help to maintain by silencing the reality of sexual subjugation: “Sally, you lied... The way they said it, the way it’s supposed to be, all the story books and movies... They all lied. All the books and magazines, everything told it wrong” (100). As Maria Herrera-Sobek points out, Esperanza “discovers a conspiracy of two forms of silence: silence in not denouncing the “real” facts of life about sex and its negative aspects in violent sexual encounters, and complicity in embroidering unrealistical sexual relations” (178).

In the Garcia Carla’s experience when she is followed and invited by a man in a car, is narrated as it was experienced by the child, with a child narrator:

“He leaned towards the passenger door and clicked it open. “C’moninere.” He

nodded towards the seat beside him. “C’m’on,” he moaned. He cupped his hand over his thing as if it were a flame that might blow out...A pained, urgent expression was deepening on his face like a plea that Carla did not know how to answer. His arm pumped at something Carla could not see, and then after much agitation, he was still...Carla turned and fled down the street, her book-bag banging against her like a whip she was using to make herself go faster” (158).

This traumatic experience for the adolescent Carla who begins to realize what a woman is for a man. It is interesting to notice that when she first sees the man in the car, instead of thinking about the danger of talking to strangers, her only concern is about language, about her not even being able to give directions:

“Her English was still classroom English, a foreign language. She knew the neutral bland things...But if a grownup American of indeterminable age asked her for directions, invariably speaking too quickly, she merely shrugged and smiled an inane smile. “I don’t speak very much English,” she would say in a small voice by way of apology. She hated having to admit this since such an admission proved, no doubt, the boy gang’s point that she didn’t belong here.” (Garcia 156),

In the context of the United States, language is indeed a very important issue for any immigrant child growing up in the USA. In the Case of the Garcia Girls who had to learn English during their adolescence, the issue of language becomes even more painful. In general, for most Latinas English is their main language in the

sense that English is the language of their schooling; Spanish is their home language, the language in which they dream. Spanish is an important link to the Latino heritage. The three authors make use of scattered words in Spanish that, though they are not necessary for general comprehension, they add their “difference” to the real text. The non-Latino reader is aware from the very beginning of the different vocabulary and therefore, of the different culture he/she is approaching. The use of isolated words in a foreign language is a wide-spread technique among postcolonial and minority authors who find it a very expressive way to reinforce their bicultural heritage.

In the three texts, Spanish becomes a tie between Latinos. It also becomes a vehicle for making them feel part of a community within US society. Language however can also become a powerful racist weapon. Most derogatory labels are directly based in language. The term “spic” makes direct reference to the non-native speaker of English who mispronounces or simply can’t speak English. We can see some examples: La Bruja had stopped her mother and the girls in the lobby and spat out that ugly word the kids at school sometimes used: “Spics! Go back to where you came from!”” (Garcia 171). The problems the Latinas encounter with the language can be examined depending on the particular situation. “the boys pelted Carla with stones, aiming them at her feet so there would be no bruises. “Go back to where you came from, you dirty spic!” (152).

Linguistic difference is also emphasized as one more problem to overcome when trying to interact in society. In this passage from *The Garcia* we find an ironic identification between language and culture: “‘What Happened, Yo?...We thought you and John were so happy.’ “We just didn’t speak the same language.” (81). In Cisneros, ‘No Speak English’ is devoted to the interrelation between language and culture. Mamacita refuses to learn English because Spanish for her is the link back to her past in Mexico and English means to lose it, that is why she doesn’t come out. She represents the millions of immigrants who came to the States thinking that they would go back some day but were never able to do it: “No speak English, she says to the child who is singing in the language that sounds like tin. No speak English, no speak English, and bubbles into tears. No, no , no, as if she can’t believe her ears.” (78)

The mere fact of speaking English with a Spanish accent is seen by many Americans as a marker of inferiority and is usually related to racist comments or prejudices. The reaction to these racist comments is usually responded to by a conscious attempt to master the English language. Three of the main characters take root in the language and use it as a salvation board and as a way to be able to define themselves in the new world, to give voice to themselves. In the *Garcia* we find Yolanda that: “Back in the Dominican republic growing up, Yoyo had been a terrible student. No one could ever get her to sit down to a book. But in New York,

she needed to settle somewhere, and since the natives were unfriendly, and the country inhospitable, she took root in the language” (141).

In the context of the Latino community, language is also a controversial issue for the parents of these Latinas. We can notice how while some emphasize the necessity to speak English as a tool of survival others may stick to Spanish in fear of losing their sense of identity closely connected with the language. In Garcia, “Mami was the leader now that they lived in the States. *She* had gone to school in the States. *She* spoke English without a heavy accent” (176), while “their father’s formal, florid diction was hard to understand” (142). In *The Line of the Sun*, Marisol becomes her mother’s interpreter because she refuses to learn English so that her Spanish is still ‘pure’ when she comes back while her father “always spoke in English to us: a perfect textbook English, heavily accented but not identifiable as Puerto Rican” (181).

Another concern for most Latinos/as in the United States is the fact that they are blamed by their Latin American “purist” relatives for a bad use of a Spanish plagued with Anglicism when they visit their home countries. Sometimes, these Latinos/as who had spent some part of their childhood in their countries almost have the feeling of not having a language of their own, as Julia Alvarez confesses: “I began losing my Spanish before getting a foothold in English. I was without a language, without anyway to fend for myself, without a solid ground to stand on”

(Augenbraum 61). At best, some Latinas, like the writers we are commenting, try to find their own voice by making a statement of their use of one or another language or simply by presenting the issue of language as a symbol of their own experience. Ortiz Cofer describes the linguistic experience of Puerto Ricans as one of “infinite variety” and compares the use of language by immigrants with the experience of Africans or natives in the new world whose words had to be introduced in Spanish to fill an empty space in the language and the culture: “Is the Spanish that Rosario Ferre speaks now, which has incorporated the African and the taino usages, I hope, a corrupt form of Spanish from that spoken in Barcelona? Am I corrupting the language when I use my own anglicisms because that’s what I grew up with?... I am a Puerto Rican of another speaking manner than the Puerto Ricans on the island, but not less Puerto Rican.” (736) The same thing happens to Sandra Cisneros and Julia Alvarez who reflect the same concern when their characters are called “gringas” “americanitas”, “americanized” ..etc.

Names are really important for Latinos in the States who, while they have to endure the different labels imposed on them (*spic, hispanic, etc.*), in their search for identity they are trying to invent a new self. As Bruce-Novoa points out: “to name oneself is an act of self-creation... Chicanos and Riqueños have chosen names to fit a reality - or an ideology....Names change, new identities are forged... That is the point of names, to emphasize difference in sameness, to affirm a faith in our power to

synthesize a language and a new culture, ours" (288). There is a constant attempt by Latinas to give themselves a new name. Their Latino names can be at the same time an ethnic reminder and a seed of racism since they instantly reveal the ethnic origin of the person. As ethnic reminders, names are usually inherited from other relatives. For Esperanza her name is a link to other women ancestors but she is not proud of the connotations and burden that this brings to her. We can see how Esperanza’s analysis of her name leads us to two conclusions: her name in English “means hope”, that is, her new self defined in English can give her a new strength (though at the same time connotes uncertainty, uneasiness) not available in Spanish where her name is unavoidably linked to “sadness” and “waiting” represented by her grandmother. She was a strong woman who finally submitted herself to the rules of patriarchy. Her search for a new name is an indication of her internal search for her own self, a self not defined by any of the two cultures that make up her world: “I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees. Esperanza as Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X. Yes, something like Zeze the X will do.” (11)

Especially in the case of Cisneros and Alvarez , Esperanza and Yolanda go through this search for a new name. Yolanda innocently provokes a game in which she and John have to find words rhyming with her name. But they encounter the problem of the different pronunciations of her name. Unconsciously she refuses to

play that game with her name and escapes the constrictions of names. She wants only to be herself, not Yolanda or Joe but her own self: “‘I’ -she pointed to herself- ‘rhymes with the sky!’ ...” *Yo* rhymes with *cielo* in Spanish.” (72).

Though we have considered the three texts as belonging to the tradition of the *Buildungsroman*, we have also noticed the way in which these authors deviate from the male-white-oriented tradition. Their novels are not only narrations of self-development emerging from the interaction of the individual with the difficulties of growing up as a woman between two worlds. In their attempt to narrate their experience they realize they have no appropriate literary models. They therefore have no choice but to create their own tradition as they invent themselves, their new world selves. They raise their voices against racism, sexism, the prejudices and oppression that affect their lives as members of a double discriminated minority.

To sum up, we should be able to answer this question: How do these Latina writers reconcile both worlds when they try to find out their self-identity? For Latina authors writing becomes a way of creating their own identity by narrating their experiences. They find in writing the place where they can re-invent themselves. Through writing they are claiming those different parts that make up their identities and what it means to grow up Latina in the US.

#### Works Cited

Alvarez, Julia. *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*. New York: Plume-Penguin, 1992.

---. "Entre Lucas y Mejía." In Augenbraum, Harold, Terry Quinn and Ilan Stavans (eds.). *Bendiceme América. Latino Writers of the United States*. New York: Mercantile Library of New York, 1993, 59-63.

Bruce Novoa, Juan. "Judith Ortiz Cofer's Rituals of Movement." *The Americas Review: A Review of Hispanic Literature and Art of the USA*. Houston, TX. 1991 Winter, 19:3-4, 88-99.

---. "A Question of Identity: What's in a Name? Chicanos y Riqueños." Translated by Elpidio Laguna-Diaz. In Rodriguez de Laguna, Asela (ed.) *Images and Identities: The Puerto Rican in Two World Contexts*. New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1987.

--- and Barbar Sjostrom (eds.). *The Hispanic Experience in the United States. Contemporary Issues and Perspectives*. New York, Wesport and London: Praeger, 1988.

Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. New York: Vintage, 1984.

Eysturoy, Annie O. *Daughters of Self-Creation. The Contemporary Chicana Novel*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993.

Fernández, Roberta ed. *In Other Words: Literature by Latinas in the United States*. Houston: Arte Público Press, 1993.

- Gutierrez-Jones, Leslie S. “Different Voices: The *Re-Bildung* of the Barrio in Sandra Cisneros’ *The House of Mango Street*.” In Singley, Carol J. And Susan Elizabeth Sweeney (eds.) *Anxious Power. Reading Writing, and Ambivalence in Narrative by Women*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993.
- Herrera-Sobek, Maria. “The Politics of rape: Sexual Transgression in Chicana Fiction.” In Herrera-Sobek, Maria and Helena Maria Viramontes (eds.). *Chicana Creativity and Criticism: Charting New Frontiers in American Literature*. Houston: Arte Publico, 1988, 171-181.
- Jussavalla, Ferozza F. and Reed Way Dassenbrock (eds.) *Interview with Writers of the Post-Colonial World*. Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1992.
- Ocasio, Rafael. “The Infinite Variety of the Puerto Rican Reality: An Interview with Judith Ortiz Cofer.” *Callaloo: A Journal of African-American and African Arts and Letters*. Baltimore. MD. 1994 Summer, 17:3, 730-42.
- Olivares, Julian. “Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*, and the Poetics of Space.” *Chicana Creativity and Criticism: Charting New Frontiers in American Literature*. Houston: Arte Publico, 1988, 160-169.
- Ortiz Cofer, Judith. *The Line of the Sun*. Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1989.
- . *The Latin Deli: Prose and Poetry*. Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1993.

---. *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood*. Houston: Arte Publico, 1990.

Rebolledo, Tey Diana, Erlinda Gonzales-Berry and Teresa Marques (eds.). *Las Mujeres Hablan. An Anthology of Nuevo Mexicana Writers*. Albuquerque, NM: El Norte, 1988.

Rodriguez de Laguna, Asela (ed.). *Images and Identities: The Puerto Rican in two World Contexts*. New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1987.