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**Resisting Dominican Motherhood across Julia Alvarez's How the  
García Girls Lost Their Accents and Junot Díaz's The Brief  
Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao**

Ana Hilario

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### Abstract

This paper endeavors to explore the distinct ways in which the Dominican motherhood ideology promoted by Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina's regime is resisted by women of different social classes and race through a close reading of the characters Laura and Beli in Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, respectively. Using Adrienne Rich's concept of motherhood ideology as a theoretical framework and engaging in discussion of how these ideologies were constructed, engendered, and enforced by the Trujillo regime, I found that these texts depict voluntary and involuntary resistance to motherhood on the basis of how socio-economic status and race play a role in the interpretation of motherhood and performance of mothering. Though Dominican-American scholarship has neglected the theme of motherhood in these texts as a focal point into ideological resistance, it is significant that though published sixteen years apart in the diaspora, by two different representative authors of the Dominican diaspora, these texts grapple with resistance to motherhood ideology because it demonstrates how Dominican diasporic literature is still engrossed with the effects of the Trujillo regime and its oppressive use of motherhood ideology disguised under a quasi-feminist conservative vision.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Resisting Dominican Motherhood across Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their*

*Accents* and Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

by

Ana Hilario

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts

May 2022

College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Department of English

Thesis Committee:

[REDACTED]

Dr. Melinda Knight

Thesis Sponsor

[REDACTED]

Dr. Laura Nicosia

Committee Member

[REDACTED]

Dr. Lee Behlman

Committee Member

RESISTING DOMINICAN MOTHERHOOD ACROSS JULIA ALVAREZ'S *HOW THE GARCÍA GIRLS LOST THEIR ACCENTS* AND JUNOT DÍAZ'S *THE BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO*

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Montclair, NJ

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## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to begin by thanking my thesis sponsor Dr. Melinda Knight whose invaluable comments inspired clarity and rescued me from nearly drowning in critical theories and frameworks, and sometimes (many times) my own confusing ideas. Because of her patience and kind words, the writing process was almost painless. Thank you to Dr. Laura Nicosia for her readership and enthusiasm for this project. I would also like to thank Dr. Lee Behlman for his support throughout both my undergraduate and graduate career, for his thoughtful and careful comments, as well as for his encouraging words just when I needed it most.

I would be terribly remiss if I didn't extend my thanks to Dr. Jeffrey Gonzalez. Thank you for seeing the potential in this project many months ago when it was just a fragment of a 3 am thought. Thank you also for challenging me to become a better reader and writer from my first English class as an undergrad and throughout my graduate career.

To my friends and peers in the English department, it has been a privilege to learn alongside you all.

To my friends and colleagues at the Center for Writing Excellence, your dedication and contagious passion for writing is inspiring. Thank you especially to Val who read many drafts of this thesis and endured many 25-minute sessions of my rambling thoughts.

To my wonderful friends, thank you for the coffee dates and laughs because writing is a social process more than a solitary one.

Finally, to my family, I dedicate this thesis to you. Gracias a mis padres por todos los sacrificos que han hecho por mi bienestar, por darme todo, por escucharme, apoyarme, y creer en mi. Papi, thank you for passing down your love of literature to me; this never would have been possible without you. Mami, eres mi fortaleza e inspiración diaria. To my brother, thank you for listening to me complain and providing nuggets of motivation; I look up to you in more ways than one.

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## 1. Introduction

As a result of the feminist movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the Dominican Republic, women obtained citizenship, the right to vote, and access to careers outside the home, often using the institution of motherhood as a vehicle for securing those rights. That said, during the Trujillo regime from the 1930s to the early 1960s, women were still expected to operate and work under the umbrella of motherhood. In *The Paradox of Paternalism: Women and the Politics of Authoritarianism in the Dominican Republic*, Elizabeth Manley finds that while Trujillo's paternal constructs helped advance women's roles, it also "paradoxically enforced a superstructure that maintained a traditional understanding of women's innate abilities as maternal public figures" (4-5). Though there has been critical discussion about how the maternalization of various discourses came underway in the Dominican Republic's history and under Trujillo, there has not been much scholarship on Dominican women's resistance to ideologies of motherhood, especially as it appears in literature. From a Western feminist perspective, it may feel tempting to declare that Dominican women indeed felt oppressed by the ideologies of motherhood, but this is difficult to determine, especially since even women who opposed Trujillo utilized their belief in the ideologies of motherhood as pretext for retaliating against the regime. Yet novels written in the diaspora, including two crucial works, Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) and Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), paint pictures of Dominican women traumatized by violence, the condition of womanhood, and, as I will argue in this thesis, motherhood. I have paired these novels not just because their authors have famously left their mark on contemporary American literature but because together they paint a picture of how both upper- and working-

class women are subjected to domination and subordination by the patriarchy through ideologies of motherhood.

Both transnational works set in the Dominican Republic and the United States, these two novels together provide insight into how both the elite and working-class dealt with the effects of motherhood ideologies during and after Trujillo's regime. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* centers on the affluent, white García family and their four 1.5-generation<sup>1</sup> Dominican-American daughters. Spanning almost 40 years, this novel traces their immigration journey from escaping the Trujillo regime to their assimilation experience in New York. The novel dips into how the García girls' mother, Laura, struggles to find a space for herself in the United States while still staying true to Dominican traditions. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is a multi-focal narrative that illustrates the tremendous hold the island has on the Cabral de León family as it traces their family history from the upbringing of Oscar and Lola's mother Beli in the Dominican Republic during the 1960s to their lives in Paterson, New Jersey during the 1990s. As a Black working-class mother, Beli experiences the hypocrisies of motherhood ideology both in the Dominican Republic and in the United States.

In my preliminary research and scholarly engagement, I failed to find evidence of Dominican women feeling oppressed by the confinements of motherhood ideology during the Trujillo regime. In fact, Dominican female politicians to this day stress the importance of maternalism and its necessity in politics. It may be possible that these accounts of resistance have been censored by Trujillo's regime; it is also probable that such accounts do not exist altogether. Women who were feeling the day-to-day confinements of the mother-wife role were most likely illiterate and unable to record evidence of these traumas. The women who were able to write

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<sup>1</sup> 1.5 generation is a term which describes individuals who were born in a foreign country and brought to the United States as children or adolescents.



their histories came from privilege and affluence, like Laura in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. These women, with their hired maids and the ability to escape the regime as Laura does in the novel, do not experience the same level of oppression and trauma that working-class black women, like Beli in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, would. Before Laura leaves the Dominican Republic, she does not ever question these norms because she is comfortable with her privilege. Similarly, Beli engages with certain ideologies because she recognizes that conforming could afford her the lifestyle and escape she dreams of. This is how ideology works—if it is very convincing, there is no reason to step outside of it. However, as a working-class Black woman, Beli fails to conform no matter how hard she tries. This failure to conform is recognized as a voluntary resistance to motherhood ideology, though she merely does the best she can in her unfortunate circumstances. My research on Dominican feminism along with my analysis of these texts expose the cultural hegemony which allows motherhood ideology to mostly benefit white elite mothers while preventing the social recognition of Black lower-class mothers as “good” mothers.

In this thesis, I will address the relationship between Trujillo’s maternalistic propaganda and how motherhood is represented in these texts. Using this historical contextualization, I will thoroughly explore how these novels help to frame Dominican motherhood in a different light and the fragility of this discourse in the diaspora. My analysis of these two novels is underpinned by theoretical frameworks and socio-historic contexts, and for that reason I will begin this project by exploring motherhood as an institution using Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born*. Then, I will illustrate the construction, engenderment, and enforcement of these ideologies under the Trujillo regime.

### 1.2 Ideologies of motherhood

According to Adrienne Rich, there are two meanings for motherhood: the first relates to “the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children,” and the second is “the *institution* which aims at ensuring that that potential- and all women- shall remain under male control” (Rich 13). Andrea O’Reilly’s interpretation of this quote is that Rich is distinguishing between *mothering* and *motherhood* (22). O’Reilly finds that the first meaning Rich states refers to mothering, which is “female defined” and empowering since it centers on women’s experiences with the action of mothering, while the second refers to the patriarchy-derived institution of motherhood and its ideologies (22). This institution calls the ideal mother to be nurturing, selfless, morally driven, asexual, and the domestic manager (Rich 34). A mother should move mountains to care for her children and her husband. These ideas not only underscore a system of power where women serve men, but these ideologies of motherhood have also permeated what it means to be a woman.

The interpretation of the institution of motherhood and its ideologies are ostensibly based on the biological differences between males and females. It contends that women are predisposed to mothering because of the female ability to birth and lactate. This essentialist view maternalizes other discourses such as nationalistic, religious, and feminist ones. Renata E. Hryciuk, who writes about motherhood in contemporary Mexico, explains how these discourses “have all emphasized the social significance of the mother role and led to the ‘maternalization’ of the Mexican woman’s identity” (488). These ideas apply beyond Mexico; in a patriarchal society, the identity of women is generally impacted by their expected ability to mother. In turn, womanhood is informed by “pregnability,” and it may be argued that for one to be a woman, one must also be a mother (“Rape Has Many Forms” as qtd. in Rich 14). The maternalization of womanhood discloses a double standard about social obligations for parenthood in men and

women. It is more probable to hear someone say that a woman becomes a real woman after becoming a mother than that a man is a real man after becoming a father. These ideas are further developed in the dominant interpretation of what parenthood looks like. Pregnancy changes the female body in a very physical way, so that one could point out a mother-to-be from a group of women. Yet, it is quite difficult to determine what an expectant father looks like without the proximity of a mother. Moreover, it is easier to call a woman a mother in the early stages of pregnancy than it is to call a man a father. Furthermore, a woman's continual presence to mother her child is expected; however, a man is not as socially obligated to spend time in the role of father. As Rich notes, "To 'father' a child suggests above all to beget, to provide sperm which fertilizes the ovum. To 'mother' a child implies a continuing presence, lasting at least nine months, more often years" (12).

Womanhood is also marked by fear because there are certain social expectations for motherhood. Motherhood is held sacred but not if a woman is too young, promiscuous, or the child is conceived out of wedlock. Susan Griffin writes that it is fear which "keeps women at home" and "keeps women passive and modest for fear they be thought provocative" (as qtd. in Rich 14). In turn, the opposite to the ideal of the virtuous, largely asexual mother figure is the bad mother—immoral and promiscuous, a fearful figure. Gender, race, and law scholar Dorothy E. Roberts finds that it is this stigmatization that further "facilitates male control of all women" (5).

The dichotomy of "good" and "bad" mother, and motherhood studies itself, is further complicated when applying these concepts to women of color because the ideology of motherhood considers white mothers to be the ideal mother archetype. Roberts notes that "[i]n America, the image of the Black mother contradicts the ideal image of a white mother" (6). Both

in the United States and throughout the Americas, white motherhood is perceived as the standard experience. Historically, women have been placed on a hierarchy in accordance with race, where Black women are subordinate to white women. Roberts notes that “Black women experience various forms of oppression simultaneously, as a complex interaction of race, gender, and class that is more than the sum of its parts” (2). Consequently, white and Black women experience gender differently, and it is important for scholarship on motherhood studies to take an intersectional approach, especially when looking at the Dominican Republic, as opposed to perpetuating gender essentialism.<sup>2</sup> Racism and patriarchy are intricately linked to “shape the meaning of motherhood in particular contexts, [and] the ways that women resist those meanings . . .” (7). Black women are devalued as humans and in turn devalued as mothers. Moreover, there are multiple attitudes and notions which work to further divide white and Black mothers and “good” mothers from “bad” mothers. Roberts provides one particular example about feminism which aligns well with the focal texts of this thesis. The scholar explains how the (white) feminist view of work does not account for the experiences of working Black women. For these feminists, working is a resistance to motherhood and a form of liberation (20). Roberts goes on to explain that “Black women historically experienced work outside the home as an aspect of racial subordination and the family as a site of solace and resistance to white oppression” (20-21). Historically, much of the work Black women have done outside the home has been in service to white people’s homes. We will see this depicted in both novels as Laura has a full staff of Black maids, and Beli endures years as a child domestic servant. White women have been able

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<sup>2</sup> Angela Harris defines gender essentialism as “the notion that a unitary, ‘essential’ women’s experience can be isolated and described independently from race, class, sexual orientation, and other realities of experience” (qtd. in Roberts 1).

to make their way into the public sphere by unloading their domestic duties unto Black women, “rather than by demanding a fundamental change in the sexual division of labor” (22).

### *1.3 Motherhood as a Pillar in the Trujillo Regime*

The motherhood ideology of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina’s regime was internalized by allegories of family and the idealization of elite women, and the subordination that resulted was enforced by legislation and violence. To understand the construction of Trujillo’s idealized Dominican woman, it is important to grasp how these ideologies of motherhood were a response to the feminist movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and a political approach that helped gain and maintain power over a thirty-one-year authoritarian regime.

Early feminist movements in the Dominican Republic were an instrument to defend national, and in many ways racial, identity after the country gained independence from Haiti in 1844. The Dominican Republic has a long history of anti-Black ideology and a denial of Black identity, which still permeates contemporary Dominican society, culture, and laws, despite the fact that “Blacks and mulattos make up nearly [ninety] percent of the contemporary Dominican population” (Torres-Saillant 126). While a complete historical analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, this reluctance to embrace Blackness can be traced back to Spanish colonialism and the first African slave ships in the New World that arrived in the island of Hispaniola, which is shared by Haiti and the Dominican Republic, in the sixteenth century. Blackness was associated with oppression, primitiveness, and poverty. This disdain later became embedded in Dominican culture during the twenty-two-year Haitian occupation of the Dominican Republic (1822-1844).

In the 1880s, a new philosophy called *Hostosanismo* emerged that complemented women’s *normalista*<sup>3</sup> movement. Eugenio María de Hostos’ *Hostosanismo* created an identity

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<sup>3</sup> A *normalista* is an educated woman who is dedicated to social reform (Mayes 353).

for the educated elite as the “moral vanguards” to civilize the “backwardness” caused by “Spanish colonialism and religious tyranny” (Mayes 350). Elite women were called to the role of reformers and “convert[ed] educated women’s domestic labours into virtuous, patriotic work” (351). However, in some respects *Hostosianismo* was quite radical, in that it called for women to be educated in order to “liberate them of mandatory marriage and motherhood” and adding them as counterparts to the task of nation-building that men had taken hold of (352).

Though these two movements worked together to broaden possibilities for women in the public sphere as educators, this collaboration of ideas also had its shortcomings because it failed to include lower-class women, instead seeing them as object of reform.<sup>4</sup> It worked to establish class and racial superiority under the pretense of exemplifying honorable womanhood. These visions of “female domesticity, household order and virtuous, submissive womanhood” were beyond the reach of Black and lower-class Dominican women (356). Moreover, the change or shift from “backwardness” Hostos sought after represented “bio-cultural, evolutionary change” (356). While Hostos viewed “racial mixture as degenerative,” Mayes writes that scholar Evangelina Rodríguez believed Dominicans, as a group or race, were on the verge of “racial suicide” because they had not yet become civilized. Rodríguez insisted that “[Dominicans] were a race longing for improvement and their evolution was measured by how well they conformed to bourgeois domesticity” (356). For Rodríguez, this conformity was taught by childrearing.

After the first U.S occupation of the Dominican Republic (1916-1924), and just as Trujillo started his ascension into power, a debate began on how to make space for a progressive

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<sup>4</sup> Followers of *Hostosianismo* policed the poor and “scandalous” women. Mayes writes that “By policing and punishing ‘scandalous’ women, San Pedro’s elites reasserted men’s monopoly over citizenship and *all* women’s subordinate status to *all* men” (354). Elite women were positioned as partners to elite men as long as they accepted the ideas of honor. The figure of the *normalista* policed the boundaries of honorable womanhood, and in doing so distanced itself from working women of color.

nation of “modern” Dominican women while ensuring “proper womanhood” (Manley 30). As men’s opinions of womanhood changed, so did popular feminist ideas, but motherhood stayed at the center of the discussion. The U.S. occupation broadened women’s visibility in the public sphere by expanding career opportunities (Mayes 356). During the occupation, women were able to practice law, obtain medical licenses, as well as take part in civil employment as clerks, typists, and secretaries (Mayes 357). While U.S. officials thought these reforms to be progressive, Dominican nationalists found these legislations insulting to Latin traditions. *Latinidad* nationalism rose to popularity after the publication of *Ariel* by Uruguayan essayist José Enrique Rodó in 1900 (357). This work “called upon Latin Americans to protect the Latin race and its high culture from Yankee imperialism, secular democracy, materialism, and Protestantism” (357). Dominican *Latinidad* activists aimed to protect Dominican identity by preserving Latin ideals, such as the silent and holy wife, defending Catholicism, and rejecting imperialism (351). Feminists responded to *Latinidad* with Latin feminism as a way to keep educated women connected to politics while maintaining loyalty to Latin traditions and condemning imperialism (359). Following a long history of veneration for the country’s elite, under Trujillo’s dictatorship full Dominican womanhood was limited to elite and aspiring women. *Hispanidad* is a term coined by Ramiro de Maeztu in his 1934 book, “Defensa de la Hispanidad” (Southworth 149). This term “expresses the mystic of Spanish National Syndicalism” (149). The term spread widely in Latin America and was used to “return [these countries] to a Catholic, anti-liberal tradition as well as the idea of drawing her closer to present-day Spain” (Bristol 314). Trujillo was able to appeal to this newly popular feminism through his proposed philosophy of Dominican *Hispanidad*; this is a nationalist ideology that asserted

Dominicans are racially pure-blooded Spaniards and Catholic. It called Dominicans to defend their nation and racial integrity through obedience and procreation (363).

Positioning himself as the “Father of the Nation,” Trujillo was not just a figure of authority but of protection as well; he vowed to safeguard the Dominican family. After many years of turmoil, wars, and short-lived presidencies, Trujillo’s goal was to raise the Dominican Republic as a modern nation, and he portrayed himself as the only person who could do it. The allegory of the nation as a family created a sense of belonging and dedication to service. Everyone would have a part to play in Trujillo’s vision for *la patria nueva* [the new fatherland] (Derby 1125).

The role of women and the ideology of motherhood was central to Trujillo’s authoritarian politics, as seen with other right-wing twentieth-century dictatorships. Women were positioned as the moral and virtuous figures who would birth, raise, and educate the future generations of the Dominican Republic. Elite women could rise in society by creating clubs and organizations that centered on these principles of motherhood, which would eventually allow them into local and national politics as well as international arenas. Feminist organizations like the *Acción Feminista Dominicana* [Dominican Feminist Action] maintained the biological differences of men and women but critiqued those who exploited these differences to keep women “invisible and irrelevant to social and political change” (Mayes 359). The idea was to extend the innate feminine domestic values of caretaking and selflessness into the public sphere. This quasi-feminist conservative vision of women as peacemakers in the chaotic and masculine political world allowed them to do political work in a heretofore male-dominated realm.

Trujillo’s assistance to women’s presence in social reform worked in tandem with his pro-natalist stance to solidify the idea that, though Dominican women were able to hold positions



outside the home, their sole purpose was mothering and motherhood. In 1940, Trujillo established an award in his mother's honor for women who had birthed and raised at least eleven children; then that same year, he established a law that had women undergo vaginal examinations to obtain their marriage license, to ensure proper function for childbearing (Mayes 363-4). Moreover, it is said that Trujillo even modified the divorce laws to make issues with procreation grounds for divorce (Méndez).

In 1930, Abigaíl Mejía, born to a prominent family and educated in Spain, founded the *Acción Feminista Dominicana* (AFD), which united elite and middle-class feminists of various philosophies (Mayes 351). As Trujillo introduced Dominican *Hispanidad*, it became clear that any ideologies that strayed from his could prove to be dangerous. This was proven in the case of Dr. Evangelina Rodríguez, a *Hostosanismo* women's activist and an anti-*Trujillista*.<sup>5</sup> Though Trujillo had initially gained the support of the AFD's elite and aspiring women through his promise to grant women citizenship and voting rights, they were limited under his rule and the organization soon became entrenched in Trujillo's system. In 1942, the Dominican congress granted women voting rights after the AFD aligned their views with Trujillo's political party, the Dominican Party. April Mayes argues that the AFD were not entirely forced to support Trujillo, stating "that AFD members found in Trujillo an acceptable ally because his vision of elite women's role in cultivating national progress complemented the sense of racial superiority, social power and class interests of a select group of Dominican feminists comfortable with the AFD's narrow and paternalistic social reform agenda" (350). Here we can see the scaffolding of

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<sup>5</sup> As a woman of color, Dr. Evangelina Rodríguez experienced economic mobility when she became the first woman licensed to practice medicine in 1911 (Mayes 350). She established a medical practice that "provided free milk and healthcare for poor mothers and their children" (350). But in 1935, Dr. Rodríguez experienced harassment for not expressing proper gratitude to Trujillo for recognizing her work on social medicine and a decade later was tortured due to a perceived connection to the sugar workers' strike of 1946 (350).

Gramscian hegemony<sup>6</sup>, which is the ideal put forth by the ruling class. In order for the AFD to make the reform impact they desired, they needed to be elevated in a way that corroborated their legitimacy. This allowed them to be put on a pedestal that removed elite white women as far as possible from lower-class Black Dominicans.

Nonetheless, the regime met resistance from many other women. Though Trujillo vowed to protect the Dominican family, the attack, murder, and exile of men and women who resisted his regime, resulting in broken homes and orphaned children, proved otherwise. The violence against women during this period is most often highlighted by the actions of the historical Mirabal sisters and their brutal treatment by Trujillo. The Mirabal sisters, Patria, Maria Teresa, and Minerva, born to an elite agricultural family, joined the underground resistance against Trujillo and were jailed on several occasions for their political beliefs. The family became victims to Trujillo's vengeance after Minerva's rejection of the dictator's advances at a party the family was invited to at Trujillo's estate in San Cristobal (Robinson 176). The sisters and their husbands were at the center of organizing the *Movimiento Revolucionario 14 de Junio*, a plot to assassinate Trujillo by use of a bomb on January 21, 1960 (179). They were arrested the day before the scheduled assassination, but the husbands were imprisoned longer. On November 25, 1960, the sisters took a trip to visit their husbands at the Puerto Plata prison when their car was stopped by the Servicio de Inteligencia Militar (SIM). After the driver and three sisters were beaten and strangled, they were put back inside their vehicle and it was pushed off a cliff to look like an accident. They were survived by their six children and the fourth Mirabal sister, Dédé. Manley calls their murder a "breaking point" for the Trujillo regime because it "exposed the regime's failure to protect the sanctity of the home, embodied symbolically by women and

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<sup>6</sup> According to Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, ideology is constructed by the ruling class for their own benefit and is spread to the masses through social institutions (Parker 278).

mothers. As a result, it was an assault on Dominican national morality” (Manley 94). On a broader scale, as Robinson writes, “The enduring significance of the Mirabal sisters in the Dominican Republic is that they have legitimized women's political participation not as ‘mothers of the disappeared’ or widows, but as political activists in their own right” (180).

In “Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors,” Edward Said states that “exile, immigration and the crossing of boundaries are experiences that can . . . provide us with new narrative forms or, in John Berger’s phrase, with other ways of telling” (225). Exile also allows other ways of seeing. The diaspora, for both insiders and outsiders, has led to complex new understandings of normalcy, right and wrong, identity, and home. The Dominican diasporic novels *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, by Julia Alvarez, and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, by Junot Díaz, allow a reimagining of Dominican motherhood ideology in which its capacity as a system to disempower the marginalized is exposed. In doing so, these novels describe active and passive forms of resistance to the very vehicle that brought citizenship to Dominican women. Published sixteen years apart by two distinct Dominican diasporic authors over forty years after the assassination of Trujillo, these novels expose how prominent these issues of resistance still are for the Dominican diaspora. Accordingly, these novels are exemplary of a distinct trend in literary reframings of Dominican motherhood: feminist resistance to white elite women and its complement, the unfit Black mother who fails to conform. These novels expose the control patriarchy has over women through hegemonic ideologies. Regardless of socio-economic statuses and race, women are still subject to domination and subordination by patriarchy.

## **2. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*- Laura**

“Yes, women have rights,” Manuel Gustavo agrees. A wry smile spreads on his face: he is about to say something clever. “But men wear the pants.” (Alvarez 122)

Julia Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* follows the García family, which consists of parents Carlos and Laura, and their four daughters Carla, Sandra, Yolanda (often referred to as Yo and Yoyo), and Sofia (Fifi). The novel traces in reverse chronology the family’s life in the Dominican Republic and their exile to the United States (1960-1956), while centering on the four García sisters’ assimilation to the new country (1970-1960), and their identity struggles as 1.5-generation Dominican-Americans (1989-1972). The García family is wealthy, lives on a large estate that houses the rest of Laura’s de la Torre family, and is extremely well connected. When the mission to assassinate Trujillo that Laura’s husband, Carlos, is involved in gets discovered, a CIA agent helps Carlos obtain a medical fellowship in the United States, granting asylum to the family, and they have mere hours to pack up their lives into suitcases. This is a polyvocal text and includes narrations from each of the characters, but the third daughter, Yolanda, effectively functions as the story’s protagonist, given that the novel starts and ends with her narration.

Laura García de la Torre appears as an idealized, traditional mother-wife figure both in appearance and responsibilities and is empowered through this identity. First, she is light-skinned or white, and her bourgeois family can be traced back to Spanish conquistadors. Second, she takes care of her family by empowering her daughters through their education and careers while also upholding her husband’s authority. As a wealthy, educated, modern yet “proper” white woman, she is the poster child for the Trujillato’s Dominican *Hispanidad*.<sup>7</sup> While being in the

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<sup>7</sup> That said, her husband is part of the resistance against Trujillo and her outward compliance with it is crucial to the family leaving unscathed from the country.

elite class itself affords Laura recognition and power, the rest is based on her position in the home. Laura could be seen as a figure of authority or power, two characteristics often associated with masculinity and the patriarchy, because she directs a full staff of domestic servants and acts as a partner to her husband.

However, this power is ultimately quite limited. It is through Laura's storyline that we see that though women in the Dominican Republic have rights on paper, its patriarchal society does not allow women who are mothers the agency to define their selfhood outside of the identity of mother. As long as "men wear the pants," women are not able to define for themselves what it means to be a woman. That definition is always subject to approval and rewrites by the patriarchy. Furthermore, this is considered normal, natural, and how it should be by women, which is indicative of cultural hegemony.

While in the Dominican Republic, Laura's storyline is isolated to the home. This indicates that her range of agency is also confined to that setting. She does not resist domestic practices or expectations or thinks them to be oppressive. Laura embraces this ideology because of the comfortable life it affords her and her family; her elite lifestyle is crucial to her mothering. While living in the Dominican Republic, Laura's main responsibilities are to care for the children and oversee the maids and other domestic workers. Because of her affluence and privilege, domestic duties such as cooking and cleaning are taken care of by the family's dark-skinned servants, and she is able to dedicate the majority of her time to mothering. While it is assumed she was properly educated given her accentless English, enthusiasm for literature, and of course the fact that she comes from "one of those old wealthy families who send their kids to the States to prep school, and the boys on to college," Laura does not hold a position outside the home (Alvarez 205). In this society, for a woman to stay home and be financially cared for by

her husband is the standard. This is illustrated with the attitudes expressed by Laura's sisters about staying home: "'Look at me, I'm a queen,' [Tía Flor] argued. 'My husband has to work every day. I can sleep until noon, if I want'" (121). In this section of the novel, the García sisters are debating women's rights with one of their male cousins in the Dominican Republic. Tía Flor suggests here that if a man provides a woman with financial stability, a large house, and the ability not to have to wake up to go to work every day, that woman should not protest for civil rights; she already is living a privileged life.

It is not until the García family moves to New York that Laura realizes that the "power" and authority she held in the Dominican Republic was not as progressive, let alone real, as it seemed on the island. Moreover, the partnership she has with her husband is not truly equal; she is still subordinate to him. Laura's eyes soon open to how her life might be better as a woman in the United States, whereas in the Dominican Republic she could only understand herself as a wife and a failed mother because she was not able to produce any male children (143-44). Laura starts resisting the norms that have long been expected from her and looks for purpose and selfhood outside of her mother-wife role.

This change Laura undergoes is not catalyzed by a single event, rather it unfolds organically as it does with many immigrants. As an immigrant, Laura is interpolated into a new identity with its own expectations and surrounding context. Though in the Dominican Republic the Garcías are wealthy, light-skinned, and members of the elite, in the United States they struggle financially, are othered by peers, and part of a minority group. Every aspect of the Garcías' lives is different now and old ways cannot be easily aligned with this new environment. The family must learn to assimilate. This physical and cultural into racial and socioeconomic

difference leads Laura to adopt American feminist ideals about female selfhood outside of the mother role over time.

Though Laura does not become a full-fledged 1970s feminist, she does actively resist motherhood ideology by becoming the main character in her own life rather than remaining in a supporting role. Nevertheless, her conversion experience to some feminist ideals in the United States is quite limited and thus her resistance is reminiscent of Dominican feminism. In the second part of the novel (1970-1960), Laura further develops her creativity, acute eye, and fascination with invention. In the Dominican Republic, these characteristics are useful in helping her family to escape the SIM and to catch a maid or two stealing valuables, but in the United States, Laura might actually be recognized for her merits beyond her family role. In the United States, she drew plans for inventions on scrap paper; however, even this passion was tied to domesticity and the private sphere. Her inventions were of household items because at that point she thought women's true treasures are found in the home in forms of heavy-duty washing machines and refrigerators with automatic defrost, while men are interested in wonders of the outside world such as skyscrapers (133). Laura's own inventions were a bit less mainstream ("Instant coffee with creamer already mixed in . . . a key chain with a timer that would go off when your parking meter was about to expire" (137)) but no doubt would "make life easier for the American moms" (138). These qualities are comparable with how the bourgeois members in the AFD who advocated for women's education and suffrage, freedoms only really useful to other elite women, through their identities as mothers and wives.

Laura also engages with creativity to establish a unique identity through the interesting ways she expresses herself in English. Language acquisition is an important theme throughout *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. Each character struggles in some way with their

bilingualism, which many times acts as a barrier to their assimilation and bicultural identity. For Laura, learning English is a way to assert a unique identity and give voice to her story; it affords her agency. Though her second youngest daughter Yolanda is embarrassed by it, Laura puts her own spin on English idioms. She creates “malapropisms that make their own sense” (Barak 168), such as “When in Rome, do unto the Romans” and “No use trying to drink spilt milk” (Alvarez 135, 140). Though these may seem like silly or frivolous details, Laura’s mismatched phrases highlight her desire to create and stand out. Laura wants to be recognized by the public sphere outside of her maternal responsibilities.

When Yolanda is asked to give the speech at the Teacher’s Day assembly in ninth grade, Laura encourages her and acts as her audience (141). Yolanda finds inspiration in Walt Whitman’s poetry: “*I celebrate myself and sing myself. . . . He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher.* The poet’s words shocked and thrilled her” (143). Yolanda likes these phrases so much that she plagiarizes them in her speech. When Laura hears her daughter rehearse the speech, she beams with pride and exclaims that Yolanda will bring fame and honor to the family name. In her journey to self-discovery, and going after her passions, Laura is in many ways performing self-care and self-love, so it is no surprise that she resonates with Whitman’s line “I celebrate and sing myself.” These ideas are also quite far removed from the glorified self-sacrificing mother figure, as they indicate a unique identity, rather than a social construct, and convey the message that one should take pride in that identity. The poem these lines come from, “Song of Myself,” is deeply concerned with and dedicated to America and the modern American people. Therefore, Laura’s affinity to this speech may also symbolize her assimilation to this new culture.



However, Laura's husband, Carlos, feels quite the opposite and believes Yolanda's speech to be "boastful," "insubordinate," and "improper," and goes on to forbid her from reading it at the assembly (145). Rather than acting passively or running to comfort Yolanda,

Laura leapt to her feet, a sign she was about to deliver her own speech. . . . She stood by Yoyo's side, shoulder to shoulder. They looked down at Carlos. "That is no tone of voice—" she began.

But now Carlos was truly furious. It was bad enough that his daughter was rebelling, but here was his own wife joining forces with her. Soon he would be surrounded by a houseful of independent American women. (145-46)

After Carlos rips up Yoyo's speech, Laura leaps at him and asks if he is crazy. This encounter is a grand departure from the Laura in the Dominican Republic. In her expression of creativity and selfhood, Laura is engaging in what Adrienne Rich calls "courageous mothering" (246). Rich writes that

The most notable fact that culture imprints on women is the sense of our limits. The most important thing one woman can do for another is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities. For a mother, this means more than contending with the reductive images of females in children's [media and the classroom] . . . It means that the mother herself is trying to expand the limits of her life. (246)

When Laura has the opportunity to return back to the Dominican Republic after the end of the dictatorship, she refuses to return to Rich's "limits": "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. Better an independent nobody than a high-class houseslave" (144). Yet it is only Laura that wants this for herself. Being only in their early teens and not concerned at all with feminism at this point, the García

daughters are quite dismissive of their mother's creative interests and her quirks. They are critical of her for not being able to assume the typical American mom role and Yolanda even says that Laura "was a good enough Mami, fussing and scolding and giving advice, but a terrible girlfriend parent, a real failure of a Mom" (136). Laura is caught in a liminal space between being too American by her husband's standards and not American enough by her daughters', and she is therefore caught in an argument with herself about who she should be. After her encounter with Carlos regarding Yolanda's school speech, Laura takes a step back from inventing things and resisting expectations for a few years.

When the three eldest daughters are in college, Laura herself starts taking classes in real estate, international economics, and business management, "dreaming of a bigger than family-size-life for herself" (116). Perhaps with the thinking that less mothering is required with her daughters mostly out of the house, Laura reinvests in her interests. Since her classes are within male-dominated fields, Laura counteracts seeming too American or a bad mother by participating in what Deniz Kandiyot has called "patriarchal bargaining," a strategy women use to cope with the patriarchy that involves assuming traditional roles to broaden their agency and power (Kandiyot 275). Laura tries to play into patriarchal ideas by morally policing her daughters, and ultimately playing into the role of the asexual mother. As stated before, the ideology of motherhood differentiates the "good" mother from the "bad" mother, which encourages the virgin/whore dichotomy (Hewett 126). Generally, the "good" mother is devoted, nurturing, and asexual, much like the ultimate "good" mother, the Virgin Mary (127). When Yolanda brings home the now famed 1970 book about women's health and sexuality, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, Laura calls the pictures of women "exploring 'what their bodies were all about'" as something to be ashamed of (Alvarez 110). Moreover, she starts researching private

schools after one daughter is caught using tampons (108). It is also stated that Laura had been protecting the girls' virginity since they hit puberty (114). By doing this, Laura is protecting her image as a good mother and therefore a good woman and an acceptable one in Dominican-American society. According to the Kandiyoti, "In classic patriarchy, subordination to men is offset by the control older women attain over younger women" (279). This is the kind of "lip service to the old ways" Laura participated in "while herself nibbling away at forbidden fruit" (116). Though perhaps not consciously, Laura varies the way she resists patriarchal ideology because she does not want to be ostracized as too radical or a bad mother. In order to wield some agency, she balances her creative self while still adhering to important ideas of motherhood ideology.

Though Laura is not able to express herself freely without compensating with regressive ideas, she encourages her daughters to follow their dreams and does not ridicule them for their variant lifestyles that stray from the Dominican ideology of motherhood. Laura has a particularly strong relationship with Yolanda. Yolanda is the writer of the family and Laura is immensely proud of her: "The mother used to go to all the poetry readings her daughter gave in town and sit in the front row applauding each poem and giving standing ovations. Yolanda was so embarrassed that she tried to keep her readings a secret from her mother, but somehow the mother always found out about them and appeared, front row, center" (46). Feminist theorist Hélène Cixous emphasizes the importance of women writing themselves into history to destroy "phallogocentric tradition" that restricts thinking, creating, and innovating (Cixous 879). Poetry is a vehicle for this kind of resistance work, as it encourages introspection and the unveiling of oneself. Cixous calls women to do feminine writing by writing about their bodies (880). Throughout her college career and adult life, Yolanda writes poems about her sexuality. Though Laura is said to "not believe in sex for girls," she is astounded by Yolanda's creative and

imaginative nature (46). Laura sees her creative nature and desire for self-expression reflected in Yolanda. Laura gives nicknames to each family member, so it might be inferred that she also gave Yolanda the nickname “Yo,” which is Spanish for “I.” This further solidifies Laura’s connection to this daughter and a willingness to live vicariously through her.

Laura is not a writer, but she does engage in self-authorship, and, in a way, speaks herself into history, by acting as the García family’s oral historian. While her husband is traumatized by the SIMs’ signature black Volkswagen cars and her daughters try and fail to piece together their childhood memories, Laura resists passivity and silence about her family’s hard times. In the early (but chronologically last) chapters of the novel, it is Laura who brings in details about the sisters’ childhood to people outside the family and even strangers. She tells stories about each girl that she finds essential to their lives, though to the rest of the family they might seem embarrassing, unnecessary, or shameful in any other context. The first story Laura tells is at the wedding of the eldest García sister, Carla. Laura tells the story of Carla’s desire for red shoes during the time that the family was struggling financially and how Carlos painted white shoes with red nail polish (Alvarez 44-45). At one of Yolanda’s poetry readings, Laura tells the person sitting next to her about the first time she realized Yolanda was a poet (48-50). After Sandra’s breakdown, Laura tells the psychiatrist all about the events that have transpired and brought this daughter to the mental institution (51-53). While in the maternity ward after Fifi gives birth, Laura tells Fifi and Oslo’s love story, though the reader learns later that it is missing some details (58-59). Laura decides what is important and meaningful to give light and consideration to.

In the Dominican Republic, Laura has everything working in her favor to be happy and content in her life, at least according to societal ideals. She is white, wealthy, has a loving husband who takes care of her family. It is not until she is removed from the Dominican

Republic that she realizes the confinements of Dominican traditions. While Laura's resistance to motherhood is a conscious effort made to expand her skills and identity beyond the confinements of these ideologies, Beli is driven to resistance by necessity.

### **3. *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*- Beli**

Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is a bildungsroman that centers on a protagonist named Oscar de León and includes chapters focused on his older sister Lola and their mother Belicia (Beli). This polyvocal approach traces the history, though not linearly, of the Cabral de León family's inescapable *fukú* curse, raising questions about free will and destiny, from Beli's life in the Dominican Republic to the family's present-day life in New Jersey. The novel is primarily narrated by Yunior, a family friend, who hopes the telling of the Cabral de León's story will act as a *zafa*, or counter curse, so that the plague that has caused the downfall of Oscar, his mother Beli, and her parents will end with Lola's daughter. The *fukú* is said to have been placed on the family by Trujillo after Beli's father, Abelard, resists the dictator's sexual advances towards Beli's eldest sister. Abelard is later imprisoned, tortured, and murdered for treason. After Abelard's imprisonment, Beli's whole family succumb to mysterious deaths, and she is left an orphan.

This novel portrays the response Hypatía Belicia Cabral (Beli), who has been systemically oppressed and has endured trauma from it from birth to adulthood, has to motherhood ideology. It seems like no matter what Beli does, either to resist or conform to patriarchal ideologies, there is no way for her to transcend her circumstances. In this sense it could be said that Dominican ideology, or perhaps all ideologies, act as a curse for those born into oppression. According to Gramsci, people become willing participants in their oppression by following the ruling class constructed ideologies that are presented in school, church, the media,

and other institutions (Parker 278). Since these ideas perpetuate their everyday lives, people internalize their oppression and deem it natural. This leads to a continuation of the performance of ideology, enabling an inescapable system. By sharing the full history of this family from the curse's inception to present day, the storytelling acts to offset the curse. Likewise, learning about how ideology is constructed, ingrained, and enforced through society can help people to create change. Beli's story acts as a cautionary tale of how young Dominican women were and are oppressed by patriarchal ideology. As I have previously stated, one's interpretation of motherhood and their performance of mothering is affected by their socio-economic status. Laura is able to dedicate the majority of her time to mothering because she has no financial necessity to work and provide for her family, plus she has a full staff that takes care of the cooking, cleaning, and other domestic chores. As a single mother, Beli is solely responsible for providing financially for her family which makes it difficult for her to find time to properly connect with her children and leads the eldest daughter to basically raise young Oscar. Motherhood ideology is set up to portray the married elite white mother as "good" while women of color who are single and working-class are deemed "bad" mothers. Though it may be difficult for these "bad" mothers to dedicate the time and attention required for mothering work, they are simply doing their best given their circumstances.

In the Dominican Republic, Beli is a resister of authority, but after being punished for going against the grain, she does her best to conform to Dominican patriarchal ideals. It is almost as if it is too late for her to be a good mother, so she enforces these expectations onto her daughter so that she might not have to endure the difficulties that Beli does. Yet this comes across as abusive in practice.

Trujillo's promotion of family unity and patriotic Dominican *Hispanidad* fails Beli from the start because it is all conditional. In a society that promotes family unity as a means of nation building and encouraging modernity, Beli was left abandoned as an infant after her family was allegedly murdered by Trujillo because of her father's rumored resistance to the dictator. Not only was she abandoned, Beli was also unwanted by extended family members because of her dark skin. Yunion explains that "That's the kind of culture I belong to: people took their child's black complexion as an ill omen" (Diaz 248). For the first six years of her life, Beli bounced from distant aunts to cousins before being sold as a *criada*, a child domestic servant. Beli was not one to be passive and is considered stubborn and hardheaded throughout the novel. She retaliates against her *criada* "family" by attending class at the local public school instead of attending to her household chores. Her punishment for disobeying is two-fold: first, the father poured hot oil on Beli, which etched scars on her back that were visible the rest of her life; second, she was made to sleep locked in a chicken coop (257).

Soon after this, La Inca, a cousin of Beli's father, found the young girl and adopted her. La Inca nurtures Beli, pampers her, shows her how to behave like a proper young lady, and gives her access to resources so that she may continue her parent's legacy. Despite this positive shift, Beli dreams of escaping: "For reasons she only dimly understood, by the time of our narrative, Beli could no longer abide working at the bakery or being the 'daughter' of one of the 'most upstanding women in Baní.' She could not abide, period. Everything about her present life irked her; she wanted, with all her heart, something *else*" (79). The narrator continues to list everything that Beli wants to get away from. The list includes La Inca's "impossible" expectations, Beli not being able to buy the clothes she wanted, and the mysterious death of her parents, among other things (79). Though this list is long and, in many ways, includes what any teenage girl would

want to escape, it is clear that it is more than just her current living situation that Beli wants to leave behind. Even if “she’d been a princess in a high castle or if her dead parents’ former estate, the glorious Casa Hatüey, had been miraculously restored from Trujillo’s Omega Effect,” Beli still would have wanted to leave the island, the dictatorship, and Dominican cultural traditions (80). She is desperate to start anew elsewhere.

This dissatisfaction is a form of resistance. If ideology works in someone’s favor, there is no need to question it, yet, in a place like Trujillo’s Dominican Republic, even to those who do not conform to or benefit from the dominant ideology, it is difficult to imagine anything outside the existing system of government and way of life. Beli describes the physically and mentally inescapable country as “like being at the bottom of an ocean . . . There was no light and a whole ocean crushing down on you. But most people had gotten so used to it they thought it normal, they forgot even that there was a world above” (81). What Beli describes here is cultural hegemony. Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony argues that to some extent people consent to the rule of a regime through the spread of ideology. According to Robert Dale Parker, “The bourgeois capitalists’ prestige makes their way of thinking seem like common sense to the masses, and so the masses come to identify with bourgeois ways of thinking, leading them to consent to bourgeois dominance” (278). The ruling class’ ideology is spread through social institutions such as education, religion, laws, and media. This system of socialization leads people to accept that the existing regime is normal. Gramsci’s concept was developed as an answer to why Marx’s prediction that the working-class would overthrow the ruling class was not realized in countries like Italy. Those who are exploited and oppression do not retaliate because though they may not be content, they believe their dissatisfaction to be natural and are not able to imagine anything beyond their current state because they have been following



society's rules of what is good and acceptable. Beli is part of the few that recognizes her dissatisfaction but will not tolerate it. She wants more than the island has to offer. She is a natural resister of tradition and ideology.

As Beli becomes a young lady, escape starts taking the shape of the ultimate domestic symbol: a house. She daydreams about being swept off her feet to a French mansion by a handsome European who happens upon La Inca's bakery on a stroll through their town and falls madly in love with Beli (87). Beli holds fast to these fairy tales and becomes obsessed with the idea of a traditional mother-wife role in which she and her family are protected and financially taken care of by a man. For Beli, the only way to escape the island is by marrying a wealthy man with power. While La Inca encourages Beli to follow in the footsteps of her parents into a career in medicine, and in turn restore the family legacy of the estate Casa Hatüey, even as a doctor or a person of respectable status it is unlikely Beli would have been able to leave the country. During this time, people had to have great influence and connection to obtain permission to leave. According to Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, Trujillo restricted the number of international passports issued to Dominicans in order to encourage his pro-natal agenda and ensure loyalty to the regime, as well as "to prevent the flow of information between disaffected Dominicans and opponents on the world stage" (50). Beli did not have power, talent, or family that would be able help her, so she found her only choice to be to marry well.

Though unable to leave the island through her own efforts, Beli does assert agency by making her own decisions. She is resistant to authority all her life, from the "parents" that purchased her to her adoptive mother La Inca; she shows no trust in people no matter their intentions or how valid their advice. As an adolescent, Beli puts a lot of her trust in men because the attention they give her makes her feel powerful. However, this is just a feeling; in the end,

the men always have control over the relationship and influence its trajectory. Paradoxically, though resisting social norms of purity, Beli also places faith in the patriarchal idea of men protecting and saving women because it might afford her the escape she desperately seeks.

Beli becomes engrossed with the idea of motherhood because social norms can afford her the escape she wants. If she becomes pregnant, societal norms encourage the couple to get married. From there, the husband would provide financially for his family and if it were a wealthy man, Beli's dream of escape could become reality. Despite La Inca's disapproval and endless lectures in protest, at the age of sixteen, Beli starts dating a middle-aged man who goes by the name "the Gangster." He is a *Trujillista* "business" man holding a high ranking in the SIM. His position allowed him to travel throughout Latin America and fly frequently to Miami. This worldliness really appeals to the elsewhere bound Beli: "[He] treated her to plays, movies, dances, bought her wardrobes of clothes and pirate chests of jewelry, introduced her to famous celebrities, and once even to Ramfis Trujillo<sup>8</sup> himself—in other words, he exposed her to the fucking world (at least the one circumscribed by the DR) . . ." (124). Moreover, the Gangster was promising Beli twenty-room mansions in Miami and Havana. Scholar Melissa M. Gonzalez finds Beli's confidence that she will never need a job because the Gangster will provide for her to be indicative that Beli "has bought into a bourgeois, heteronormative fantasy of security" (Gonzalez 289). So, when Beli found out she was pregnant, she was elated: "This was it. The magic she'd been waiting for. She placed her hand on her flat stomach and heard the wedding bells loud and clear, saw in her mind's eye the house that had been promised, that she dreamed about" (136). Despite the pro-natal attitudes during this time and the belief that motherhood is a position of high honor in Dominican society, it is all conditional on one's social status and race.

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<sup>8</sup> Ramfis Trujillo was the infamously flashy son of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo, and he briefly took power after his father's assassination.

Dominant ideologies are constructed for and by the powerful, who are often white or the whitest appearing males in a society, to keep the powerful on top while not allowing mobility for those at the bottom. Since the powerful are the ones who make use of such ideologies, they are also the ones able to make alterations or attach conditions to them. For example, though motherhood is deemed an honorable vocation, having a child out of wedlock is often stigmatized. The Gangster is revealed to be married to Trujillo's sister. When news of her husband having impregnated a girl starts circulating, Trujillo's sister sends Beli to get an abortion. Beli refuses to get the abortion and she is later kidnapped, brutally beaten, and left for dead in a sugarcane field. After this incident, Beli loses the baby, though it is not clear if it is the result of the abortion or the near fatal violence she endured. Despite no longer being pregnant, Beli remains a target for the SIM and La Inca decides to call in favors in order to send Beli to the United States.

When she arrives to New York, Beli is still holding on to the idea that a man will save her, but motherhood is a prison and not an escape for Beli in the end. Though in theory motherhood could provide Beli with the family stability and security she wants, this vision that is often force-fed to young girls does not really fit into the patriarchal structure because there are different social expectations regarding pregnancy for men and women. As stated previously, men have a different social obligation to parenthood than women do.<sup>9</sup> Adrienne Rich writes that

A man may beget a child in passion or by rape, and then disappear; he need never see or consider child or mother again. Under such circumstances, the mother faces a range of painful, socially weighted choices: abortion, suicide, abandonment of the child, infanticide, the rearing of a child branded "illegitimate," usually in poverty, always outside the law . . . Whatever her choice, her body has undergone irreversible changes,

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<sup>9</sup> See pages 9-10 of this document.

her mind will never be the same, her future as a woman has been shaped by the event.

(12)

Though to have a family is a life-changing commitment that is generally regarded as a decision that cannot be retracted, it is physically easier for men to reject parenthood during pregnancy or change their minds after the child is born. Women are met with stigma on various levels if considering the same choices and even more so if their partner is the one who leaves. Beli does get married and has two children, Lola and Oscar. However, her life is just as devastating as it was in the Dominican Republic, if not worse, because she is left to raise those children on her own when her husband abandons them after two years of marriage. Beli abandons mothering to survive both financially and psychologically. In doing so, her role as a parent is stripped down to the bare minimum, a father role. She becomes emotionally unavailable and just works to provide food and shelter for her children. According to motherhood ideology, this makes Beli a “bad” mother.

Though Beli makes naïve decisions in the Dominican Republic that give the impression that she is culpable for the tragic life she endures in the United States, her status as a bad mother has little to do with those decisions and is just a systemic result of the patriarchy. As a single parent, Beli has to work three jobs in order to provide for her family and has no time to dedicate to the “proper mothering” work of nurturing and care. Lola describes her mother as an “absentee parent; if she wasn’t at work she was sleeping, and when she was around it seemed all she did was scream and hit” (54). Moreover, the result of systemic “bad” motherhood affords Beli some power and even allows her to embody patriarchal authority by taking the position of head of the household. She is the sole breadwinner for the family, buys her family’s house in New Jersey, and has one built for La Inca in Baní. In many ways, she takes on the role of father. In the

patriarchy, the sole role of fathers is to provide financially and be the voice of authority; they are not expected to be emotionally connected to their children. It is not just that Beli is emotionally unavailable for her children, but she pushes the responsibility of mothering onto her daughter. The abuse Beli unleashes at her daughter is also connected to deeply rooted patriarchal ideas. As Beli steps into the role of patriarchal authority, she places her daughter in the subordinate position a man would place his wife or daughter. Not only does Beli demand her daughter to complete domestic tasks, but she acts like she is the only one that can determine Lola's value and treats her according to that evaluation.

In gaining this kind of authoritative power, Beli embodies the voice of patriarchal ideas and forces Lola to conform to them as the perfect Dominican daughter. Lola goes on to describe Beli as

a mother who makes you doubt yourself, who would wipe you out if you let her. But I'm not going to pretend either. For a long time I let her say what she wanted about me, and what's worse, for a long time I believed her. I was a fea, I was a worthless, I was an idiota. From ages two to thirteen I believed her and because I believed her I was the perfect hija. I was the one cooking, cleaning, doing the wash, buying groceries, writing letters to the bank to explain why a house payment was going to be late, translating. (56)

Rich finds that “[p]owerless women always used mothering as a channel—narrow but deep—for their own human will to power, their need to return upon the world what it has visited on them” (Rich 38). In their article, Gonzalez traces how the disappointments of love and power have left Beli bitter and merely surviving (289). The pain and hardship she endured in the Dominican Republic and then again in the United States have left her disheartened and coldhearted. Gonzalez finds that Beli's demands for Lola be “the perfect Dominican daughter” are illustrative

of a cycle of violence and misogyny. Just as Beli has endured a difficult life, so must her daughter.

Another way to look at Beli's abusive parenting is that it is a response to a realization that her tragic life is a punishment, or *fukú*, for the resistance she had towards authority and Dominican ideologies of "good" womanhood. It could be argued that in forcing her daughter to conform to the obedient, passive ideas of what a "good" woman is, or a "perfect Dominican daughter" for that part, Beli is saving Lola from enduring the pains that she has. Not only do circumstances not allow Beli to be "good," but there is a slight acknowledgement that being a "good" mother does not guarantee that one's children will have good lives. This is shown through the parallel mother-daughter relationship between La Inca and Beli, and Beli and Lola. La Inca was the ideal mother in many ways, perhaps only failing because Beli is not her biological daughter. Even when Beli disregards her mother's advice, calls her horrible names, comes home terribly late, La Inca never raises her voice at Beli or really ever disciplines her outside of lecturing. And all of that did not result with Beli making good choices or having a good life. Because her mother was so lenient and participated in intensive mothering, Beli was allowed the agency to resist. In the end, Beli is stuck and leads a tiring, burdensome, lonely life. It could be that Beli is not only projecting onto her daughter but practicing an extreme form of tough love.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Written sixteen years apart, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) demonstrate distinct reactions to motherhood during the Trujillo regime by women of different social classes and race. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* depicts the voluntary resistance to motherhood by an ideological "good" mother.

Laura's resistance is interpreted as a feminist action. On the other hand, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* depicts the involuntary resistance to motherhood by an ideological "bad" mother. Beli's resistance is interpreted as a voluntary action. These intersecting aspects of these women's lives also impact their view and how they relate to motherhood ideology and mothering. Even though Beli is a realist about the restrictive life under the regime, she has rose colored glasses when it comes to ideas about traditional family life. The majority of Beli's upbringing is marked by instability and loneliness. Though La Inca loves and cares for Beli in the most unconditional motherly way, she is still not Beli's *own* mother. Beli's obsession with owning a home is really a fixation or longing for having a family of her own. In her early adult years, having a family she can properly call her own would be the ultimate refuge for stability. Though Beli's quest for a wealthy man may seem shallow or lazy, she is really in search of something everyone wants: love and nurturing. Everyone wants to be and feel taken care of, and for Beli, becoming a mother can secure that. The idea of the traditional family is that once a couple has children, they are tied down for life. In the end, Beli does not achieve this ideal and in many ways, she fills in the role of the head of the household and is the one who provides stability. While in the Dominican Republic, motherhood ideology is just a normal part of life for Laura. She adheres to the traditional stay-at-home mom role without ever questioning anything. It is not until she leaves that environment that Laura realizes she wants to do so much more in addition to her role as a mother. In the end, Laura has no support for these new goals and she must tap into the self-sacrificing figure to avoid any more rifts in her family.

Though Laura and Beli resist motherhood in some ways, they also conform to other patriarchal ideas so that they may afford certain powers and freedoms; as I have noted, this can be usefully characterized as patriarchal bargaining. However, Diaz portrays a path to resistance

that is subversive to what Alvarez presents. The resistance present in Alvarez's novel in some ways resembles that of the American second-wave feminism of the 1960s. Laura is a wealthy white woman who is tired of being limited to her role as a mother and wife. She starts inventing gadgets and takes college courses only to be ridiculed by her family. Because Laura is trying to better her life and expand the options available to women like her, while also still taking care of her motherly duties, readers would still consider her a "good" mother and label this resistance as "courageous mothering." Beli, on the other hand, would perhaps be labeled as a "bad" mother on the surface because of the series of "bad" choices she makes throughout her life that led to becoming Oscar and Lola's bitter, emotionally unavailable, abusive mom. Yet, many of the choices Beli makes are due to her circumstances. It would be absurd to reduce these two characters as "good" or "bad" because their circumstances are so complex and different. Instead, by putting them in conversation with one another, these novels demonstrate the hegemonic ideology of motherhood which only benefits the elite while shunning and stigmatizing mothers who fall outside of it. Paired together, these novels illustrate how women of privilege want to escape the role of mother-wife that is so revered by both American and Dominican institutions and how oppressed women look up to the lives of these elite women as aspirational and try their hardest to conform to ideology so that they may reach that goal, but it is nearly impossible.

Though these ideas are embraced by elite women (like Laura and her sisters), it was not created by them. It was created by the patriarchy so that elite women could feel like they were in a place of power, status, and freedom but because they are only limited to the mother-wife role, it is actually quite restricting. This apparatus is also demonstrated in how both *Hostosianismo* and the AFD recruited elite, mostly white women to join restrictive social reform movements that placed them on a pedestal as an example for the working class. Hegemony works when everyone



follows the rules that benefit the ruling class. It is unclear whether the benefit is the prestige elite women get is from spreading these ideas, or if it is how hegemony has worked to convince these women that there could not possibly be anything greater than the privileged positions that they are in. While elite women do reap some kind of benefit that compels them not to question these ideas, the real benefactor here is the patriarchy which “allowed” women these positions.

As different as Laura and Beli are, they share many similarities. First, they are both strivers and work to obtain their respective goals though they are not able to realize them. Second, they demonstrate the costs of functioning within patriarchy. For Laura, this cost is her career goals and creative agency. In the end of the novel, it is not revealed what Laura goes on to do after taking the adult courses. What may be inferred, is that those dreams were casted aside because of lack of support and confidence in those ideas. The tumultuous journey Beli takes costs her the thing she was first after, a family. Together, these novels not only point to a shift in the depiction of resistance to motherhood ideology in Dominican-American literature between the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, but they also expose an underlying preoccupation in the diaspora with the effects of Trujillo’s regime forty-six years after the dictator’s assassination.

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