
Creating Social Justice: A Conversation with Julia Álvarez

Rebeca Moreno-Orama

The Dominican-American writer, Julia Álvarez is one of the most prominent female voices in contemporary American and Hispanic Caribbean literature. Recipient of numerous awards, including the prestigious National Medal of Arts given by president Barack Obama in 2013, Álvarez is the author of bestsellers such as *How the García Girls Lost Their Accent* (1991) and *In The Time of the Butterflies* (1994), which was adapted into a feature film in 2001. More recent titles by her include the novel *Return to Sender* (2009) and the nonfiction book *A Wedding in Haiti* (2012), although her work extends to poetry, essays, and children's books as well.

In her prolific career, Álvarez has dedicated herself to the exploration of crucial issues related to social justice, including the representation of marginalized identities in dominant cultures, the odds confronted by immigrants, and the process of constructing bridges of tolerance between privilege and unprivileged groups in society. Her commitment to building a more egalitarian world is materialized not only in her literary work but also in her efforts as a social activist. For years she has been advocating for the rights of Latino migrant workers in Vermont's farms, and she is also one of the founders of *Borders of Light*, a human rights collective created in 2012 to promote hope and justice along the convoluted border between Dominican Republic and Haiti.

In this interview, Julia Álvarez shares her insights on the power of storytelling to overturn political injustices, such as the one suffered by the Dominican people, and in particular by the Mirabal sisters, under General Rafael Trujillo's thirty-one years of dictatorship. The writer also offers a compelling vision of community engagement through the creation of a literary space in which issues affecting the Latino population in the United States can be explored. Álvarez reveals the importance of the imagination in envisioning a distinct narrative space where the effects of NAFTA on undocumented Mexican farmer workers or the challenges faced by the children of undocumented immigrants are brought to life through the singularity of her characters. She particularly stresses her commitment to creating a multiplicity of voices and approaches in order to provoke an independent but well-rounded discussion of the conflicting perspectives on these issues.

Moreover, Álvarez reveals her current literary and social projects, one of which is her active role in criticizing "The Sentence". On September 23, 2013 the Dominican tribunal passed ruling TC/0168/13, revoking the citizenship of thousands who were born in the Dominican Republic because they were descendants of "undocumented" Haitian parents. The decision affecting anyone born in 1929 or later suddenly left stateless a significant part of the population on the Caribbean island. Álvarez comments on how "The Sentence" split Dominican public opinion, and on how the prejudice brought up by the ruling is a consequence of Trujillo's legacy. As she has done extensively in her novels, Álvarez points out the urgency of inverting the racial stereotypes used against Haitians. Specifically, she emphasizes the need to rethink the significance of the Haitian massacre of 1937 in order to reverse the intolerance established afterwards. Ultimately, this conversation shows how Julia Álvarez is creating a new sense of social justice through her work as both an artist and activist.

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Rebeca Moreno-Orama: In *The Time of the Butterflies* (1994), you recounted that your family arrived in the US in the 1960s, because your father was forced to leave the country because he was an opponent of Trujillo's regime. Do you consider your novel a space in which Trujillo's dictatorship is finally brought to trial?

JA: That is an interesting question, because you know during the time of Trujillo everything was timed in terms of "La era de Trujillo". Tenth year of the era of Trujillo, when he had been in ten years, twenty years, twenty-five years. And that's why instead of "La era de Trujillo", it's "El tiempo de las mariposas". I wanted to wrench that time from the dictatorship and give it to the people who were not able to live fully realized lives because of the oppression; they're known as "la generación perdida". And I also wanted—because you know we always hear of the males in the dictatorship and the underground and the "Ches" and the "Castros" and so many other male figures, and I thought, there is a whole population of females that were also a part of the anti-regime. In this case, they were also the inspiration because when they killed the Mirabal sisters—all the historians say two things brought down the regime: when the Catholic Church finally stood up against Trujillo—well not all of it, some of the hierarchy were still blessing him—and when he murdered the Mirabal sisters.

RM: Do you believe that the assassination of the Mirabal system was a turning point?

JA: It was a turning point, people said if he can do this, to these—I mean, they had all the star quality, PR quality: they were beautiful, they were young, they were mothers, they were wives—all the iconic things in our culture, and he violated that. And he had been taking little girls, and he was a ladies' man, and he had been taking people's land and properties but this was like the ultimate violation. And I think that not only taking the Trujillo regime to task, but the Trujillo regime that persists in the mentality of the people. Because that scene at the end where she says "Was it for this?" the sacrifice of the butterflies—because you killed the dictator, but the dictatorship, that is the mentality that allowed that to happen, persists—and we see that, because the Haitian Massacre of 1937, and everybody said: "pero eso fue Trujillo, Trujillo, Trujillo." Now we are killing them, not with bayonets and machetes, we are killing them cleanly with legal pronouncements. And this is the thing, that that mentality persists. That's why we have *Border of Lights*, that group we started.

Border of Lights is an effort of bringing to light the fact that is a massacre that is never been addressed properly or redressed by the Dominican government. In fact we are repeating it, as I said, legally now, legally. With—"tapando el sol con el dedo", with the idea that it is an immigration problem—these are not immigrants.

RM: No, we are talking about thousands of people that were born in the Dominican Republic of Haitian descent.

JA: And they have been there, many of them with their families, since 1929. So, it is not just bringing the dictatorship to task, but bringing our history, bringing us to see it. Chekhov, a wonderful writer that I love, says: "The task of a writer is not to solve the problem but to state it correctly." You are not ostensibly preaching—because you say, it is your way to bring it to the society, not with an argument, but with a story.

RM: What does storytelling mean to you?

JA: For me, storytelling is my activism. Because I believe that when people enter deeply into a story, and connect with the characters, they become the other. I mean and I really believe—it is a slower process, and it is under the radar, it is not proclaiming, so it just seems it escapes notice in some ways. You never leave a book that has touched you as the same person that entered it. Some adjustments have been made, some perceptions have been gained. And I have to believe that over time this creates a groundswell of transformation. There is a wonderful poem by Seamus Heaney called "The Cure at Troy" and in it, there is a stanza that I love that goes: "History says, don't hope / On this side of the grave / But then, once in a lifetime / The longed-for tidal wave / Of justice can rise up / And hope and history rhyme." History says don't hope. But poetry, our arts, our stories, can bring about slowly a tidal wave—and "hope and history rhyme." I love that, you know.

RM: Here in Vermont, you are very well known, not only as a resident writer here at Middlebury College but as a defender of the rights of local Latino migrant population. Do you consider yourself a politically engaged writer? How do you feel about that notion?

JA: In our cultures, we had so many dictatorships. People don't realize because they know Holocaust and things like that as happening in Europe, but during the second half of the last century if not before, Latin America was full of these kinds of regimes and dictatorships. And as an artist, whether you did it through indirect means of magical realism, that makes it sound like it is about some imaginary thing, or however you did it, I think writers in many of our countries, in Latin America and in Europe don't have the luxury of being apolitical. I think that any literature or art that sinks below a certain level of awareness doesn't really serve us as a human family. I am not saying that a writer has to be ostensibly political and in your face, that

can sometimes destroy the story, because you have to have such a light touch, it is such a gossamer thing, it is such a bubble, and you come at it too hard with agendas or polemics or propaganda, and you are somewhere else. It is still a valid way of expression and protest, but it is not the way that I work and that I believe works for me, anyhow. But you have to have a certain level of awareness of your own time and what is going on, because if you are in the middle of Nazi Germany and you are writing poems about the flowers and you know that are not somehow connected to that reality, how can you provide people with sustenance for their souls? You are providing sustenance for their escapism, but you are not helping them live fuller, more integrated lives. I really think that there has to be a level of awareness. We are products of history too. We plumb down into the human soul so we can read somebody like Gilgamesh, the oldest work known, from two thousand years back and we can relate to Enkidu and Gilgamesh because they have gone to the soul—but they are within the context of a time. There is an affliction in the kingdom; there is a situation, which is being addressed. I think it is an important thing. When you asked me—I always think of my art as a pebble in my shoe, and I don't go putting a pebble in my shoe. Who would be so crazy as to do that? But something comes to your door. Here I was in the Latino-compromised state of Vermont—really, there were hardly any Latinos—and all of a sudden, I am getting calls from farmers, and I am getting calls from schools, and I am getting calls from the hospital, because they don't have Spanish language speakers, and we got a Mexican migrant worker here.

RM: When does this start happening?

JA: About ten years ago. It was after the 2001 census, when there were still like only 2,500 Latinos in all of Vermont. Come to find out there were 500 Latinos just in this county; undocumented Mexican migrant workers now doing all of the milking in all of the farms. They were bringing their girlfriends and their wives, and their kids were showing up at school, and the teachers didn't know how to deal with this population, and they knew through my husband, who is now retired but was a physician, —and they would say: “Hey, Dr. Eichner's wife, she knows some Spanish.”

RM: Did this experience influence the writing of *Return to Sender* (2009)?

JA: I got called a lot and I would go to schools especially. That is when I wrote that book, *Return to Sender*, because I realized that most of our workers in this county came from Chiapas, and they were corn farmers, and they came here after NAFTA flooded the market with cheap corn subsidized by the government, they could not survive as farmers. They were coming to Vermont, to small farms that were closing up because the farmers here cannot survive as farmers either. Because they are against the big corporate agrobusiness, dairy agrobusinesses, they cannot find somebody that

will work. And when you are a farmer, you have to work 365 days a year, most of them don't have health insurance, most of them were losing their farms, and this was cheap labor, but what would happen is they would come, they would live on the farm—they could not go wandering around because instantly they were spotted, this is not a diverse population—and they built relationships with the farmers and their wives and their families. But the irony is that we are in the same position, but from different sides of the border: farmers in trouble. I went to the schools and I saw all these kids of migrant workers who were there, and they were traumatized because they were afraid, they had been told to be careful, they didn't know when they might get deported. They were scared; they didn't know what was going on.

RM: And this was a new Spanish-speaking community in Vermont, right?

JA: Yes, but in the schools they were with farmers' kids. And those farmers' kids didn't realize—they thought of themselves as really good Americans, and here their parents were telling them, “You must not talk about this, these people can be deported.” Deported? They had never heard of those things except when they read about Nazi Germany and people being hauled away. So they were both two really confused populations, and I thought, “Only a story can help us understand what is happening to us.” And that's why I wrote *Return to Sender*. I didn't set out “Oh, there's a problem here, I need to address it;” somebody came knocking at my door and said “Would you come and translate? Would you come to the open-door clinic and volunteer—” because that's the free clinic in town —“we're getting these people and we can't talk to them.” I ended up showing up there, and that's the pebble in my shoe, you know. Something happens in the life.

RM: How would you describe that “something” that inspires your writing?

JA: Something that troubles me, that puzzles me, which I don't understand. And for me, as well as I hope my reader, writing is a way to bring it—to try to understand it, and I don't mean just with my mind but with my emotions, with my soul, with my integrated self. I have to write the story that helps me to understand that predicament. And that's why it's two points of view. That book [*Return to sender*] is not just the Mexican migrant—first I just wanted to make it, and be an advocate for the Mexican migrant community and I thought: “No, there's this other story, and this other story—”

RM: In your recent writing, *A Wedding in Haiti* (2012) and in the article published in *The New York Times*: “Driving the Seam of Hispaniola” (2014), it seems that you are exploring the idea of a harmonious relationship between Haitians and Dominicans. Do you believe there is a gap or a contradiction between daily life in the Dominican

Republic and the cultural policies of the Dominican government? Because when we read you, it seems as if the borderlines are not static, or not even blocked.

JA: This is the story that is not getting out. People now want me to be on their show and comment on the situation, but we have been talking about this for years, and nobody paid attention. Now there is a titillating, *crisis*, and everybody wants their pundit to get in there and say something and to create—even if you are reacting against that dominant discourse, not the dominant population but the dominant discourse, if you are just responding and reacting to them, you are still in their paradigm. You go to the border—we do *Border of Lights*, and it is so moving to see the people historically—there is a story of integration and mutual survival together; that sort of dialogue about the Haitian as the other, I mean that was especially exacerbated by Trujillo. It was a way to divide and conquer, and also to kind of erase his own Haitian background and his own racial mix. The dominant population, it is a mixed population. Even white people have mixed people in their families.

RM: Isn't the racial background something that historically we have been struggling with in the Hispanic Caribbean?

JA: Right, right, and in Latin America too, with the identity of the indigenous, and the Spanish and the racial background. That does not exactly happen at the border. One of the projects we did in the central parks of both, the Jimaní and the Dajabón, was about postcards that said "1937—what does that mean to you?" It was amazing how many people wrote: "Hasta compadres somos". In other words, we are integrated. One of the people that is a big part of it, Eduardo Paulino, he teaches at the CUNY system, is coming out with a book, which is called *Dividing Hispaniola*. It is about the history of the border, and how permeable it's always been. And how families were intermarried, how suddenly by a signature, because of some treaty in Europe you'd find out that you were in French territory not in Spanish territory, or in Haitian territory not in the Dominican Republic. There is an unwritten history that is not about the massacre, but that does need to be addressed.

This other story that does not get out needs to be told. That is, again, the reason for *A Wedding in Haiti*: what happens when you enter the territory of the enemy that you were raised to think of as, "el cuco". When I wouldn't eat my supper it was "el cuco haitiano te va a llevar y allá se comen a los niños dominicanos, ¡se los comen!". You grew up with this fear, and then once you come to the States and you learn the history you see that that's not so, that that was fear mongering, but then you learn about 1937 and you feel this shame. My fear in going to Haiti was not the "cuco layer", it was the layer of "I didn't want them to know that I was Dominican, that my country had done something like that in the past." That shamed me. I was afraid because I thought that if I were a Haitian, I would hate me. I had to address all those layers in myself. It's a journey not

just into a wedding—and the wedding is between countries, not just between bride and groom—but it is also a journey into those layers in which we are culturally brainwashed.

RM: Would you say that it has been a history of demonizing the other?

JA: Exactly. I talk to some of my relatives, I mean some very conservative members of the family, and they will say if I talk about the massacre: "Sí, pero ellos nos invadieron en mil ochocientos cuatro" and I will say: "When are we going to stop?" How far—and what about when Columbus came and murdered all the indigenous? Why don't we go there? I mean, we've got to address the past; we've got to create a future that rids us of that paradigm.

RM: Considering what is going on in the Dominican Republic with the Haitian immigrants, do you believe that literature can play an important role in confronting that past and its injustices?

JA: At a certain layer, because "el problema es que" Dominicans, and I hate to make generalizations, don't have a reading culture. It is still an oral culture. I think the ways, which would be most effective there, would be if you can write some "bachatas", some rap songs, and some "merengues"; if you could enter that bloodstream and address it from the point of view of the culture itself. But I am a hybrid, I am a mixture, and I have entered another reality. What my literature can do, and how my literature can address that, is through, I really think, the power of diaspora. I have seen it. Look at Junot Diaz. I mean, that there is a way in which you can write the story, first of all, so that Dominican Americans, Haitian Americans growing up in this country that would not have an access, that is no longer their culture, and the mainstream culture here is not going to tell their stories, so you are seeding those people who then go back. I really believe if we hadn't had a diaspora to really rise up against what is going on, it would have been a lot easier to get this through. Because the people that I know there, they are intellectuals and artists, they are so over-voiced, they are so in siege, and they have to live that reality day by day. They can lose their jobs. I have a lot more flexibility and tenderness towards the people there. It is easier to be a big mouth from here.

I think the diaspora is key. And you know what, what is that thing that happened after the murder in that journal in Paris, "I am Charlie"—we're all diaspora, all of us, because we live in a culture of connectivity. So we get the seeds and the cross-fertilization and the hybridity that comes from entering and being a part of other realities. We travel a lot more. If you educate, if you look at it as though you are educating the human family, then you are creating change at a level that is amazing.

The first year we did *Border of Lights*—was beautiful, we marched to the border, there were responding lights—we sang, we read poems, there was a service—The second year, people came

out of their houses: “¿Qué es lo que está pasando?” “¡Ah, sí, vengan, vengan!” We massed on that border. It was huge. We were singing and holding up lights, we created a border of lights. The next year was right after the sentence, in September. The officials would say: “Esto está muy caliente, no les podemos dar permiso para que marchen a la frontera. We can’t let you go there.” However, we are the diaspora and we have a lot of young people, and they know the technology. They created an online vigil. What happened then is throughout the world.

The young people spread it through social media, they were on Facebook, and people could light a candle. A group of us, about twelve of us, went quietly to the border, and we lit our lights, and of course it was just twelve of us, and we took a photo that was then posted, and then people would say: “We’re with you there!” Riverside, New York. “We’re with you there,” Madrid, Spain. And we were so you won’t let us have a march? Here we are. We are global now. That’s even more dangerous!

This is the way these young people, this Dominican American diaspora, young generation, is thinking with tools that were unavailable, and they are able to do this. There is a wonderful phrase by Rebecca Solnit: “We must change the imagination of change.” We just can’t think that the way to change something is to react to something because you are just the opposite of it; you have to change the imagination of change.

People say to me: “What do you think of the movie *In the Time of the Butterflies* (2001)?” I always say: “Well, I thought I made the movie with language, and I have a hard time seeing it sort of flattened out that way.” But one thing is that everybody comes up to me in the Dominican Republic to say: “Ay, a mí me encantó *En el tiempo de las mariposas*.” “¿Lo leíste?” “Ah, no, vi la película.” That is our oral culture, the way it got spread.

RM: Do you travel back and forth to the Dominican Republic?

JA: Yes, we were just there with my two granddaughters, volunteering for a week at a camp.

RM: How often do you go?

JA: Well, when my parents were still alive, and they only died three years ago, one of them and then two years another, I would go about six, seven times a year because they both had Alzheimer’s and I was very involved in their care. Now less so, but still, it’s always going to be my other country. I think of myself as a citizen more of the world anymore. But we come from different tribes and root systems, and that is definitely one. When someone said: “Well gosh, I thought

you were getting off all these boards you are on. Why are you getting onto the Mariposa Foundation one?” and I said: “Because these other boards can get people. You know, there is—this board, Shelburne Farms, which does environmental education; they can get a zillion people. But how many Dominicans, and Dominican women, have the capacity and the visibility to begin to transform something there? If we don’t do it, who is going to do it?”

RM: Do you have a heroine or another prominent female figure from the Dominican Republic or any other place—you mentioned being a citizen of the world—which you want to write about?

JA: I’m working now on a lot of poetry. Every time that I need to clear my head, and need to connect deeply with what I’m put on this earth to do, --in the time left me, with the resources and whatever talent is left me—I ask myself: “what is the work that I still need to do”? The culture turns to you and they say, your publisher, your agent: “When are you going to write another book like *In the Time of the Butterflies*?” and I say: “You know, if I wrote another book like *In the Time of the Butterflies*, I would be betraying my readership. I would be just repeating something that works.” My job is to listen, closely, and to learn what it is that is the song that I can do, the story that I can tell. And when that happens, I find that returning to poetry returns me to the very deep root, that place where mystery stirs. Seamus Heaney came here and gave a talk, and he said: “Poetry is about putting into words what can’t be put into words.” I think of poetry as like pushing out, if you think of it with that—I hate to use the Western cowboy metaphor—but the scouts went out to discover the territory, and then afterwards came the wagon trains with the wives and the kids and the towns were built and the schools and the hospitals—and that’s novels. The wagon train is the novel. The scout is the poet; going out and pushing against the edge.

I’m working on poems. I’m also really interested in memory, in the past. I am thinking of immigrants a lot, these days—how much we lose of people when they are immigrants and they lose their language. They are in a foreign language, in a world where they don’t have access to the ability to express themselves. What happens to those selves? That is very much, for me, the generation of my parents, all the things that we lost of them in English.

It is not just a language, it is a rhythm, and it is a way of being. What happens to that self? Where do you put it? On top of that you have the antagonism of people saying you should banish it if you want to be a part of this world, learn English, leave Spanish behind, what happens to the closeted self, that doesn’t get integrated into your everyday life?