

Division of Public Programs

Sample of a Successful Application

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Project Title: Julia Alvarez: Something to Declare

Institution: Latino Public Broadcasting

Project Director: Sandie Viquez Pedlow

Grant Program: Media Projects Production

NARRATIVE

A. NATURE OF THE REQUEST

JULIA ALVAREZ: SOMETHING TO DECLARE (wt.) is a proposed documentary film on the life and work of Julia Alvarez, one of America's most celebrated Latina writers. Alvarez burst onto the literary scene in 1991 with her semi-autobiographical novel, *How the Garcia Sisters Lost Their Accents*, followed by *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994), which raised global awareness about three sisters assassinated by Dominican dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, and was subsequently made into a major motion picture. Her most recent novel, *Afterlife*, explores the universal issues of aging, loss, and healing, and narrates a new chapter about Latino immigrants in the United States.

Called "a writer of gigantic storytelling talent, and exquisitely composed prose," Alvarez has helped blaze the trail for generations of Latina/o authors, helping transform American culture and literature. Now 72 years old, she feels that time is running out to tell all of the stories still within her. The film will explore her childhood in the Dominican Republic, her complex family dynamics, the lifelong impact of their escape from the dictatorship, her feelings of displacement, hybridity, and loss—and how she transforms all of this, in a nuanced, complex writing voice—into poetry, essays and novels.

Latino Public Broadcasting, director Adriana Bosch, executive producer Jeff Bieber, and the PBS primetime series, *American Masters*, have formed a partnership to create this documentary and a comprehensive public media initiative to engage and enlighten the American public about the life and work of Julia Alvarez. The proposed outcome from NEH funds will include a 90-minute primetime broadcast on *American Masters* and *Voces*, as well as film festivals and on-line streaming on pbs.org. This initiative will also include a robust social media and communications campaign, and digital distribution in the international marketplace. We are requesting \$699,154.00 in production funding from the NEH for a total budget of \$1,023,521.00.

B. N/A.

C. PROGRAM SYNOPSIS

Julia Alvarez, the author of seven novels, three collections of poetry, a dozen books for children and a book of autobiographical essays, is considered one of the most influential Latina writers of her generation. Her work dramatizes the immigrant's dilemma in America and explores universal themes from coming-of-age to the grief and loss of growing older. She forges connections between the personal and the political from her unique point of view as a Dominican American woman. At a time when the Latina/o experience remains under-represented in American fiction, the proposed documentary aims to address this invisibility by acknowledging Alvarez's significant contribution to the American literary canon.

JULIA ALVAREZ: SOMETHING TO DECLARE (wt.) begins with a young Julia struggling to discover her voice. The film then unfolds along two interwoven strands—Julia's biography and the evolution of her writing life, with each act of the film centered on one of her novels. We witness her point of view as a 'hybrid'—in her life and work—as she

navigates the cultures of her native Dominican Republic and her adopted home in the United States.

Her first novel, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, exploded on the scene in 1991, an immediate sensation. “It came out as Latinos were transforming the U.S.,” says sociologist Ramona Hernández. “It grew into a cultural phenomenon that challenged stereotypes and provided immigrants, especially young women, with a sense of empowerment and a connection to a shared experience.”

Acts 1 and 2 explore *Garcia Girls* and its sources—Julia’s childhood in the Dominican Republic, her family’s frantic escape from their homeland’s brutal dictatorship and the four sisters’ complex path to becoming American. Julia Alvarez extended her meditation on women’s lives to the tragic era of Trujillo’s dictatorship in the Dominican Republic with *In the Time of the Butterflies*. Based on the true story of the Mirabal sisters, murdered by Trujillo, the novel sold more than a million copies, and was made into a movie starring Salma Hayek.

Act 3 interweaves the history of the Mirabals with an inside look at Julia’s writing process, as she retraces the fascinating journey across the Dominican Republic that inspired her most celebrated work.

Act 4 visits Julia at home in Vermont, where she taught at Middlebury College for the past 35 years. Her most recent novel, *Afterlife* (2020), explores the universal themes of love, loss, and aging against the challenges of immigrant life in 21st century America.

At age 72, she has pieced together the parts of her fragmented identities into the rich, full life of a writer, a teacher, and a social activist, equally at home in Vermont and the D.R. Having blazed a path for Latina/o writers with her coming-of-age novels, her writing, like Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, Cristina García and Sandra Cisneros, expands our ideas about immigration, diversity, identity and American literature.

D. HUMANITIES CONTENT

JULIA ALVAREZ: SOMETHING TO DECLARE (wt.) will touch on a number of Humanities themes: Ethnicity and Identity, Latina Literature in a Changing America, Feminism and Patriarchy, Loss and Grief, and Writing and Social Responsibility. Through these themes, the film will also explore relevant moments in the history of the Dominican Republic and Dominican immigration to the U.S., the rise of a Latino identity and the transformation of American culture as seen through Alvarez’s novels, poetry and essays

Ethnicity and Identity

Julia Alvarez, like many great writers, achieves her universality by focusing on the specific. Several of her novels chart her own distinct and individual experience of ethnicity and identity, as a Dominican American from a privileged family, who came to the United States at a specific historical moment.

The Alvarez family arrived in the U.S. in 1960, to escape political persecution, part of a small first wave of immigrants from the island. Her father, Dr. Eduardo Alvarez, was a member of the opposition to the Dominican dictatorship of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo.

Arriving before urban Dominican communities had formed in the U.S., the Alvarez family settled in a mostly white section of Queens. With no community to shore up their Dominican culture, and their own upper-class bias against the working-class neighborhoods of Latino New York, Julia and her three sisters were initially cut off from their roots. Assimilation was further encouraged when the Alvarez girls were sent to an elite New England boarding school. Later in their teens, they spent the summers in the D.R., living in their extended family's compound, in an attempt to refresh their Dominicaness.

Alvarez belongs to a generation who arrived in the United States as children or teenagers in the early 1960s—referred to as the 1.5 generation. This generation came of age during the cultural upheaval of the 1960s and '70s—a time when the certainties of American life were being questioned, when the notion of assimilation into the American 'melting pot' was giving way to notions of 'a mosaic' or 'salad bowl,' a mix of distinct cultures thrown together, in an often confusing and ambivalent process of integration. "She inhabits the hyphen that divides the two cultures," says project advisor Fernando Valerio-Holguín. "This hybridity... often results in collisions that manifest themselves in her characters and in her own development as a writer."

Alvarez and her characters are caught in the collision between her native Dominican culture and the culture of her adopted country. They struggle with an American mainstream culture that calls them 'spic!' and cannot locate their homeland on a map. They face their own traumatic experience of migration—the deep loss of the certainties of family and nation. And they navigate a clash between the expectations of their own patriarchal Dominican family—that women were confined to the role of wife, mother and caretaker of la familia—and the opposite lessons they learned in the America of the 1960s and '70s: that women should be independent, pursue careers and be sexually free.

Scholar Himanshi Chandervanshi describes the psychological burden of Alvarez's 'hybrid' identity. Yolanda, Julia's fictional stand-in in *Garcia Girls*, "grows up in the United States but does not develop a feeling of belongingness there. This makes her wish to return to her homeland, but when she does go back, she discovers her incompatibility there, and realizes that return and integration remains a myth."

Alvarez's identity is transnational. She inhabits two separate worlds, two separate nations—the United States and the Dominican Republic. She makes her home in both, at different times of her life, in different seasons. And she draws on both in her literature.

Unlike some immigrants who can never return to their country of origin, (because of politics, economic limitations, or distance) Julia and her characters travel frequently between the U.S. and the D.R., constantly navigating their relationship to family, homeland, and language. She is a Dominican in Vermont and a gringa in the Dominican

NEH proposal, *Julia Alvarez: Something to Declare*
LPB, Bieber, Bosch, WNET/American Masters

Republic. She embraces a third nation, she says, a nation of her imagination, writing, in her poem, *Homecoming*, “Surely knows where her roots really are, deep in the terra firma of language.” As Valerio-Holguín writes, “Alvarez appears to have overcome these cultural conflicts by... choosing language, or rather writing, over culture as her place of residence.”

Latina Literature in a Changing America

“Latino and Latina writing profoundly humanizes the complex, heart wrenching, and often enraging story of the Latino/a experience that is often missed in the glut of statistics or in the heated polemics around immigration.” —Professor Alan West-Durán

When Julia Alvarez’s first novel, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, was published in 1991, it was an immediate sensation. “Arriving at the end of a decade when the U.S. Latino population had grown by 53 percent, *Garcia Girls* was a book that was needed when it came out. As Latinos were transforming the U.S., people were hungry to know about us,” says sociologist and project advisor Ramona Hernández.

Between 1980 and 2000, the number of Latinos in the U.S. more than tripled and today they are the nation’s largest ethnic minority group. Although Mexicans and Puerto Ricans remain the dominant Latino population in the United States, the 1965 Hart-Cellar Act facilitated more widespread migration from the Americas. Today, Dominican Americans, with a population of approximately 2 million, are the nation’s fifth largest Hispanic immigrant group, a diverse community economically, racially, and geographically.

The Latino influence on American society has become increasingly visible and increasingly diverse; evident in the popularity of Latin American food and music, in the prevalence of Spanish-language advertising and media, and in the widespread inclusion of Latina/o writers in classrooms. “Latinidad is now part and parcel of popular culture,” sociologist Marcelo Suárez-Orozco writes.

This is a far cry from Alvarez’s own experience as an immigrant child in the early 1960s. “In the days before multicultural studies, the model for immigration was that you came to America, you assimilated, you cut off your ties to the past,” Julia reminds us, “and that was the price you paid for the privilege of being an American citizen.”

By the late 1970s, minority and immigrant writers had begun to mount an attack on white cultural hegemony. Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, and James Baldwin redefined African American writing. Chicano literature (including Rodolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima*, and Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* had been established as an alternative to European interpretations of history. And Chinese American Maxine Hong Kingston had written her seminal *Woman Warrior* in 1976, a book which Julia Alvarez singles out as a direct influence on her writing.

With *Garcia Girls*, and its sequel, *Yo!*, Alvarez joined Amy Tan, Cristina García, Sandra Cisneros, Nicholasa Mohr and others, in creating fiction that challenged and expanded the idea of American identity and American literature.

NEH proposal, *Julia Alvarez: Something to Declare*
LPB, Bieber, Bosch, WNET/American Masters

“There was a whole group of us,” Alvarez writes, “a tradition forming... By writing powerfully about our... culture we were... creating literature to widen and enrich the existing canon.”

Garcia Girls grew into a cultural phenomenon that challenged stereotypes while providing new immigrants, in particular young women, with a sense of empowerment, and a path for navigating the dualities of language, culture, and identity. Scholar Alan West-Durán describes Latino/a writing “as complex acts of creation, yielding diverse experiences that nevertheless share key commonalities.”

Dominican American writer Nelly Rosario, a humanities advisor on this project and a student at MIT in the 1990s, recalls reading *Garcia Girls* for the first time. “This was a novel about upper-class girls, negotiating a white world,” she says, “it was not my experience, growing up in the Bronx, but it did speak of displacement and of our shared history. I was grateful for Alvarez’s representation of Dominicans as writers and thinkers. She opened the door for us. She made me realize it was possible to tell *my* story.”

Today, Alvarez argues, this country has become “a nation of nations, a congregation of races.” Sociologist Peggy Levitt agrees: “the United States tolerates ethnic diversity more. The pressure to conform to a well-defined, standardized notion of what it means to be ‘American’ has greatly decreased.”

“To speak of Latino and Latina literature is to open “a world of diversity... of complex personal, social, and historical experiences,” adds West-Durán, “but at the heart of much Latino and Latina writing, is its willingness to explore and explicitly examine cross-cultural encounters.”

In her most recent novel, *Afterlife* (2020), set in the present, Julia explores the growing hostility to immigrants and its impact on small towns like her own, where undocumented immigrants are afraid even to shop for groceries for fear they will be deported. The protagonist, Antonia, encounters a young, undocumented couple from Mexico. Hesitant at first, she begins by offering them odd jobs. Then she invites the pregnant young woman to stay in her home. Finally, she arranges their safe return home to Chiapas.

By delving into her own connection to a new generation of immigrants, Alvarez explores the reach and meaning of ethnicity—going beyond the personal to a larger sense of social responsibility, to family and community, to one’s native country and to the larger Latino/a population of the United States.

In this way, Alvarez succeeds in the great mission of immigrant literature—transforming a culture often regarded as ‘foreign’ into an emergent culture that can challenge and reshape American life and society.

Feminism and Patriarchy

As a student at an elite New England boarding school in the mid-1960s, Julia Alvarez was steeped in the traditions of British and American literature dominated by white male voices

NEH proposal, *Julia Alvarez: Something to Declare*
LPB, Bieber, Bosch, WNET/American Masters

such as Yeats, Shakespeare, Milton, and Whitman. Alvarez writes, “I thought that was the way I had to sound if I wanted to be a writer.”

One day, while working at the prestigious Yaddo artists’ colony, she had a breakthrough. “The voice I heard when I listened to myself was not the voice of the white males in the tower, it was the voice of a woman, sitting in her kitchen.” Julia’s first collection of poetry, *The Housekeeping Poems* (1984), centered on women’s intimate realm (recipes, cooking utensils, romantic songs). She later expanded this idea in her novels, creating “a private, feminine everyday epic as an alternative to the public epic of masculine affairs,” writes adviser Valerio-Holguín.

How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents describes a private struggle between four sisters and their domineering father, who runs his home as his personal fiefdom and a mother firmly anchored in the traditions of female traditional roles. The restrictive gender norms of an immigrant household resonated deeply with thousands of women who read Alvarez’s novels. And Alvarez was careful to remind her readers that men’s assertion of control over women is not restricted to immigrant cultures, writing a scene in *Yo!*, where an American landlady is beaten by her husband.

In her best-known book, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Alvarez applies her feminist lens on a grander scale. Armed with the tools of American feminism, she rewrites an epoch of brutal dictatorship—known in the Dominican Republic as the Trujillato—from a women’s point of view.

Novels about dictatorship make up their own subgenre of Latin American literature, from Gabriel García Márquez’s *Autumn of the Patriarch* to Mario Vargas Llosa’s *La Fiesta del Chivo* to Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones*. Alvarez’s novel turns this tradition on its head by narrating the Trujillato through the eyes of the activist Mirabal sisters, murdered for their resistance to the dictatorship.

In the Time of the Butterflies brings Alvarez’s ‘language of the kitchen’ to the center of historical events. “It was on this very Formica table where you could still see the egg stains from my family’s breakfast that the bombs were made,” one sister explains in the novel. “Nipples, they were called. It was the shock of my life to see María Teresa, so handy with her needlepoint, using tweezers and little scissors to twist the fine wires together.”

The Mirabal sisters, known by their underground name, Las Mariposas or ‘the butterflies’, writes scholar Katherine Lashley, “broke through the confining restraints of womanhood and motherhood” to participate in “fighting and resistance,” and so represent “the negation of submissiveness in a male-dominated Dominican Republic.”

“Literary adaptations of the Trujillato do what historians cannot,” writes project adviser Sonia Farid, they can “delve into the emotional scars this regime has left on its victims,” by allowing those victims to tell their version of the history. The “personal turned collective traumas” of the sisters, their extended family, and friends, creates “a new

NEH proposal, *Julia Alvarez: Something to Declare*
LPB, Bieber, Bosch, WNET/American Masters

chronicle that portrays a shockingly faithful image of tyranny.” Bringing her feminist sensibility to bear, Alvarez’s novel empowers the victims and reclaims the ‘era of Trujillo’ by upending the narrative and recasting it as ‘the time of the butterflies.’

Loss and Grief

“*All Americans have something lonely about them. Maybe it is because they are immigrants.*” —Ryu Murakami

In Julia Alvarez’s writing, like that of many immigrant authors, loss is a central theme. Throughout her work, her characters struggle with the fundamental loss felt by an immigrant child leaving home. Looking back on her family’s escape from the Dominican Republic, Julia wonders, in an essay, if “those papers [the family’s long-awaited exit visa] had set us free from everything we loved.”

When the Alvarez family (and the fictional Garcias) left the Dominican Republic, in 1960, they left behind not only family, but also privilege, class status and the certainties that come from knowing who you are and where you belong. As cultural theorist Ian Chambers has written, “migrancy calls for dwelling in languages, in histories and in identities that are constantly subject to mutations... the promise of a homecoming becomes an impossibility.”

This is evident in the opening chapter of *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*. Twenty-nine years after her departure, Yolanda (Julia’s stand-in) returns to the D.R. to celebrate her 41st birthday; her one wish on that occasion is “let this turn out to be my home.” But we soon learn that this return is impossible, as she finds herself unable to reintegrate into Dominican society.

In her most recent novel, *Afterlife* (2020), Alvarez wrestles with another kind of loss—the one that comes with aging and mortality. This novel, like Joan Didion’s memoir, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, makes an important contribution to the literature of grief.

“I started losing everyone I love,” Alvarez writes in an essay. “Tías, tíos, madrinas, my parents... the suicide of my oldest sister—the losses kept coming. They seemed insurmountable.”

Julia’s fictional stand-in, Antonia, must learn to face the “gut wrenching pain” of her sister’s suicide, as well as the emptiness left by her husband’s sudden death. When Antonia calls upon the memory of the loved ones she has lost for guidance, she comes to understand that the only way to keep the people she loves alive is to “act as they would act,” to embody what she loved about them most.

Ultimately, *Afterlife* ties the personal losses that come with aging to that original sense of loss and dislocation faced by immigrant children. Antonia begins to find solace in helping a new generation of immigrants—Mexican farm workers—as they navigate their own loss of ‘everything they loved.’

“None of us can stop at despair,” Julia writes. “We owe the generations to come as well as our own, our deepest, truest activism: doing the work we love to do... to act out of the larger versions of ourselves.”

Writing and Social Responsibility

In her work and in her life, Julia Alvarez has chosen to follow a path of social responsibility, embracing what Nobel laureate Mario Vargas Llosa has called “the moral imposition that impels all Latin American writers to social and political commitment.”

In the Time of the Butterflies (1994) explores this commitment through the lives of the activist Mirabal sisters and *Afterlife* (2020) considers social responsibility, in a different light, as a path out of personal despair.

“Alvarez has a remarkable ability to show how our personal lives can enmesh with political questions,” writes editor and social worker Rachel León. In a time when “mothers and children are separated at our nation’s southern border... questions about America’s responsibility to its fellow humans arise. When one disagrees with an unjust, even cruel system, at what point do we step in? If silence is complacency, then just how loud do we need to speak out?”

“In Third World countries, you have no choice but to take a stand,” Julia has said. “My father was a doctor, but he joined the underground. He didn’t have to. My mother fought for women’s rights in the U.N. She didn’t have to do that. Because of my roots, I don’t feel I have a choice either.”

Her social justice work takes place transnationally, in the D.R. and in Vermont. From 1997 to 2019, Alvarez and her husband owned a coffee farm in the Dominican mountains called Altagracia, helping a cooperative of farmers grow coffee using traditional methods and export it to the United States. They also established a school and a library on the farm. In 2019, they donated Altagracia to the Mariposa Foundation, which is transforming it into a center for the empowerment of girls and young women.

In 2012, she co-founded Border of Lights (Frontera de Luces), to educate people about the suppressed history of the so-called Parsley Massacre, when Trujillo ordered the execution of as many as 20,000 Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian descent. Every year, on the day of the massacre, the group gathers at the border the two countries share on the island of Hispaniola, and lights thousands of lanterns in memory of those who were lost, challenging the nation’s entrenched racial prejudice against Haitians.

In Vermont, Alvarez works with Mexican and Central American migrant workers, translating for them in medical clinics and in schools. Drawing on her own childhood experiences, she wrote a series of novels for young people, giving voice to the fear, loss, and displacement of immigrant life.

“Alvarez’s work is a reminder of the enduring power of literature, of what it can and should do,” writes León. “Its job isn’t simply to entertain, but to move us, challenge us, change us.”

E. CREATIVE APPROACH

The film will rely on extensive interviews with Julia Alvarez on location at her home in Vermont and scenes of Julia and her family in the Dominican Republic. We will film verité sequences with Julia and her family in all locations including scenes of Julia at work, participating in readings and book signings, teaching, and with family and colleagues. Some scenes will be shot in a way to make the present stand in for the past. We will also follow Julia and her husband to locations of historical importance in the D.R., which will also be used to evoke their memory of earlier visits. Interviews with family members, fellow writers and scholars will provide details, counterpoint, and context. Narration will be used for transitions and for context.

The team will collaborate with Mind Bomb, a high-end graphics and animation company with extensive experience in documentaries. Digitally enhanced archival photographs and film, layered with graphic animation and point of view photography, will help to illustrate key moments in Julia’s life. For example, black and white animation with some details in gold will serve to illustrate passages from Julia’s novels. The gold details (such as the glint off the mirrored glasses of Trujillo’s henchmen, or the last ray of sunlight in a New York winter) will create a visual style to suggest the seams of broken porcelain repaired through the Japanese method known as *kintsugi*, Julia’s metaphor for her fractured life.

The animation will serve to clearly distinguish Julia’s fiction from her biography. We will also include animation and poetic scenery of the Dominican Republic and Vermont and will film recording sessions of an actor reading Julia’s work. Traditional archive photos, films and newspaper articles will provide historical context. All photography will be shot with the latest and highest quality technology. We will use an Arri Alexa 35mm or comparable camera, and employ a full lighting crew, dolly, and the most maneuverable and compact jib arm and drones available for added fluidity and motion. In key shoots, there will be two cameras to secure different angles for dynamic editing. Our musical score will be composed by a Latina/o composer with roots in classical Latin-American music such as Tania de Leon, former director of the Harlem Dance Theatre Orchestra in New York. We will also sample Bachata, Merengue and Boleros as necessary.

F. RIGHTS AND PERMISSIONS

In 2013, we were fortunate to have Julia Alvarez participate in our Peabody-Award winning PBS series, *Latino Americans* and fell in love with her charisma and her storytelling. We are once again fortunate to have her agree to participate in a documentary about her work and her life. Julia will provide complete access to her life today, as well as her personal visual archive, and has introduced us to her sisters Estela and Ana, relatives, colleagues, and friends. She will also allow us to film her in the Dominican Republic as she meets with family and friends, recounts her childhood and earlier visits, and retraces the trip she took researching her novel, *In the Time of the Butterflies*.

Archival collections: We have identified wonderful photographs of Julia's childhood and youth, as well as a rich archive of the Trujillo years in the D.R., and of the U.S. in the 1960s and '70s. We have obtained access to family home movies and photographs of Julia and family members and will continue our search into the private family archives. The Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin holds an extensive archive of Julia Alvarez's work, including manuscripts, journals, correspondences, audio and video recordings and photographs which will be made available to us. We will conduct an exhaustive search for additional archival material at the following sources: John E. Allen Inc. Library; Historic Films; Critical Past; Filmmakers' Library; National Archives and Records; UC Berkeley Moffitt Library Chicano Latino Studies; Grinberg Film Library; Huntley Film Archive; Getty Images; Corbis; The March of Time; Gaumont Newsreel; Prelinger Collection of American Life, Culture and Industry; RKO/Pathé Library; Worldwide Television News; Christian Science Monitor TV News Archive; UCLA Film and TV Archives; SFSU Special Collections; NBC News; ABC News Videosource, Library of Congress, NPR interviews; Museum of Broadcast Communications; USC Newsfilm Archives; National Museum of American History; Archivo General de la Nación de República Dominicana; Brown University Library's Opening the Archives Dominican Republic Project and John F. Kennedy Presidential Library.

Other productions on similar or related subjects.

There are no biographies of Julia Alvarez on film or in print (other than autobiographical essays by Alvarez), so this program will be a pioneering study of this remarkable writer. There are, however, two fictional films about the Mirabal sisters, the subject of Julia's novel, *In the Time of the Butterflies*. Scenes from these films, used sparingly, will help us bring their story to life. *American Masters* has recently presented a number of acclaimed film biographies about women writers such as *Toni Morrison: The Pieces I Am*; *Amy Tan: Unintended Memoir* and *Lorraine Hansberry: Sighted Eyes/Feeling Heart*. We will also draw on our own interview with Julia Alvarez for Episode 4 of *Latino Americans* and on images obtained during production.

G. HUMANITIES ADVISORS

Maria Cristina García, is a Professor of American Studies at Cornell University and studies refugees, immigrants, and exiles. Her most recent book is *The Refugee Challenge in Post-Cold War America* (Oxford University Press, 2017), She is also the author of *Seeking Refuge: Central American Migration to Mexico, the United States, and Canada* (University of California Press), a study of the individuals, groups and organizations that responded to the Central American refugee crisis of the 1980s and 1990s and helped shape refugee policies throughout North America. She will bring her in-depth understanding of the history of migration from Latin America to the U.S. and where Julia's life and writing fits within this history, from her childhood experience in the 1960s to the Mexican immigrants Julia works with in present-day Vermont.

Ramona Hernández is Director of the Dominican Studies Institute of The City University of New York (CUNY) housed at The City College of New York, and Professor of Sociology at The City College and on the faculty of The Graduate Center, CUNY. Dr. Hernández is the author of pioneering texts in the areas of migration, labor, and Dominican

studies, including *The Dominican Americans* in 1998 and “Dominican Immigrants” in *Multicultural America: An Encyclopedia of the Newest Americans* in 2011. Her expertise will help us explore the impact of Julia’s work on urban Dominican communities, as well as explaining the immigration patterns of Dominicans in America.

Fernando Valerio-Holguín is a Professor of Contemporary Latin American and Caribbean Literatures and Cultures at Colorado State University. His research includes Caribbean Diaspora, slavery narratives, and post-modern hybridity among music, film, and literature. He is currently writing a book about U.S. Latino and Latina writers and explores Julia Alvarez in that context. He also brings a critical eye to Julia’s writing, her place of privilege, her capacity to take advantage of market trends, and the impact of her novels.

Sonia Farid is Associate Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at Cairo University in Egypt. She has written extensively about dictatorship and trauma, specifically Julia Alvarez’s feminist challenge to the narrative of the Trujillato in *In the Time of the Butterflies*. Farid’s work also explores questions of borders and immigration. She brings a gender studies perspective and her immigration expertise to the project and will help shape the film’s presentation of the Trujillato, the Mirabal sisters and the role of historical fiction.

Nelly Rosario is a Dominican American novelist, and an associate professor of Latino/a Studies at Williams College. Born in 1972 in the D.R. and raised in the Bronx, she will bring to the project the perspective of the generation of Dominican Americans that came after Julia Alvarez—and her own take on immigration, assimilation, culture and ethnicity, race, and class. She has a complex relationship with Julia’s writing, and she offers access to a network of other Dominican, Caribbean, and Latino writers, whose diversity of voices will bring a fresh point of view to the portrait of Julia.

H. MEDIA TEAM

Adriana Bosch, Producer/Director. Bosch is an award-winning documentary filmmaker with more than 30 years of experience. She was Series Producer of *Latino Americans*, a six-hour series on the history of Latinos in the United States (2013) and *Latin Music USA*, a four-hour series highlighting the contribution of Latino artists to American culture (2009). Bosch has produced and written a number of films for the PBS series AMERICAN EXPERIENCE, including several of that series’ acclaimed presidential biographies—Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Carter, Dwight Eisenhower, and Ulysses S. Grant. She also produced and wrote documentaries on the Rockefeller family, a two-hour award-winning documentary on Fidel Castro and *American Comandante*, a profile on American soldier of fortune William Morgan. Bosch has won two Peabody Awards, an Emmy Award, and an Erik Barnouw Award among other honors. Born in Cuba, Bosch holds a Ph.D. in International Affairs from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. Her most recent Film, *Letters to Eloísa* about obscured Cuban writer José Lezama Lima, aired on the PBS’ series, *VOCES*, in October 2021.

Maia Harris, Story Consultant. Harris has written and produced historical documentaries for more than twenty years. Most recently, she co-wrote and produced *Tulsa Burning: The 1921 Race Massacre*, directed by Marco Williams, nominated for a primetime Emmy for non-fiction writing. She wrote and co-produced *GI Jews: Jewish Americans in World War II* (PBS), *No Job for a Woman* (PBS World), *Banished* (Independent Lens), *Storyville: The Naked Dance* (PBS) and *Beyond Tara: The Extraordinary Life of Hattie McDaniel*. Harris began her career as a researcher on *Eyes on the Prize II: America at a Racial Crossroads*. She has won three Emmy awards for her work.

Salme M. López Sabina, Supervising Producer, has led production for several groundbreaking, critically acclaimed films for Public Television including *Latin Music USA*, FRONTLINE and American Experience's co-production of *God in America*, and the six-hour PBS series *Latino Americans*. Salme began her career in journalism where she worked for *El Nuevo Día* in San Juan, Puerto Rico, *El Nuevo Día*.

Jeff Bieber, Executive Producer, is a 40-year veteran of public media who has created and managed films and social impact campaigns that have cast a new lens on U.S. history and the transformation of the American identity. His films include *My Journey Home* (2-hours, 2004), *The Jewish Americans* (6-hours, 2008), *Latino Americans* (6-hours, 2013), *Italian Americans* (4-hours, 2015), *The Pilgrims* (2-hours, 2015) and *Asian Americans* (5-hours, 2020). He has earned four Emmy Awards, a duPont-Columbia Award and three Peabody Awards.

Sandie Viquez Pedlow, Executive Producer, Latino Public Broadcasting. Pedlow oversees the development, production, and distribution of public media content that is representative of Latino people, addressing issues concerning Latino Americans through the public media lens. She is the executive producer of *VOCES*, a PBS documentary series on the arts and culture of Latino Americans. Pedlow was Director of Programming Strategies, Associate Director of Cultural, Drama, and Arts Programming and Senior Program Officer at the Corporation for Public Broadcasting for 10 years. She managed the development and funding of national public media programs which addressed history, the arts, and many aspects of American culture. She was Director, Station Relations, PBS and was a writer/producer of arts and culture documentaries at SC ETV Network.

Michael Kantor, Executive Producer, American Masters, joined as the series' executive producer in April 2014 and founded its theatrical imprint, American Masters Pictures, in January 2016. American Masters Pictures premiered three films at Sundance Film Festival in 2019: *Miles Davis: Birth of the Cool*, *N. Scott Momaday: Words from a Bear* and *Toni Morrison: The Pieces I Am*. Recent programs include *Sammy Davis, Jr.: I've Gotta Be Me*, *Bombshell: The Hedy Lamarr Story*, *Itzhak* and *Raúl Juliá: The World's a Stage*.

I. PROGRESS

Since spring 2021, the producers have solidified a relationship with Julia Alvarez in an agreement that provides us with full access to her life and work. We have conducted two lengthy pre-interviews with Julia and other participants in the film and spoken at length with our project advisors. We have obtained access to Julia's sisters, Estela and Ana, her

cousin Manuel Enrique, who is writing a family memoir; Minou Mirabal (daughter of one of the Mirabal sisters), Megan Myers, who co-founded Border of Lights, and Patricia Thorndyke Suriel, executive director of the Mariposa Foundation.

We have identified and begun to explore archival material including Julia's personal archives at the University of Texas in Austin. We have assembled a team of scholar-advisors and with their input, we wrote the attached script. In addition to the NEH proposal, we will create a fundraising deck and reel. We have started to discuss the film with potential funders including (b) (4), which has supported the producers' previous projects. In the coming months, we will also move forward with fundraising and marketing the film internationally. A schedule for work during the period of performance is as follows. (See addendum for full work plan.)

Pre-Production/Development: October 2022-November 2022: Hire staff and contract personnel. Producers and researchers scout locations and conduct pre-interviews with all participants in the film. Archivists investigate all film and still photo archives. Complete the shooting script. Work with animation/graphic houses on treatments. Prepare and book trips to the Dominican Republic. Final conference calls with advisers and production team to finalize script and schedule.

Production: December 2022-January 2023 (with shooting continuing intermittently through April if needed): Conduct key interviews with Julia, relatives, and colleagues, scholars, writers. Verité shoots. Animation/Graphics house prepares samples for edit. Researchers secure archival materials. Composer begins drafting initial treatment.

Edit to Picture Lock: February 2023-July 2023: Producers begin editing; with help of writer identify interview selects. Write an edit script. Edit assembly, rough, fine cuts. Review rough cuts by team, advisers, LPB, American Masters. Music scoring. Archival acquisitions. Animation/Graphics edit.

Post-production: July 2023-August 2023. Picture Lock. Online all programs. Narration and actor recording. Deliver program to American Masters for final packaging.

J. DISTRIBUTION

The documentary will be distributed by the award-winning, primetime PBS series, *American Masters* which has been called "the best biographical series ever to appear on American television," (Philadelphia Inquirer) and "one of the greatest cultural storytelling franchises in American life" (Baltimore Sun). Through a variety of engagement efforts, the life and impact of each *American Masters* presentation is extended far beyond its initial broadcast. Traffic to the *American Masters* website is high; in the last twelve months, over two million unique visitors have explored the treasure trove of supplemental materials that it makes available. We hope this program may also be shaped into educational resources for distribution through PBS LearningMedia.

The film will also be co-presented on primetime PBS by the acclaimed series, *VOCES*, produced by LPB. *VOCES* features the best of Latino arts, culture and history and shines a light on current issues that impact Latino Americans. Devoted to exploring the rich diversity of the Latino experience, *VOCES* presents new and established filmmakers and
NEH proposal, *Julia Alvarez: Something to Declare*
LPB, Bieber, Bosch, WNET/American Masters

brings their powerful and illuminating stories to a national audience. In partnership with *American Masters* and the extensive network cultivated by Latino Public Broadcasting, we will target Latino populations in the U.S. and overseas through extensive online and on-the-ground campaigns. The on-line content will be developed to engage users of mobile devices. We will build a network of partnerships to help push content out to diverse and new audiences on-line and on-the-ground, around the country and the world. We will produce shorter, digestible segments on-line in addition to streaming the full program through pbs.org.

K. PROJECT EVALUATION

The project's success will be measured by the following metrics: broadcast Nielsen ratings, online/streaming analytics, and public engagement surveys through *American Masters'* station events. *American Masters* has long-established success in the broadcast arena. Its Nielsen ratings confirm high audience loyalty, with an average audience per episode of close to one million viewers nationwide, with hundreds of thousands more engaging with their content online. Metrics for on-line viewing, discussions and views of the website and social media will be measured and analyzed for reach, demographic, and geographic breakdown. On-the-Ground: We will conduct surveys of people who attend screenings, and participate with PBS stations to hold screenings, forums, and supplemental local content. Each station will also provide local metrics for their events and on-line usage. Teachers who use the curriculum distributed via PBS LearningMedia will also be surveyed about its effectiveness and distribution.

L. FUNDRAISING PLAN

The total budget for project activities is \$1,023,521. In addition to our proposed funding request of \$699,154 from the NEH, we expect Latino Public Broadcasting (LPB) and WNET/*American Masters* to contribute approximately (b) (4). We will secure remaining funds from foundations and/or individuals and will approach (b) (4), both supporters of past films by the producers. We will also approach (b) (4), a co-production partner and funder for films by Bieber, *American Masters* and LPB.

M. ORGANIZATION PROFILE

Latino Public Broadcasting is the leader of the development, production, acquisition, and distribution of non-commercial educational and cultural media that is representative of Latino people or addresses issues of particular interest to Latino Americans. These programs are produced for dissemination to the public broadcasting stations and other public telecommunication entities. Recent program highlights include the PBS *Great Performances/VOCES* special *John Leguizamo's Road to Broadway*; the *American Masters/VOCES* special *Raúl Julia: The World's a Stage*; the *Frontline, Independent Lens* and *VOCES* co-presentation *Marcos Doesn't Live Here Anymore*; the POV broadcast documentary *The Silence of Others* and the Independent Lens broadcast *Harvest Season*. As of 2020, LPB has awarded \$12.6 million in funds to independent filmmakers, distributed 255 hours of programming, and presented five seasons of *VOCES*, the acclaimed PBS documentary series that explores the Latino American experience. LPB will engage with the film to reflect on its impact on the diverse Latino community's public

media serves. It will also support its broadcast, distribution, social media, and other outreach efforts to ensure it reaches the widest possible Latino audience.

N. Digital component N/A

O. social media and audience generated content N/A

NEH SCRIPT: JULIA ALVAREZ: SOMETHING TO DECLARE (wt.)

OPENING

1991. Julia Alvarez is at a bookstore, seated at a small table, surrounded by piles of books. She is signing her novel, as adoring fans line up to wait their turn.

Julia Alvarez: I began writing my own stories in large part to understand what was happening to my family in this brave new world. Writing was my GPS for the labyrinth of real life...

Narrator: Dominican American author Julia Alvarez burst on the scene in 1991, with *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, a coming-of-age novel about four Dominican sisters living in New York City, inspired by Julia's own experience. Praised for its "rich descriptions of island life and the threshold experience of new immigrants," *Garcia Girls* became a touchstone in the formation of Latina cultural identity in the United States.

Nelly Rosario, writer: I used to wonder, where am I in books? *Garcia Girls* was transformative for me.

Concepcion de Leon, writer: The novel's greatest gift was merely that it existed and discovering it made writing as a professional calling seem more real and open to me.

Ramona Hernández, sociologist: *Garcia Girls* came out at a time when Latinos were transforming the U.S. People were hungry to know about us.

We see President Obama awarding Julia a National Medal of Arts.

An announcer says: "...the 2013 Medal of Arts to Julia Alvarez. For her extraordinary storytelling in poetry and prose." President Obama hangs the huge medal on the diminutive writer, who stands on tiptoe to reach for a kiss.

The announcer continues: "Miss Alvarez explores themes of family, identity and cultural divides. She illustrates the difficulty of navigating two worlds."

Julia Alvarez, at home in Vermont: I am not a Dominican writer. I don't live on the island breathing its daily smells, enduring its particular burdens, speaking its special Dominicano. I am also not a mainstream American writer, with my roots in Illinois, or Kentucky or even New Mexico. I am a Dominican American writer. That's not just a term. I am mapping a country that's not on the map. I am a world made of many worlds... a synthesizing consciousness...

Sandra Cisneros, author and poet: The connection between Julia's autobiography and her fiction is subtle and evocative. She writes great imaginative literature, with its roots in her own experience.

Julia Alvarez: It took time for fame to find me, at 41, to be precise, after 15 different addresses and as many writing and teaching jobs. Two divorces in my wake, before I married Bill [Eichner]...

Now, I am 72 and have lived a settled life for 30 years...The habits of those early years are still with me... of second-guessing, of tentativeness.... I grew up in that generation of women thinking I would keep house. I had never been raised to have a public voice.

I write every day between nine and three. Never sure if the muse will strike but here just in case...

She looks out the window to the locust tree she planted years ago, and reads, for us, a poem.

I took solace from those locust trees
known for their crooked, seemingly aimless growth
We have to live our natures out, the seed
we call our soul unfolds over the course
of a lifetime and there's no going back
on who we are—that much I've learned from trees.

TITLE SEQUENCE

Act 1: How the García Girls Lost Their Accents

Summer. Wide shot of Yaddo writers' retreat. As the camera tracks closer, a faint cacophony of typewriters is heard coming from opened windows

Julia Alvarez: I sat up in my tower room, waiting for inspiration.... All around me I could hear the typewriters going. Before me lay a blank sheet of paper...

Narrator: In the summer of 1976, just graduated from the University of Syracuse with a Masters in Fine Arts, Julia was accepted to the prestigious Yaddo artists' retreat in Saratoga Springs, New York, a place where masters like James Baldwin, Truman Capote, Flannery O'Connor, and Robert Lowell had honed their craft.

Reverse shot of a desk and an idle typewriter. Sheets of paper. The room is empty. The door ajar. Breeze makes the sheets stir... Tac Tac Tac.

Julia Alvarez: I was tuning my voice to the men's voices I had come to know—Yeats, Milton, Whitman, because I thought that was the way I had to sound if I wanted to be a writer...

But the voice I heard when I listened to myself think was the voice of a woman, sitting in her kitchen...

...It was the voice of Ada, our Dominican live-in maid who...kept an altar to her santos, and read coffee grounds.... It was the voice of Aunt Titi naming the orchids in her garden... Gladys, the cook, singing her sad boleros...

Unable to write, I followed the cleaning lady to the kitchen. I met the cook and we sat, drinking coffee.

I paged through her old cookbook... *knead, poach, stew, whip, score, julienne*... I began hearing music in these words...

I went up to my room and wrote in my journal this beautiful vocabulary of my girlhood.... I would write in the voice not of the men in the [ivory] tower, but of the women who first taught me about service, about passion, about singing as if my life depended on it.

Julia reads from her poetry book, Homecoming, mixed with photos of Gladys and Julia as a child.

Gladys sang as she worked
in her high clear voice,
mangualinas, merengues
salves, boleros, hymnos.
Why do you sing? I asked her
as she polished off a song
with the swirl of a feather duster.
Singing, she told me, makes
everything else possible... ¹⁹

Home movies of Julia's childhood. The family together for Sunday dinner.

Julia Alvarez: Growing up, la familia was everything I knew. It was the only neighborhood and country. It matters in a way that nothing else has since. Except for the writing.

Back then, we all lived side by side in adjoining houses on a piece of property that belonged to my grandparents...

Stills or home movies of Grandfather Tavares surrounded by his grandchildren...

Grandfather Tavares, Mami's father, was the patriarch. He lived in the biggest house and every Sunday the family gathered there for lunch. The children would line up to receive his blessing. He was handsome and elegant, he had these beautiful long hands....

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" he asked, chuckling.

"I want to drive a red pickup," I said. "I want to go to the moon in a rocket ship and underwater in a submarine and work in an ice cream shop and be a guard at Buckingham Palace... and I want to be a pilot and go to Nueva York and shop for toys, and I want to be a poet and write lots and lots of poems."

"A poet," my grandfather said, smiling dreamily... he took my face in his hand, tilting it this way and that.... "A poet, yes, now you are talking."

At a family gathering, filmed in the present, verite style in the Dominican Republic, someone brings photo albums, and Julia and her cousins page through them, recollecting their magical childhood

Manuel Tavares, cousin: The Alvarezes were a branch of one of the most prominent Dominican families. Julia's father Dr. Eduardo Alvarez was Chief of Surgery at the most important hospital in the island. Grandfather Tavares was the Dominican Republic's cultural attaché to the United Nations.

Julia Alvarez: Every day, when our father and grandfather and two uncles left for work, the complex of houses became a stronghold of women, our mother, our tías and an army of maids.

There was Tía Amelia, “a beautiful rich widow who lived all alone in a mansion by the ocean... she had her own private chapel... hung with rosaries from all over the world.”

There was Tía Rosa, who taught us the words to the national anthem, “Quisqueyanos valientes alcemos,” and insisted we read the newspapers in Spanish.

Tía Titi “was a different kind of aunt, she sat by herself on the couch... reading a book.

She refused to work at catching a husband. Instead she focused on her books and her beautiful garden. I followed behind her, helping with this task or that one.... I sensed Titi’s passion for beauty and order, and that, more than her flowers, is what I wanted to be close to.

Estela Alvarez, sister: All day long, while Mami and the aunts played canasta or visited with each other, it was the maids who took care of us.

Manuel Tavares: Julia’s favorite was Gladys, the two of them would dance-sweep across the galleria, singing “Con tu amor, soy feliz y seré toda la vida...”

Everyone laughs at Manuel’s imitation of Julia, as a bolero fades into the sound of waves lapping the shore and the soft swoosh of palm trees.

Julia Alvarez: During the long hot months of July and August, the whole extended family left the capital for Boca Chica, where grandfather had bought this big rambling house, a short walk from the beach. We slept on cots, all the cousins on a big screened-in porch. We ate in two shifts at a big picnic table.... The men stayed on in the capital during the week, working hard...

As night falls over the ocean, the music shifts.

...Then, one summer, in 1960, we stayed home. We didn’t go to the beach. Every night a black Volkswagen came up our driveway and sat there, blocking our way out.

Narration: The black Volkswagen was the signature car of the Servicio de Inteligencia Militar, or SIM, the secret police of Generalissimo Rafael Leónidas Trujillo.

Archive newsreels and photographs

Maria Cristina García, Historian: Trujillo had come to power thirty years earlier, in the wake of a U.S. intervention that lasted from 1916 to 1924. The U.S. was responsible for Trujillo and then washed its hands clean of all responsibility. As long as he was a good trustworthy American ally (first against Nazi Germany and later against Soviet Communism) the U.S. government overlooked his atrocities.

Narration: Known as *Chapitas* for his penchant to cover his chest with questionable military decorations, Trujillo ruled the Dominican Republic with peculiar cruelty. There was much theater to his rule, but the source of his power was simple: fear.

Fernando Valerio-Holguín, Professor of Latin American Literature: Trujillo’s henchmen were everywhere. And to simply contradict or speak ill of him, or to deny him a whim, even your own

daughter, could result in torture, imprisonment, and death. In the 31 years he was in power, 30,000 people were executed.

Julia Alvarez: He mandated that his portrait be hung on the wall of every Dominican home, next to the household saints. But there were no photos of Trujillo at our home, our family were lifelong opponents of the dictatorship.

Narration: In 1937, Dr. Eduardo Alvarez Perello, then a student at the University, joined the opposition against Trujillo, then fled to the U.S. to escape persecution.

Ana Alvarez: Papi met our mother, Julia Tavares Espaillat in the U.S. She had just graduated from the Abbot Academy in New England. They fell in love and got married in New York and moved back to the D.R. in 1953 when Julia was only 3 years old.

Narration: In 1960, with opposition to Trujillo on the rise, Dr. Alvarez and his brother joined a plot to assassinate Trujillo, or as Dominicans say, ‘to bring Trujillo to justice.’

Maria Cristina García: The role of the United States and the CIA in the Trujillo opposition has never been totally clear. Nor the motivation. We know that sometime in 1960 there were plans to try to replace Trujillo with a moderate government in keeping with the U.S. reformist stance in Latin America. And there is evidence that the CIA supplied some arms to Trujillo’s opposition.

Julia Alvarez: As rumors of a plot spread, Papi came under heavy surveillance. We were practically under house arrest.

Narrator: More than 30 years later, Julia Alvarez would revisit the trauma in her semi-autobiographical novel *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*.

Animation: Light coming from under a door denotes the presence of someone in hiding. ... Reflected in the mirrored glasses of two SIM officers, we see a living room, a maid [Chucha], and a frightened little girl. The animation shifts to the girl [Yolanda] as her eyes flit between the guns of the men, their glasses, and the light, clearly visible under the closet door...

The actor’s voice reads a passage from the novel:

“...[T]he doorbell rings and Chucha lets in these two creepy-looking men.... What catches Yoyo’s eyes are their holster belts and the shiny black bulge of their guns poking through.... Chucha talks very loud and repeats what the men say... she must be wanting Papi to hear from wherever he is hiding.... Yoyo does not say a word... [She] wants to cry, but she is sure if she does, the men will get suspicious and take her father away and maybe the whole family.” (Alvarez, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, p. 195)

Archive sequence of airplane ca.1961 on the tarmac preparing to take off.

Estela Alvarez: After that summer, our parents began to secretly plan their escape. Since Papi was chief of surgery at the William Morgan Hospital, Manuel Chavez, a CIA contact we called “tío Manny” who was stationed in Santo Domingo, arranged a medical fellowship for him in New York.

Julia Alvarez: The pretext was that he would study heart surgery since there wasn't a heart surgeon in the D.R.... As soon the papers arrived, Papi booked us on the next flight off the Island. He told us we were going on vacation, not telling us that, most likely, we were never coming back.

Archive photos of Julia, her sisters and parents dressed up for a trip. Push in on Julia's ten-year-old face.

... Years later. I wondered if those papers had set us free from everything we loved.

FADE TO BLACK.

Over a sweeping archival cityscape of New York City, the Alvarez sisters remember the day in August 1960, that the family arrived in America.

Julia Alvarez: I had never been above a two-story house. I had never been in an escalator or an elevator, or those doors that open by themselves in magic when you went to the grocery store.

Estela Alvarez: No one was there to greet us. There was nothing to cushion the culture shock...

Newspaper Archive, headlines: Gangs in New York. Capeman accused of murder....

Narration: New York City in the early 1960s was home to half a million Puerto Ricans, U.S. citizens who had arrived as early as 1917, and to a few thousand Cuban exiles, mostly crowded into what had once been white immigrant neighborhoods, East Harlem, the Lower East Side and the South Bronx.

Maria Cristina García: Puerto Rican migrants struggled with poverty, housing and racial discrimination. Especially darker-skinned people who were treated in the same way as African Americans. There was a lot of prejudice and a lot of competition which bubbled over into gang warfare and was all over the press, even on Broadway and in the movies, with *West Side Story*. Dominicans, on the other hand, were few, and largely invisible.

Julia Alvarez: Nobody knew where the Dominican Republic was... One boy in our class asked if I was from Portorico. "We have a Portorican lady who comes cleans our apartment." It became clear that by being Latinos, we had entered the American servant class.

Black and white archival images of a striving middle-class neighborhood in Queens, [Jamaica Estates] circa 1961. Rows of small houses, neat lawns, all divided by chain link fences.

Estela Alvarez: Where we lived, Jamaica Estates, in Queens, there were Germans, some Italians, some Jews. There was no comunidad, no concentration of Dominicans to keep alive our values and customs. We were the only ones, surrounded by los Americanos.

Ana Alvarez: Suddenly we were too busy to eat together as a family.... Breakfasts were catch-as-catch-can before running the six or seven blocks to school. When Papi got home, he ate alone in the kitchen, my mother standing by the stove...

Archive of winter, desolate streets. Steam rises from the manhole covers....

Julia Alvarez: It was cold, November, December. It was dark when we got up in the morning. I chased my own breath to school. We had lost everything, a homeland, an extended family, a culture, and a language I felt at home in.... The classroom English I had learned [in the D.R.] had little to do with English spoken on the streets and playgrounds of New York.... I could not understand most things the Americans were saying to me... one thing I did understand: boys at school chased me across the playground... yelling “Spic! Spic! Go back where you came from!”

Animation: A little girl’s legs are pelted with rocks that bounce on the asphalt...

FADE TO BLACK.

Newsreel begins. A headline on screen: “Assassination! Trujillo Killed; Army in Power”⁽¹⁾

Announcer’s voice:

“A 31-year reign of terror and bloodshed comes to an end in the Dominican Republic as Generalissimo Trujillo is shot down by seven assassins... and now the struggle for power begins.”

Narration: Just nine months after Julia and her family had escaped from the Dominican Republic Trujillo was assassinated on a lonely country road. Among the weapons found at the scene, one rifle was traced to the CIA.

Rioting broke out in the streets and the country teetered on the verge of civil war. Thousands of people began to flee, the beginnings of a mass migration of Dominicans to the United States.

Julia Alvarez: We had arrived with the idea that we would be going back as soon as the dictatorship was over, but the situation was nowhere near safe in the Dominican Republic. We were beginning to feel at home. Our acute homesickness had passed. Now we were like people recovered from a shipwreck, looking around at our new country, glad to be here.... “I want to be in America,” my mother hummed after we’d gone to see *West Side Story*, and her four daughters chorused, “OK by me in America...”

Archive of a classroom at a Catholic school. Chalk squeaks. A nun, her back to the students, writes on a chalkboard.

Narration: Julia embarked on her American journey; the only one possible before the 1960s and cultural studies and bilingual education—to assimilate into the new culture and into the new language.

Julia Alvarez: In New York, in sixth grade, I had one of the first in a lucky line of great English teachers who began to nurture my love of language...

Graphic Animation: A teacher’s hand writes, “the snow fell” on the blackboard. The words come to life, as if taking flight in young Julia’s mind.

Sister Maria Generosa stood at the chalkboard.... “Here’s a simple sentence: ‘the snow fell.’” The sister pointed with her chalk. “But watch what happens if we put an adverb at the beginning... ‘Gently, the snow fell on the bare hills.’”

More words appear on the blackboard, the words become snow, become waves, become the skyline.

She filled the chalkboard with snowy print, on and on, handling and shaping the language... until English... became a charged, fluid mass, rolling and moving onward to deposit me on the shores of my new homeland. I was no longer a foreigner with no ground to stand on. I had landed in the English language.

Narration: In 1963, just two years after their arrival in New York, Julia and her sisters were sent away to boarding school. They had scholarships to the Abbot Academy, where their mother had studied as a girl.

Decades later, Julia would re-create the sisters' prep school experiences in her novel, *Garcia Girls:*

Actress voices the passage. Animation mixed with archival photographs.

We ended up at a school with the cream of the American crop, the Hoover girl and the Hanes Twins and the Scotts girls and the Reese kid... those brand-named beauties simply assumed that, like all third world foreign students in boarding schools, we were filthy rich and related to some dictator or other.

We learned to forge Mami's signature and went just about everywhere, to dance weekends and football weekends and snow sculpture weekends. We could kiss and not get pregnant. We could smoke and no great aunt would smell us and croak. We began to develop a taste for the American teenage good life... (Alvarez, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, p. 108-109)

Archive photos of the sisters at the Abbot Academy.

Narrator: Although Julia's fictional stand-in had many adventures, Estela remembers her sister as "a serious, anxious student."

Julia Alvarez: I read Keats, Milton, Shakespeare, the literary canon of great white men. Every "A" was a way to save my family and prove our worth to the Americans.

Narration: In the summers, when she came home from school, Julia helped out at her father's clinic, located in a mostly Latino area in Brooklyn where some Dominicans had begun to settle.

In archive photographs we see Julia with her handsome father walking through the streets of New York. He is in a light suit. She is proudly hanging on his arm.

Julia Alvarez: At the Centro Médico, I was 'la hija del doctor.' His patients brought me pastelitos and dulce de leche. The guys flirted with me, tossing out their piropos.... I loved the place, though I admit too, I was very aware of my difference.... We were another class, a difference that was signaled the minute I walked into our house and my mother instructed me to wash my hands. "You don't know what germs you picked up over there."

Narration: By 1966, peace was restored in the Dominican Republic, after a U.S. Marines invasion had paved the way for Joaquín Balaguer, Trujillo's former Vice President, to consolidate power.

Archive of a busy airport in the Dominican Republic. People embracing, crying. Families reunited.

Dominicans began to travel between the Dominican Republic and New York in what would become a transnational community separated by a short three-hour flight.

Julia Alvarez: My parents then decided to send us back to the island in the summers so we wouldn't lose touch with la familia. Once we got there, we discovered we could not return to the interrupted life of our childhood.

Estela Alvarez: As we had once huddled in the school playground, when we first arrived in New York speaking Spanish, my sisters and I now hung out together in the D.R.... kibitzing in English...

Julia Alvarez: My aunts and uncles unsuccessfully tried to stem this tide of our Americanization... "Tienen que hablar en español," they commanded... It was a measure of the growing distance between ourselves and our native culture. Not American, but no longer Dominican. We had become hybrids with un pié aquí y un pié allá. With one foot here and one foot there...

Ramona Hernández: Julia Alvarez belongs to the 1.5 generation—children or teenagers who arrived in the United States teenagers in the early 1960s. This generation came of age at a time the notion of assimilation into a melting pot was giving way to a 'salad bowl,' a mix of distinct cultures thrown together, in an often confusing and ambivalent process of integration.

Julia Alvarez: It wasn't until I failed at first love in Spanish at age 17 with a sweet boy, named Manuel Gustavo, Mangú, that I realized how unbridgeable that gap had become.

A moonlit night in the D.R. Slow '60s merengue playing softly in the background. The lights of an outdoor club at a distance.... Photographs of Julia as a teen. Perhaps with a young Mangú.

One night, Mangú... began to talk about our future. I didn't know what to say to him.... Like a child, I could just blurt out what I was thinking. "Somos diferentes, Mangú." We are so different.... "No we're not," he argued. "We're both Dominicans. Our families come from the same hometown." "But we left," I said, looking up at the stars. We drove back in silence. I never had a Spanish-only boyfriend again.

ACT 2: Life in the Hyphen

Archive of campus life in the mid 1960s. Other archive of the '60s events.

Narration: On her return home that fall Julia enrolled in Connecticut College. It was 1967, and she found herself in the midst of America's cultural awakening.

Maria Cristina García: This was the height of the civil rights era. Black, Latino and Asian Americans were embracing their ethnic identity, strengthening their connections to their countries of origin. The Chicano, Nuyorican, Black Power and Asian American movements were born.

Julia Alvarez: My classmates smoked weed from Mexico and Colombia, wore Mexican serapes and joined the Peace Corps to expiate the sins of their country against underdeveloped and overexploited countries like my own Dominican Republic...

Archive photos of Julia as a student.

...I was asked to bear witness to this exploitation, and I, the least victimized of Dominicans, obliged. I was claiming my roots, my Dominicaness, with a vengeance.

Archive photos of Julia's graduation with the Alvarez family – late 1960s and '70s.

Narrator: Julia's confidence in her writing grew as her talent was recognized. At Connecticut College, she won the Benjamin T. Marshall Prize for poetry two years in a row. At Middlebury College, where she transferred to finish school, she won the Creative Writing Prize and graduated with highest honors. She was then admitted to a Masters in Fine Arts program at Syracuse University, followed by a retreat at Yaddo where she found her writer's voice.

Julia Alvarez: I did not have a trust fund or a well-heeled partner. I had to put bread on the table. I had become a struggling writer...

Original photography showing miles and miles of asphalt, Julia's VW, tight and wide. Interior Camera to rotting floorboards... Photos of Julia in her wild hair, long coat, tooled boots.

...I used to joke that I should get a vanity plate that read, 'Have Typewriter Will Travel,' because I would take a job anywhere that would hire me. I lived in the South, I lived in California, I lived in the Midwest, New England... 18 different addresses in 15 years. You name it... So I lived skinny—in those days, my long black coat and my tooled cowboy boots were my only luxuries, my Volkswagen literally rusted under me...

Photos of Julia with her two husbands.

...I married twice, my head full of fairy tales, Cinderella, Snow White.... Marry while you're still pretty and can catch a good man, Mami and my Tías would say. Have children while you're still young...

Both marriages were brief... It was nobody's fault really. Back in those pre-women's movement days, wives were wives, first and foremost. With each marriage I put aside my writing.... But back there in my head causing trouble, waking me up in the middle of the night, were the stories of the life I could be living if I trusted myself, if I became my own woman...

Mami stopped making suggestions. My aunts just sighed a lot, but said nothing.

Archive photos of Julia and her family

Narrator: In 1983, at age 33, Julia was twice divorced, an itinerant, semi-employed teacher and a writer with no important publications to show for all of her hard work. Her inner certainty had begun to erode.

Ana Alvarez (youngest sister): Everyone in our family had given up on Julia having a happy conventional life but no one wanted her to starve. What you need, Mami kept telling her again and again is to get your teaching certification. It would be perfect; you'd have summers off to write.

Julia Alvarez: My sisters and I were caught between worlds, value systems, languages, customs. Our parents could no longer help. What leverage they had in the Dominican Republic because of their wealth and their history they no longer had. It was all confusing and painful... I didn't have a vocabulary or context to write about these issues. I didn't know how it could be done.

Narration: She would soon find inspiration in an unexpected place—in the seminal book, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, by Chinese American author Maxine Hong Kingston. Published in 1976, *The New York Times* had called it a “brilliant memoir. It is about being Chinese in the way *Portrait of the Artist* is about being Irish.”

Julia Alvarez: She addressed the duality of her experience, the Babel of voices in her head. With her as my model, I set out to write about my own experience as a Dominican American... now that I had a name for what I had been experiencing, I could begin to understand it as not just my personal problem.

I got brave and wrote my own story...

Original shots of Julia's poem engraved on the sidewalk of the New York Public Library.

Julia reads:

Practicing for the real me I become
Unbuttoned from the anecdotal and
Unnecessary and undressed down
To the figure of the poem, line by line

Narration: In 1984, Julia's first book of poetry, *The Housekeeping Book*, was published, a self-examination of her life at age 33. “Alvarez proves her right to join the ranks of poets before her,” Poet and Critic Katherine Varnes wrote for *The New York Times*. “She synthesizes her mother's tradition with her own adopted tradition of English literature... Alvarez realizes her identity as a woman writer... Her poetry sparkles in this book with political awareness.”

Narration: Soon after the publication of *Housekeeping*, Julia got a tenure track job at Middlebury College in Vermont. There she met Bill Eichner, an ophthalmologist and well-traveled humanitarian from Nebraska. They were married in 1988.

Julia Alvarez: I found a true compañero for the woman I had become. We found that our two individual narratives could be woven into whole cloth with nothing important left out.

Narrator: Three years later, Julia's first novel, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, was published.

Sandra Cisneros: I had already written *House on Mango Street* and Ana Castillo had written *Women are not Roses*, Gloria Anzaldúa had written *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club* had been published. Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*, Judith Ortiz Cofer's *The Line of the Sun* would follow, and then Lorna Dee Cervantes, Helena Maria Viramontes.

Graphic of the books with titles and authors and exuberant covers.

...All of us were hybrids like Julia, living in the hyphen of new identities that were transforming the U.S.... challenging and expanding the mainstream culture around us.

Julia Alvarez: Suddenly there was a whole group of us, a tradition forming, a dialogue going on.

William Luis, scholar: *Garcia Girls* came out at a peak moment of multiculturalism in the U.S.—diversity was welcome, assimilation felt like a thing of the past. Latino literature opens a world of complex personal, social, and historical experiences, but at its heart is its willingness to explore and examine cross-cultural encounters.

Narration: An intimate story of four Dominican American sisters, *Garcia Girls* was an instant sensation. The novel begins when the protagonist Yolanda returns to the Dominican Republic after 29 years in the hopes of regaining her roots, and unfolds in reverse order, ending with their childhood in the D.R. under Trujillo’s dictatorship and their family’s escape to the United States.

Nelly Rosario, writer/professor: I was a college student at MIT when *Garcia Girls* came out. Back then, Dominicans were rarely in the media unless it was related to crime or drugs. Then I read about this Dominican writer, with her book about these girls, and I was just beside myself. Alvarez’s work not only helped validate a historical and cultural experience my generation was only beginning to articulate but it would open up a world of literary possibility to the Dominican and Latina/o writers that followed.

Concepcion de Leon, writer: I relished and latched on to everything I recognized: Spanish words or phrases specific to Dominican slang (“antojo”; “jamona”; “U’té que sabe”); the fact that everyone had a nickname (“Lolo”; “Mundín”); and that the parents were called “Mami” and “Papi” instead of Mom and Dad.

Excerpt of the novel read by an actor cut to graphic/animated illustrations.

Papi found a packet of her love letters. “What is the meaning of this?” He shook the letters in her face.... “Has he deflowered you... have you ‘gone behind the palm trees?’ Are you dragging my good name through the dirt?” Tears spurted out of her eyes, her nostrils flared.... “You have no right, no right at all to go through my stuff, to read my mail”... The father’s mouth opened in a little zero of shock....
(Alvarez, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, p. 100)

Concepcion de Leon, writer: In the Garcia household the rules were as strict as for island girls. The parents worried they were going to lose their girls to America. This loomed over my childhood too—my parents’ fear that I would become too brave, too free or too loose.

Julia Alvarez: That really struck a chord. Once at a book signing, someone introduced me as the author of the book *How the Alvarez Sisters Lost Their Virginity*.

Julia Alvarez at a book signing, mobbed by young women holding her book. She signs copies. Poses for her photograph. Jacket photo of Julia.

I was 41 when that book came out. My family will be proud of me, I thought. Finally they won’t think I am crazy. But Mami hated it. She said it was a ‘dirty book,’ girls having sex, doing drugs.... She was not shown as a stalwart decisive mother, but as someone with doubts and with conflicts...

Return to home movies of Julia's childhood—we see her mother in the background.

I'd transgressed an unspoken but cardinal rule of la familia. By opening my mouth, I had disobeyed. By opening my mouth on paper, I had done much worse. I'd broadcast my disobedience.

It was very painful... Very hard... Mami even threatened to sue me. She would not speak to me for years.

Act 3: Chasing Butterflies

Wide, evocative vistas of the Northern Mountains of the Dominican Republic. A lonely jeep traverses the narrow road across the mountain.

Narration: Fresh from the success of the *Garcia Girls*, in 1992, Julia Alvarez returned to the Dominican Republic, to write the novel that would shoot her into stardom and take Latino fiction all the way to Hollywood.

Julia Alvarez: I had first heard of the Mirabal sisters in 1960 when I was 10 years old. It was December, four months after we arrived in New York. It was my first American winter. The skies were grey. We wanted to go home. My father brought back a *Time* magazine because he had heard from other exiles of a horrifying piece of news. My sisters and I were not allowed to look at it. But I sat in the darkness of our living room one night secretly paging through this magazine.

Archive photograph of the Mirabal sisters. The camera lingers on their eyes as Julia continues.
...I stared at the picture of the lovely, sad-eyed woman who stared back from the gloom of the black and white photo.

Narration: Three sisters active in the opposition to Trujillo's dictatorship—Patria [36], Minerva [34], and María Teresa [25], “were found dead near the wreckage of a Jeep at the bottom of a 150-foot cliff on the north coast of the island,” *Time* reported.

Maria Cristina García, Historian: The Movimiento Revolucionario 14 de Junio (MR1J4) was a leftist underground revolutionary movement whose leader was Manolo Tavarez, Minerva's husband. It was named after a failed Cuban-backed invasion of the D.R. by Dominican exiles in 1959—its aim was to assassinate Trujillo and trigger an insurrection on the Island.

Julia Alvarez: The Mirabal sisters, known by their underground code name ‘Las Mariposas’, or The Butterflies, were part of the same movement that my father had bailed out on in order to save his life. Just four months after we had escaped, they were murdered on a lonely mountain road. These three brave sisters and their husbands stood in stark contrast to the self-serving actions of my own family and other Dominican exiles. Because of this, the Mirabal sisters haunted me...

We follow Julia Alvarez and her husband, Dr. Bill Eichner as they retrace the steps of their 1992 research trip. We first find them at La Casa Museo de las Hermanas Mirabal, in the town of Salcedo, a museum dedicated to the memory of the Mirabal sisters. As they pause to contemplate the artifacts of the sisters we learn the story of their story and Julia's process of writing her novel.

Julia Alvarez: These are dresses they wore on the day they died, with the blood stains still on them. The jewelry they made for their children while they were in prison. This is María Teresa's, the youngest's, long braid. There are still twigs and dirt and slivers of glass from her last moments tumbling down the mountains in that rented Jeep...

She lifts the case containing a braid of hair to take a closer look.

Julia Alvarez: I became involved in the story of the Mirabal sisters in 1986, before Bill and I met—I was teaching at the University of Illinois in Chicago—I was asked to write a postcard about a Dominican woman for a Latina press, and immediately chose the Mirabal sisters.

Everyone, from the campesino reclining against a palm tree to the neighborhood shoeshine boys knew about 'las muchachas.' But there was hardly any formal mention of the sisters in the literature of the Trujillato. I could find no books, no serious histories. Only comic books with balloons coming out of the sisters' mouths.

Their story seemed to me impossible to piece together. I finished the postcard, and put the project away...

But then I met Dedé Mirabal. The surviving sister. She still lived in this house, where she and her murdered sisters had grown up... and ran the museum. I realized she suffered her own martyrdom: the one left behind to tell the story of the other three.

William Luis, Professor of Spanish: The most convincing parts of *In the Time of the Butterflies* have to do with Dedé, the survivor, and her anguished role as memorialist, which in turn becomes Ms. Alvarez's role. It is here that we best understand the depths of Ms. Alvarez's despair and the authenticity of her effort to represent her own inner drama.

Sonia Farid, Professor of English: Literary adaptations do what historians cannot. They can delve into the emotional scars of its victims. In Julia's fictionalized account of the hermanas Mirabal, the surviving Dedé tells her story to a *gringa* Dominicana, who is the author's alter ego. Through Dedé's recollections, the reader travels back into the past to learn about Patria, Minerva and María Teresa, as each sister tells her own fictionalized chapter of their story. By allowing those victims to tell their version of the history, Alvarez created a new chronicle that portrays a shockingly faithful image of tyranny.

Julia Alvarez: I wanted to understand the living, breathing women. I believed that only by making them real, alive, I could make them mean anything to us. The way we live history is through personality, through ourselves and our lens. And you know, this is what you do in a novel. You try to imagine the character going through these situations... who were these women and why and how, how had they become mobilized? What was the story?

Verite images of Bill and Julia driving along the mountains. Wide and tight shots as well POV. With Bill at the wheel of our rental car, I began to chase the Butterflies. We traversed the island talking to people, visiting places that had been part of the girls' lives. We went to the local church and spoke to the town priest, met one of their aunts, Doña Lesbia, and we met Minou, Minerva's daughter, heir to her mother's fire.

Minou Mirabal, Minerva's daughter: My mother, Minerva, first heard the truth about dictator Rafael Trujillo while when she was in high school at the Colegio Inmaculada Concepción, when

she discovered that her friend Desi Ariza's father had been killed by Trujillo for opposing the regime.

Black and white newspaper accounts, archival photographs, a graphic collage of documents and photographs gives us a sense of the Mirabal sisters' history.

Narrator: In the novel, in a plot line that reveals the predatory nature of the Trujillo regime, Minerva rebuffs Trujillo's advances, and he seeks revenge against her family—radicalizing her into opposition.

Nelly Rosario: Julia Alvarez uses the novelist's freedom to construct some composite characters, to create dialogue, and to explore motivations and experiences that are closed to a historical researcher.

Fernando Valerio-Holguín: Alvarez doesn't portray the sisters as martyrs on pedestals, their courage untouched by the trivia and struggles of daily life. Under Alvarez's hands, the Mirabal sisters behave like real people. They are women in love, women raising families in less-than-ideal circumstances, women who make mistakes and disagree and do the work that must be done. We all know what the ending is going to be so this makes it all more dramatic and painful for the reader.

Scene from the film, "In the Time of the Butterflies." Patria (played by Lumi Cavazos) is seated at her kitchen table, looking out the window. In the distance, Minerva (played by Salma Hayek) holds a rifle.

Narrator: In one passage, which inspired a scene in Mariano Barroso's film, Patria describes, with exquisite intimacy, the sisters' work.

Our mission was to effect an internal revolution... It was on this very Formica table where you could still see the egg stains from my family's breakfast that the bombs were made.... It was the shock of my life to see María Teresa, so handy with her needlepoint, using tweezers and little scissors to twist the fine wires together.

Down this very hall, and in and out of my children's bedrooms.... I walked, those last days of 1959, worrying if I had done the right thing, exposing my family to the SIM.... "God help us," I kept saying, "God help us." (Alvarez, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, p. 166)

Minou Mirabal: When the 14 de Junio's plot was discovered, our family home was burned to the ground.

Julia and Bill arrive at the site where Patria's real home once stood.

Julia Alvarez: Bill and I stayed close, stunned at the sight of a great house fallen.... It had been a magnificent spread...

They walk through the garden, towards the front steps.

...Here is where she probably grew her sweet-smelling jasmine. She loved flowers.

Narration: Patria's husband, and Minerva, María Teresa and their husbands, were rounded up and sent to prison.

A hand-written page from María Teresa's fictional diary describes their time in prison.

Friday, March 18 (57 days). It feels good to write things down. Like there will be a record.... The day we were brought here, for instance. They marched us down the corridor past some of the men's cells. We looked a sight, dirty, uncombed, bruised from sleeping on the hard floor. The men started calling out their code names so we'd know who was still alive. (Alvarez, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, p. 228)

We return to black and white archival footage of historical events.

Narration: In August 1960, after the sisters had been in prison for seven months, the Organization of American States condemned Trujillo's actions and sent observers to the D.R. Minerva and María Teresa were among those who were released, but their husbands remained in jail.

Minou Mirabal: That fall my dad and my uncles were transferred to a different prison, in Puerto Plata, closer to their hometown. Now, we could visit more regularly. On their last visit, we were left behind.

Wide vistas of the Northern Mountains. A lonely Jeep traverses the landscape and disappears into the distance

FADE TO BLACK.

Julia and Bill stand at the bottom of a gully.

Julia Alvarez: We parked at the shallow ditch... and looked up at the crest of the hill.... We climbed the mossy, cobbled driveway.... It was here, we were told by some boys that appeared out of nowhere, that the girls were brought after their Jeep had been stopped.... Then they put them in the Jeep with their dead driver. They pushed the Jeep over the side of the mountain to make it look like an accident.... It was already dark by then.

Archival images from newspapers—an overturned Jeep at the bottom of a gulley enhanced by graphics.

My heart was too full in this grim place. The night was falling.... As we descended the mountain, I felt as if we had traveled the whole route of their lives to the place where they had been struck down. And now that I had come to love the girls in my head, I didn't want them to be dead.

"Where to tomorrow?" Bill asked. "Home," I said. I meant Vermont. It was time to hole up and write the novel about the Mirabal sisters.

Narration: Published in 1994, *In the Time of the Butterflies* would be Julia's biggest commercial success. One million copies of the book were eventually printed.

William Luis: In its concern with history and dictatorship, *In the Time of the Butterflies* echoes the great Latin American writers, García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes and Mario Vargas Llosa, even Isabel Allende with its emphasis on great family sagas. But the actual history is very blurry.

Serious historical fiction establishes links between individual destiny and pivotal political events. But in this novel the reader is not made aware of a broader, more encompassing political world.

Sonia Farid: Julia Alvarez does something extraordinary here. She rewrites the history of the Trujillato, a history that until then, had only been told with Trujillo as protagonist. Through their eyes, Julia Alvarez reveals the atrocities of the Trujillo regime, empowers the voices of its victims, and reclaims the era as ‘the time of the butterflies.’

Julia Alvarez: When my mother had first heard from one of my sisters that I was writing about the dictatorship, she said this time was not just going to anger family members, but I would be directly responsible for their lives.

When the novel came out, I decided to go ahead and risk my mother’s anger again... and mailed my parents an inscribed copy. Days later, my mother called me up... “You put me back in those days. It was like I was reliving it all,” she said, sobbing. “I don’t care what happens to us. I’m so proud of you for writing this book!”

Narration: Not only did Julia’s mother, Julia Tavares de Alvarez, reconcile with her daughter but in October 1999, serving as the Representative of the Dominican Republic to the United Nations, she introduced a draft resolution that designated November 25th, the date of the Mirabals’ assassination, as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. With her mother’s help, Julia’s novel had helped transform the Mirabal sisters into a symbol of popular and feminist resistance.

Act 4: AFTERLIFE

Present day Vermont. The rising sun reflects on snow covered Vermont mountains. Inside her home, a farmhouse on 11 acres of land, Julia walks us through her morning ritual. She fills a clear glass bowl with water. She visits her Cemis (small stone Taino deities), and lights a candle for her Virgin.

Julia Alvarez: I have lived in this house, in this town, in Vermont, for 30 years now. This is where I settled down. But perhaps what makes me lay the deepest claim to Vermont as my home is that this is where I’ve written most of my books.

She rifles through her books and papers.

Narration: Alone in her quiet room, Julia wrote *Garcia Girls* and its sequel, *Yo!; In the Time of the Butterflies*, and a volume of poems, *The Other Side (El Cocko)*.

She pulls out a yellow folder, one of many, with pockets, where she keeps her ideas.

Julia Alvarez: I find a detail or image or character or incident. A certain luminosity surrounds them. I find myself attracted.

Narrator: She also wrote a collection of essays, *Something to Declare*, and *Cafecito Story*, a short ‘eco-fable,’ inspired by Altagracia, a coffee farm she and Bill purchased in the Dominican Republic and turned into a 260-acre cooperative growing sustainable, organic coffee.

Archive of Altagracia, ending in a photo of Julia on the porch surrounded by young women.

Julia Alvarez: I come from a long tradition of service. My father was a doctor, but he joined the underground. He didn't have to. My mother fought for women's rights at the U.N. and then led the alliance for elderly people. So while Bill was busy farming, I built a library at Altagracia to teach young Dominican women to read and write.

One thing I learned is that the world can only be saved by a man or woman putting a seed in the ground or a book in someone's hands.

Narrator: An opportunity for service would soon arise closer to home, as Julia began working with the children of Mexican migrant workers, in her adopted Vermont.

FADE TO BLACK

In present day verite images we see Julia in a classroom in Vermont reading to 4th or 5th grade children from her novel, Return to Sender.

“It feels so good to have a safe place where la migra can't come and haul my words and thoughts and feelings away. We are hiding, my sisters and I, so I don't have much privacy. And most of the time, I'm too worried to write. Worried about Mama and Papa and Tío Armando, and what will happen to all of us. I bite my nails so much that my fingers throb.” (Alvarez, *Return to Sender* p. 265)

Maria Cristina García: When Julia first settled in Vermont there were 5,400 people of Hispanic descent in the entire state. But during the 1990s there was this great influx, from Chiapas in Mexico and other parts of Central America, who came to work in Vermont's dairy farms. They were mostly undocumented. Sometimes they came with their families. They often didn't speak English.

We see Julia walking down a school hallway, greeting the children.

Julia Alvarez: Whenever I work with migrant workers' kids, and I see them fearful, unsure, I can remember that feeling—that moment of terror as a ten-year-old girl, and then leaving everything behind. That sense of loss, when you come to this country...

Narrator: In the next ten years, Julia published eleven children's books, mostly about the experience of immigration.

Julia Alvarez: Chekhov says a writer's job is not to solve the problem but state it correctly, see with clarity in its full complexity... that is something radical that stories allow us to do—to see the full humanity of others.

Narrator: Julia Alvarez had blazed the trail for Latina authors to break into the literary mainstream and carved out a place in the world, firmly grounded in both her American and Dominican cultures. As she approached her 70s, she turned her focus toward a more universal concern—the disorienting transition into old age and the losses that accompany it.

Julia begins to leaf through photographs from the beginning of the film. She explains who these people are... her family members—grandparents, aunts, uncles....

Julia Alvarez: A few years ago, I began losing many of the people I love. One of the difficult things about coming from a culture where your extended familia is considered your 'nuclear' family is that you don't just lose a set of parents, a couple of aunts and uncles, but dozens upon

dozens of tías, tíos, madrinas, padrinos, abuelitas, abuelitos. A whole flank of la familia is suddenly gone.”

The sequence of photos of Julia’s parents, the family.

Estela Alvarez: After 40 years in the U.S., our parents retired to the Dominican Republic. Towards the end, they both suffered from Alzheimer’s, and we watched from afar as we slowly disappeared from their memory.

Julia Alvarez: Each time I returned to the Dominican Republic to visit with them, I’d braced myself for the day when they wouldn’t know who I was. Mami and Papi joined that clan exodus in 2011 and 2012, dying within five months of each other. Their loss, though painful, was in the natural order of things. But then came a loss I was not expecting: my older sister, Maury, committed suicide.”

We see a photo of the Alvarez sisters, through time. ... Julia and her sister Maury.

Estela Alvarez: Maury was a psychologist at Cambridge Hospital, specializing in services for immigrants and refugees. She had an expansive personality and had a profoundly generous spirit. She had struggled with bipolar disorder her own life. Just before she died, she had big plans—she was investing in a cultural center in western Massachusetts, and a restaurant called Sweetheart. Her death was a terrible shock.

Ana Alvarez: The loss was devastating. We had gone through life together... all four of us. We had survived their exile together, attended boarding school together, navigated marriages, divorces and careers together, stood up to Mami and Papi together. We were like four quarters of a whole.

Julia Alvarez: I felt as if I’d been sliced open, and my guts poured out of me. Life, or the desire for it, was leaving me. All I could manage were the simplest childlike questions. What do I do now? I turned to my writing—I wanted to write a short novel this time. Call it lyrical. Call it obsessive. I felt that this was a form that would embody how to live in a diminished world.

Narration: Written from the depths of grief, *Afterlife* was published in 2020. It joined a growing body of literature about sadness and loss—from Joan Didion’s *Year of Magical Thinking* to Joyce Carol Oates’s *A Widow’s Story*.

Francisco Cantú, Critic, *The New York Times*: I was spellbound by the lyrical beauty with which she treated grief, anger, love and desire. This was relatively new since Latina literature mostly dealt with coming of age stories – issues of identity and ethnicity. This was Latina writing that refused to remain in the margins.

Narrator: Julia dedicated *Afterlife* to her sister, Maury. But in a surprising twist, the plot begins when the protagonist, Antonia, a retired writer of Julia’s age, learns of the death of her husband, Sam.

Over footage of a twisting snowy road, we hear the fractured words from the novel’s opening read by an actor:

She cannot comprehend how someone she loved...can be nothing but dust/unread emails, fragments, unpaid bills, memories.../how can it be?

She searches for him in the rearview mirror, in the clouds...

She keeps asking/where are you?/this is the only way she knows/how to create an afterlife for him. (Alvarez, *Afterlife*, p. 2)

Rachel León, Writer: The novel becomes an inner journey of a woman after retirement and widowhood, not to find—but to remind herself of who she is after she’s stripped of her partner and life’s work.

Nelly Rosario: The main character, Antonia, quotes Tolstoy, “What is the best time to do things? What is the right thing to do?” Then one day, an answer shows up at her door. Mario, a Mexican immigrant worker living at a neighbor’s farm, comes to her for help. His pregnant girlfriend, Estela, is being held by a Coyote on the Mexican border.

Fernando Valerio-Holguín: Alvarez puts Antonia through the paces of wrestling with the obligations of her privilege. Like Julia, Antonia has been shielded from the kind of dehumanizing fear and subjugation endured by Mario and Estela.

Rachel León: Her conflict highlights our country’s own—mothers and children are separated at our nation’s southern border while questions about America’s responsibility to its fellow humans arise. When one disagrees with an unjust, even cruel system, at what point do we step in? If silence is complacency, then just how loud do we need to speak out? Alvarez has a remarkable ability to show how our personal lives can enmesh with political questions.

Narration: It is yet another profound personal loss that propels Antonia forward. Her oldest sister, Izzy, begins to behave erratically, then mysteriously vanishes. Antonia, like Julia, loses her sister to suicide. Unmoored by grief, she can no longer find refuge in her writing.

It’s finally come: the frightening moment when not just the world but the words fall apart, and the plunge goes on and on and on. (Alvarez, *Afterlife*, p. 222)

Nelly Rosario: “If you want me to be a better person, then help me out,” Antonia asks her husband. She also invokes her sister, grandiose, big-hearted Izzy, the one who wanted to rescue llamas, who bought 83 orchids as a gift on her mother’s 83rd birthday.

A part of you dies with them, Antonia now knows, but wait awhile, and they return, bringing you back with them. (Alvarez, *Afterlife*, p. 17)

Julia Alvarez: Antonia decides to act as her husband and her sister would have acted, with unquestioned generosity. She offers Mario more work around her house. She buys a bus ticket for his girlfriend to join him. Later, she opens her home to the young, pregnant woman. Then, knowing full well that violence and detention await them if ICE finds them here, she arranges for them to return home to Mexico.

Rachel León: Reading Alvarez’s work is a reminder of the enduring power of literature, of what it can and should do. Its job isn’t simply to entertain, but to move us, challenge us, change us.

Graphic: A bowl is smashed against the ground and breaks into pieces. The deft hands of a master potter pull the pieces together before our eyes, painting the exposed cracks with gold.

“Consider Kintsugi, the Japanese technique of repairing broken porcelain with gold...,” Antonia says.

Rachel León: As the master storyteller, Alvarez collects the broken fragments of Antonia’s life to form a whole.

Julia Alvarez: The rigid gold lines, the damage made visible, the platter repaired. It tells a story. I want to live with an awareness and appreciation of all the layers. Doing so involves accepting my own diversity, forgiving myself, seeing myself with perspective, humor, generosity, and tolerance, and extending all of the above to others and to their struggles, which continue to be my own.

It is a winter day in Vermont. Coffee cup in hand, Julia pulls out her chair and sits down to write. Outside, a blanket of snow covers the ground.

Narration: Now retired from teaching, Julia has begun to think of herself as ‘the elder of a tribe—having a long view behind me.’

Julia Alvarez: Sometimes people ask me why I continue to live here. In this cold. When I can live and write in a place where colors fill the air with life. But here, in winter, the snowy fields blur into the snowy air so that the world out there looks like a blank page I want to fill with words....

As Julia writes, words appear on the snowy landscape, as she imagines what her next novel will become.

FADE TO BLACK

