

## FROM THE INSTRUCTOR

Jiani (Liz) Shen wrote this excellent essay for her final paper assignment in WR 098, a course for ESL students that asks them to engage in debates on a range of complex issues connected to the topic of globalization. For the first three units of the course, Liz and her classmates read and critically analyzed numerous essays that treated the themes of linguistic and cultural differences, multiculturalism and assimilation, and sense of self and belonging. In the final unit of the course, we shifted genres and discussed a novel, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, which presented students with a (fictional) representation of one immigrant family's experiences with many of the important themes that we had been exploring all semester. For their final paper assignment, the class was asked to pose a theme-related question about *García Girls* and to then develop an argument in which they also converse with two essays from units 1–3 for added dimension and support.

Throughout the semester, Liz's writing repeatedly focused on issues related to the themes of multiculturalism and identity, and it was clear that her interest was academic as well as personal. Her proposal for this final paper was, therefore, a logical conclusion for her consistent critical and sophisticated questioning throughout the course. It was such a pleasure to witness Liz's writing process and to discuss her successes and struggles with her as she thoughtfully progressed through (and revised) her argument. The result is a testament to her personal investment and intellectual curiosity, as well as to an impressive command of language and rhetorical strategies that anticipate alternate points of view while strengthening her own. I am so very proud of Liz and all of her accomplishments, and I wish her all the best in her continued studies at the University of Pennsylvania—they are lucky to have her!

Lesley Yoder

WR 098: Academic Writing for ESL Students 2

## FROM THE WRITER

While reading the book *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, I often felt a strong connection with the main character, Yolanda. As a Dominican immigrant in the U.S., she faces many cultural dilemmas and struggles to find her true identity. I found her story and my personal experience similar in some ways. After coming to the U.S. in ninth grade, I went through the same stages as Yolanda—from encountering cultural shock in the beginning to making every effort to be Americanized to gradually and unconsciously leaving part of my root behind. Therefore, in examining how the consumption of English and American culture have shaped Yolanda's identity, I was also self-exploring, wanting to know where I stand, how I have changed, and how much of the American culture has replaced my own. I also wanted to find out if one can successfully merge two or more cultural identities. Through synthesizing and analyzing different readings in my paper, I realized that having a harmonious multicultural identity is extremely difficult and that it is important for immigrants to find the balance.

JIANI (LIZ) SHEN is rising sophomore who will be transferring to the University of Pennsylvania in Fall 2016. She was born and raised in Shanghai, China. She came to the U.S. in 9th grade and attended a small private high school near Philadelphia. Although she has left BU, she's sincerely grateful for what she has learned during her first year of college here. She wants to give special thanks to Professor Yoder, who passionately and patiently guided her through her first college writing course and made it so fun and rewarding. She would also like to thank Professor Finlayson, who gave her constructive feedback and encouragement in WR 100 and further strengthened her writing skills.

**JIANI SHEN**  
*Prize Essay Award*

## **HOW THE GARCÍA GIRLS LOST THEIR ACCENTS: YOLANDA'S STRUGGLE WITH IDENTITY**

Can a person have a harmonious multicultural identity? In her essay “A Gentle Madness,” Humera Afridi explores this question by reflecting on her childhood experience of leaving her homeland, Pakistan, at the age of twelve and how it affects her identity. She realizes that although she has moved to many places later in life, her early memories of Pakistan still follow her and shape who she is. Like Afridi, the García sisters in Julia Alvarez’s novel *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, also leave their homeland, the Dominican Republic, at a young age and struggle to find their true cultural identities. After immigrating to the U.S., the sisters undergo a series of transformations to assimilate into the new environment. Yolanda, especially, strives to be proficient in English and its cultural connotations so that she can fit into American society faster and establish a new “self.” However, her eagerness to consume American culture through English has trapped her between the two cultures. By examining the connection between language and identity, we can gain a bigger picture of the globalization of English and analyze its effects on non-English speakers. Learning English has helped Americanize Yolanda to some extent, but it fails to give her a sense of belonging in the U.S. because, like Afridi, she is unable to leave her roots behind.

Yolanda’s English-learning process has offered her new insights and has reshaped her old perceptions, giving her an American voice she desires. Before moving to the U.S., Yolanda lived in a patriarchal society where women were expected to submit to men. When trying to trade toys with her cousin, Mundín, Yolanda obeyed his inappropriate request that she physically show him that she’s a girl: “I lifted up my cowboy skirt, tucked it under my chin, and yanked my panties down” (Alvarez 235). Though Yolanda was hesitant, she did what he asked because Mundín was in a more powerful position both in the trade and in the Dominican society. She was used to being obedient to her father, as well as to other men in the household, at all times. However, Yolanda’s wish to detach from the Dominican standards for women starts to show when she writes a bold speech for school: “That night, at last, she started to write, recklessly, three, five pages, looking up once only to see her father passing by the hall on tiptoe. When Yoyo was done, she read over her words, and her eyes filled. She finally sounded like herself in English!” (Alvarez 143). Instead of accepting her father’s advice by praising the teachers, Yolanda composes a speech inspired by Whitman’s poem, endorsing the idea of celebrating oneself (Alvarez 142). The content of the poem, though quite against the traditional Dominican values, touches Yolanda deeply and opens her eyes to a new, liberal, and creative world. Through the writing of that speech, she discovers her real voice in English and her desired new identity. At this point of her life, Yolanda, a passionate “consumer” of English language and literature, finally feels like an English speaker, an American.

This “consumption” has guided Yolanda to her ideal “self” by changing her perspectives on gender equality and being a woman. In her essay “How Does Language Shape the Way We Think?” Lera Boroditsky proves that language can significantly influence one’s mind: “... linguistic processes are pervasive in most fundamental domains of thought, unconsciously shaping us from the nuts and bolts of cognition and perception to our loftiest abstract notions and major life decisions ”

(Boroditsky 143). Reading and speaking English not only teaches Yolanda how to apply the language but also inadvertently imbues her with American values, including intellectual liberty, independence, and gender equality. Reshaping how Yolanda interprets the world, these values have led her closer to her ideal identity: an independent and courageous woman who owns the same rights and freedom that men own—far from a humble and obedient woman so commonly observed in her native Dominican culture. In short, Yolanda’s rejection of the Dominican stereotypes for women and her adoption of American liberty, as when she writes her speech, is due to her English-learning process.

Now, some readers may argue that Yolanda’s Americanization is a significant step toward assimilating into the U.S. and making it her second home. While it is true that Yolanda has incorporated Americanness into her identity, she fails to find a sense of belonging in the U.S. because her past in the Dominican Republic is deeply ingrained in her, just like how Afridi’s early years in Pakistan are ingrained in her. Yolanda is trapped between American and Dominican culture, between the present and the past. Her helplessness manifests itself in her failed relationship with Rudy: “I saw what a cold, lonely life awaited me in this country. I would never find someone who would understand my peculiar mix of Catholicism and agnosticism, Hispanic and American styles” (Alvarez 99). When Rudy pressures Yolanda to have sex, she is both offended by his disrespectful locution and disappointed by his lack of understanding of her mixed background. This feeling of estrangement in the U.S. is attributed to Yolanda’s deep-rooted Catholic-Hispanic belief that her body is holy like a temple, which was formed when she was a child and only spoke Spanish, and which conflicts with her more liberal American views (Alvarez 234).

Though Yolanda left home when she was young, her early perceptions cannot be neglected in the development of her identity. No matter how much American culture Yolanda consumes, her memories of the Dominican Republic will always define her and trap her in the past that wasn’t yet ready for the present. In “A Gentle Madness,” Afridi recalls a similar experience: “This singular memory is the core around which I’ve come to orient myself, circumambulating it still, despite the passage of time and regardless of place” (Afridi 52). Memory plays an essential role in both Yolanda’s and Afridi’s life because they were both uprooted from their homelands at an age when they had just begun to develop their identities and connections with their origins. Spanish, Yolanda’s first language, was critical to shaping her preliminary perceptions, which later become central to her identity and cannot be easily removed by the new American values. As a result, the past not only distances her from others in college but also haunts her as she grows older. The haunting is demonstrated in the final chapter where Yolanda reflects on defiantly stealing a newborn kitten from its mother: “At that hour and in that loneliness, I hear her, a black furred thing lurking in the corners of my life, her magenta mouth opening, wailing over some violation that lies at the center of my art” (Alvarez 290). Continuously reappearing in Yolanda’s dreams, the image of the mother cat reminds her of the Dominican Republic as well as the “violation” of being removed against one’s will from one’s home. Just as the kitten was taken away before it could “make it on its own,” Yolanda too was separated from her motherland before she could survive without it (Alvarez 285). Both her guilt of taking the kitten and her psychological fear of having to adapt to a new country become an emotional burden she has to carry and a barrier between her and America.

*How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* presents various problems that the García sisters face as immigrants in the U.S., mainly concerning language, culture, and identity. While the extent to which language and culture impact one’s identity remains a controversial issue up for debate, Yolanda’s experience with English demonstrates that the consumption of another language or culture reshapes but does not replace one’s original cultural identity. Boroditsky’s research supports that language does indeed have the power to reshape one’s identity by influencing one’s cognition while Afridi’s narrative illustrates that memories prevent one’s cultural identity from being replaced by another. Through speaking English and studying literature, Yolanda can be Americanized but cannot be “an

American.” So, it’s time to consider this question again: can a person have a harmonious multicultural identity? According to Yolanda’s story, my answer is no. Given such a globalized world we are living in today, we can easily interact with other cultures and add a new cultural dimension to our identities by traveling abroad or learning new languages. Yet, the new culture we acquire may not necessarily be in agreement with our native culture. This means having an identity composed of multiple cultures can bring confusion and difficulties to defining ourselves and knowing where we truly belong. Despite having assimilated into the U.S., Yolanda continues to search for her identity in the Dominican Republic by confronting her past.

## WORKS CITED

Alvarez, Julia. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin of Chapel Hill, 1991. Print.

Aridi, Humera. "A Gentle Madness." *Globalization: A Reader for Writers*. Ed. Maria Jerskey. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 53–62. Print.

In her essay, Afridi shares a traumatic childhood memory to illustrate that her early memories of her homeland, Pakistan, are at the core of her identity no matter how many places she has lived since. Afridi's narrative resembles Yolanda's experiences with her homeland and will provide a comparison for my second point of analysis.

Boroditsky, Lera. "How Does Our Language Shape the Way We Think?" *Globalization: A Reader for Writers*. Ed. Maria Jerskey. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 135–145. Print.

Boroditsky conducts several experiments on the effects of language and proves that language shapes our cognition, perception, and decision-making. The scientific facts and conclusions in her essay serve as evidence for my first point that learning English has Americanized Yolanda.