Alliances For Hopeful Futures: Fostering Solidarity Through Julia Alvarez's Young Adult Fiction[1]

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ABSTRACT

This article builds on previous scholarship on Julia Alvarez's *Finding Miracles* (2004) and *Return to Sender* (2009) to explore the educational potential of these young adult novels, with a focus on the ethics of solidarity fostered as the main characters evolve into empathetic and socially-responsible individuals. Through a theoretical framework that examines solidarity from a decolonial and antiracist perspective, this paper analyzes how the boundary-setting and exclusion inherent in the protagonists' Euro-American frame of reference are gradually replaced for a commitment to forge alliances with vulnerable others. These love- and hope-infused coalitions, which stress the volitional and ethical choice groups make to struggle together, rearrange the versions of identity imposed by colonial modernity, revealing new horizons against which we might not only imagine, but also produce new ways of being. This highlights the potential role of these young adult narratives in fostering solidarity among young readers and guiding them towards a fairer and brighter future.
KEYWORDS: Solidarity, young adult literature, education, coalitions, hope.

RESUMEN

Este artículo se basa en estudios previos sobre *Finding Miracles* (2004) *y Return to Sender* (2009) de Julia Álvarez para explorar el potencial educativo de estas novelas para jóvenes adultos, centrándose en la ética de la solidaridad fomentada a medida que los personajes principales se convierten en individuos empáticos y socialmente responsables. A través de un marco teórico que examina la solidaridad desde una perspectiva decolonial y antirracista, este ensayo analiza cómo el establecimiento de límites y la exclusión inherentes al marco de referencia euroamericano de los protagonistas son sustituidos gradualmente por el compromiso de forjar alianzas con otros vulnerables. Estas coaliciones infundidas de amor y esperanza, que hacen hincapié en la elección volitiva y ética de los grupos para luchar juntos, reorganizan las versiones de la identidad impuestas por la modernidad colonial, revelando nuevos horizontes frente a los que no sólo podríamos imaginar, sino también producir nuevas formas de ser. Esto pone de relieve el papel potencial de estas narrativas juveniles para fomentar la solidaridad entre los jóvenes lectores y guiarlos hacia un futuro más justo y brillante.
PALABRAS CLAVE: Solidaridad, literatura juvenil, educación, coaliciones, esperanza.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Latinx Young Adult fiction has traditionally featured teenagers negotiating vexing phenomena, such as forced migration, racism, and gender violence, suggesting ways for young readers to think and respond to contexts of displacement and vulnerability. This capacity to engage teenage readers in reflecting on oppression and marginalization is apparent in canonical texts, such as Nicholasa Mohr's *Nilda* (1973), Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1984), Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) and Esmeralda Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1993)[2]. The didactic nature of these YA narratives is precisely one of the main reasons why most of them are core texts in the curricula of dozens of US high schools, inspiring generations of students to work for social change. The aim of this article is to draw attention to the educational potential of two YA novels by Dominican American author Julia Alvarez: *Finding Miracles* (2004) and *Return to Sender* (2009). These coming-of-age narratives, which remain understudied in literary scholarship, picture tween characters experiencing the complexities of forced displacement, undocumented migration, and racism. [3]Although previous scholarship has pointed out the role of these texts in educating young readers to challenge colonial power structures (Fernández-García, *Geographies*, and "May the Circle Be Unbroken"), there has been little discussion about their potential to foster a sense of solidarity that orients youth towards a fairer and more hopeful future. Thus, this essay seeks to explore the role that solidarity plays in the characters' path to maturation, focusing on their development from prejudiced and self-absorbed tweens to caring and future-oriented individuals. As will be demonstrated, their journey of self-development involves a critical examination of the root causes of injustice that shape their lifeworlds, turning the act of reading into opportunities for critical reflection, change, and hope.

Emphasizing solidarity through Latinx YA literature seems particularly important given the challenges that dominant US society poses for Latinx youth. The neoliberal and white bias in society negatively affects their personal and social well-being, limiting their prospects for the future. Thereby, it is not surprising that these youngsters report the highest levels of pessimism and despair of all US youth groups (Krippner et al. 24). Drawing on Paulo Freire's

Pedagogy of the Heart, it can be argued that to reduce these higher rates of hopelessness, fostering solidarity in educational contexts is paramount (86). Latinx YA literature, which is largely didactic in nature, has the power to create learning spaces that build relations across lines of differentiation for the sake of genuine freedom, equality, and justice. In this sense, the analysis below will show that depicting tweens in solidarity with Latinx youth in conditions of extreme vulnerability may orientate young readers —especially those from a Latinx background— towards a brighter future.

To clarify my arguments, the analysis below is divided into two sections. The first of them will mainly use Sara Ahmed's work on the cultural construction of emotions and difference to examine how Milly and Tyler, the main characters of *Finding Miracles* and *Return to Sender* respectively, navigate the self/other divide in the beginning of the stories, with a focus on the emotion of fear. This section will emphasize the characters' individualistic behavior in the context of racial, ethnic, and class polarization. The second section will challenge this individualist ethos and the apparent boundaries between self and other by examining Milly and Tyler's development into caring and socially committed tweens. I shall argue that this evolution occurs as these tweens form relationships of solidarity that confront structural inequality, turning pain into hope. This analysis will engage with theories of solidarity coming from intersectional feminism (hooks; Lugones; Sandoval; Mohanty) and decolonial pedagogy (Gaztambide-Fernández). Viewing the selected YA narratives through these lenses will help foster a readership and a literary culture among young people that recognizes solidarity as a powerful tool for personal transformation, social change, and hope.

2. BODIES THAT FEAR: SETTING BOUNDARIES BETWEEN SELF AND OTHER

The primary plot lines of *Finding Miracles* and *Return to Sender* focus on Milly and Tyler's encounter with Pablo Bolívar and Mari Cruz, Latinx migrant tweens who flee from political persecution and poverty. The fear and confusion these encounters instill in the protagonists ultimately result from colonial structures that continue to divide the world into a hierarchy of superior and inferior people, shaping their frame of reference even before their encounter with

Pablo and Mari. This is most evident in the opening chapter of *Finding Miracles*, which portrays an anxious Milly who can neither connect with the unnamed war-torn Latin American country she was adopted from nor feel fully entitled to claim her Americanness. [4]Her everyday life is characterized by her determination to keep her adoption hidden from others while trying hard to find her place in the Euro-American environment where she was raised. On the other hand, Tyler's initial discomfort stems from the possibility that some racialized workers may take control of his family's dairy business after his father's farm accident. Born and raised in Vermont, which has historically been imagined as "one of the last remaining places of *authentic Yankee whiteness*" (Vanderbeck 641; emphasis added), Tyler filters reality through a Euro-American prism that excludes people perceived as nonwhite and non-American. At work in both cases are enduring colonial epistemologies that keep non-Euro-American peoples at the periphery of ontological democracy, positioning them against the perceived superiority of Euro-American peoples.

Milly and Tyler's fearful reactions upon meeting Pablo and Mari prevent the protagonists from showing interest in the tragic circumstances that led these migrants to abandon their countries. Pablo, a refugee from Milly's birth country, moves to Burlington with his family, wishing to start a new life away from the violence that forced them to migrate in the first place. On the other hand, Mari is an undocumented Mexican girl who moves with her family from North Carolina to rural Vermont in hopes of leaving poverty behind. Their vulnerability is overshadowed by the anxiety and sense of fear that the arrival of these migrants instills in the protagonists. In Milly's case, these emotions arise upon learning that Pablo comes from her birth country:

> Then, just like that, he was staring at me, not like he was hitting on me, like he knew me […] We didn't look at all alike. My hair's light brown, my skin a pale olive like some French Canadian's in our town, except, like I say, in the summer, when I tan real dark […] So if Pablo was staring at me, it was not because I looked like one of his people or anything. (Alvarez, *Finding Miracles* 12)

Desperate for a deeper sense of belonging to the US community where she has ever lived, Milly fears that Pablo may recognize her as

a Latin American girl, endangering her identity as an American. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), it can be argued that this sense of fear, which relies on colonial legacies of the construction of the racialized other, is dependent on fantasies that construct the other human being as an absolute threat "not only to one's self as self, but to one's very life, to one's very existence as a separate being with a life of its own" (64). More precisely, fear of the "stranger", as Milly calls Pablo on several occasions, is formed through the ways in which fear circulates among bodies to produce differentiations between self and other, whereby the other is in this case constituted through fantasies that Milly may be stripped of her Americanness, providing a justification for her feelings of fear. Tyler's fears of Mari and her family are also predicated upon fantasies that involve the prospect of being hurt by the racialized other: "Tyler hates to admit, but after September 11, he's a little scared of strangers from other countries who might be plotting to destroy the United States of America. It'd be worse than losing the farm, losing his whole country! Where would he and his family go?" (Alvarez, *Return to Sender* 42). Even though Mari's father and uncles have been hired by Tyler's parents to keep the family business going, he cannot help but feel afraid of the new employees. His fears are fueled by post-9/11 fantasies that picture the country being attacked by racialized others. Such fantasies validate Tyler's fears of the Cruces, Mari's family, providing him with an excuse to distance himself from them.

These embodied fears lead Milly and Tyler to draw physical and metaphorical lines between them and the newcomers. The former refuses to hang out with Pablo at high school, vanishing every time the boy approaches her group of friends, a behavior that does not go unnoticed by Em, Milly's best friend: "The way you ran off. It's like you'd seen a ghost or something" (Alvarez, *Finding Miracles* 13). This conduct unveils the exclusionary dynamics at the core of the "spatial politics of fear" (Ahmed 69), which are aimed at creating distance from the external object of fear, demanding that the latter be ejected from the collective body. Thus, Milly's impulse to run away from Pablo, the object of fear, evinces a desire to evict him from the Euro-American community where she struggles to find her place. These spatial mechanisms also operate when Tyler tells Mari that he does not want to be friends with her due to her undocumented

status, which he sees as being at odds with the law-abiding behavior of good American patriots: "I'd rather lose the farm than not be loyal to my country" (Alvarez, *Return to Sender* 70). Tyler's fear of Mari prompts him to go into emotional shutdown, distancing himself from the undocumented girl, which effectively ejects Mari from the Euro-American community of good patriots where Tyler sees himself. Furthermore, his blunt answer to Mari, which conveys the belief that US patriotism and a relationship with undocumented immigrants are mutually exclusive elements, sheds light on the exclusionary outcomes of patriotic discourses. Tyler's post- 9/11 patriotism could, in fact, be conceptualized following Catalin Ghita's insights on contemporary Western patriotism, interpreting it as a generic "fear of alterity" (19). Thereby, it can be argued that Tyler's love of his country underlies "fear of otherness" (Guita18), which combines attitudes of ethnic superiority, as seen in his mocking of Mexican culture (Alvarez, *Return to Sender* 43-44), with moral self-justification. This fear of ontological displacement drives Tyler to uphold his own familiar principles and beliefs and reject not only the values and ways of life of the other, but also the possibility of cross-cultural friendship.

Milly and Tyler's fear and its related boundary-making processes emphasize the seemingly unbridgeable colonial difference between them and the Latinx tween migrants they encounter. Born within the paradigm of decolonial and border thinking, the term "colonial difference" refers to "the irreducible difference of the colonial configuration marked by the spatial articulation of power" (Yountae 21), which places the Euro-American self and the racialized other on opposite ends. The next section will show how solidarity allows Milly and Tyler to bridge this seemingly unbridgeable difference, opening the door to personal and social transformation.

3. IN SOLIDARITY WITH THE OTHER: TOWARDS A HOPEFUL FUTURE

Rooted in a decolonial, antiracist, and anticapitalist framework, Chandra Talpade Mohanty's *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (2003) charts a vision of transnational feminist solidarity that rejects the boundary-setting and exclusion inherent in the notion of sisterhood upheld by second-wave Western

feminism. Thus, in contrast to this women's movement, which ignored the axes of race and class, Mohanty puts forward a view of solidarity grounded in

> [M]utuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities. Rather than assuming an enforced commonality of oppression, the practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together. Diversity and difference are central values here—to be acknowledged and respected, not erased in the building of alliances (7).

Under this view, solidarity stresses the volitional and ethical choice that groups make to struggle together. Thus, understanding and respecting difference are essential tasks that cannot be bypassed in the rush to forge alliances. This conceptualization of solidarity, which is also foregrounded by other postcolonial and decolonial feminist thinkers (hooks; Lugones; Sandoval; Anzaldúa and Keating), manifests as a relational praxis necessitating a deep comprehension of the specific histories and realities of women. Drawing on the work of Mohanty and other feminist scholars, such as Sara Ahmed and Chela Sandoval, educator Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández introduces his "pedagogy of solidarity," a pedagogical model which, like Mohanty's approach, is committed to decolonization and anti-racist critique. Relationality and the embrace of difference are also central to his pedagogy of solidarity:

> A decolonizing pedagogy of solidarity must shift the focus away from either explaining or enhancing existing social arrangements, seeking instead to challenge such arrangements and their implied colonial logic […] It is about imagining human relations that are premised on the relationship between difference and interdependency, rather than similarity and a rational calculation of self-interests (49; emphasis added).

In this sense, Gaztambide-Fernández explains that this pedagogy involves a commitment to three modes of solidarity, each representing a distinct form of interaction with difference: relational, transitive, and creative (50). Relational solidarity underscores a deliberate and purposeful commitment to interdependence and reciprocity as

values and outcomes, which implies reflecting on the "material conditions and symbolic orders through which both self and other are constituted as such" (52). Conversely, transitive solidarity is about fighting at the side of the oppressed to transform the objective reality that has made them "beings for another" (Freire qtd. in Gaztambide-Fernández 54). Finally, creative solidarity "is concerned with the multiplicity of cultural practices that might evolve in such encounters (encounters with difference), as a way of countering the versions of 'culture' and 'identity' that are imposed by the colonial project of modernity" (57). This involves engaging with others in ways that might rearrange or reinvent encounters with racialized others, challenging epistemologies that have perpetuated colonial power structures and hierarchies.

Similar to Mohanty's approach to solidarity, these three intertwined types of solidarity can be seen as avenues "through which to engage in decolonizing practices" (Gaztambide-Fernández 60), requiring the articulation of decolonization as a common interest that brings together individuals across their differences in the struggle against colonial power and privilege. These modes of solidarity shape Milly and Tyler's engagement with racialized others in the second part of the stories, demonstrating the role of the YA novels under study in promoting a commitment to solidarity centered on decolonization and anti-oppressive action. The pathway to acts of solidarity emerges through instances of relational solidarity, initiated when these characters engage in critically reflective dialogues with those they perceive as othered. I argue that these encounters compel Milly and Tyler to venture into unfamiliar territories, undertaking a process of interrogating structural differences and engaging in self-examination that provokes emotional responses centered on shame.

Milly undergoes this experience when her father employs Mr. Bolívar in his carpentry business, strengthening ties with Pablo's family and providing her with the chance to learn about everything the Bolívars have endured since a civil war ravaged their country:

> 'Poor family has been through hell.' Dad went on to tell how Señor Bolívar's brother, a journalist, had been murdered. His oldest son had been taken away by the secret police. 'They still don't know where he is. The middle son has had to go into hiding. Both sons are with this new party that's trying to get rid of the jerk we once put in control. We

> was the United States of America […] I knew there were a lot of dictators in many Latin America countries that had been supported by our government […] I felt even worse about rejecting Pablo now that I knew what he and his family had been going through (Alvarez, *Finding Miracles* 49-50).

Milly becomes aware of the role that US imperial intervention in Latin America has played in perpetuating a dictatorial regime and its repressive policies in Pablo's homeland, pointing out the structural imbalance that exists between the United States and the war-torn country where the Bolívars come from. This realization leads to a critical reflection on her unwelcoming behavior towards Pablo, whose tragic story had never interested her. On the other hand, encouraged by his grandmother to set aside his prejudice and engage more meaningfully with Mari, Tyler embarks on a self-reflective journey that reveals how Vermont has long benefited from foreign cheap labor, drawing vulnerable others to contribute to the state's wealth. This fact, which makes him aware of the unequal power relations between his place of origin and Mexico, is accompanied by a deeper comprehension of Mari and her sisters' feelings of displacement: "So this is what the three Marías (Mari and her sisters) feel, so far from home! And to think that Tyler has made them feel even more lonesome with his unfriendliness […] He wishes he had words that would let them know he is sorry, that they do belong here (Alvarez, *Return to Sender* 91). Milly and Pablo's feelings of shame for their insensitive behavior towards vulnerable others arise as a result of going into unknown terrains and placing themselves in the shoes of others.

Their ability to understand other social and cultural realities and critically scrutinize their own biases can be understood in light of what decolonial feminist María Lugones designates as "world-traveling." Originally introduced in her 1987 paper "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception" and then revisited in her 2003 book *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Oppression*, this concept is conceived as a major tool for crossing racial and ethnic boundaries in the context of feminist coalition politics. Although born out of the need for Latinas to navigate multiple and conflicting worlds in the United States, world-traveling involves a

genuine effort to move between different realities or perspectives in an attempt to understand the lived experiences of others, resulting in the reconstruction of the self (Lugones, "Playfulness" 16-17). It implies understanding "*what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes*" (Lugones, "Playfulness" 16-17). Thus, as seen above, Milly 'travels' to Pablo's world and understands the relation between his forced displacement and a US-sponsored government that has murdered and imprisoned thousands of political opponents, including Pablo's uncle and brother. Tyler, for his part, comes to the realization that irregular migration is mostly triggered by rich countries that find in undocumented migrants the perfect candidates to fill the precarious jobs their own citizens do not wish to do. These ponderings allow the protagonists to grasp the power dynamics that create the opposition between the Euro-American self and the racialized other, permitting the former to take advantage of the latter. Furthermore, by reflecting on their discriminatory attitude towards Pablo and Mari, Milly and Tyler scrutinize their "arrogant" perception, as termed by Lugones, which denotes a colonial mindset that devalues and dismisses the experience of marginalized others ("Playfulness" 4). This critical reflection, which prompts the protagonists to recognize their inability to look beyond their own selves, allows them to experience shame. Feminist and queer scholarship has approached shame as a self-reflective affect that opens a space for reconsidering the constitutive relations between self and other, ultimately facilitating transformation (Ahmed; Sedgwick; Lorde). Drawing on these insights, it can be argued that Milly and Tyler's shame manifests as a firm determination to recognize their wrongdoings and build relationships with Pablo and Mari that dismantle colonial logics.

After engaging in critical scrutiny of structural inequality and self-evaluation, the protagonists embark on a series of incremental endeavors to foster stronger horizontal ties with Pablo and Mari. Their dedication to mutual learning and growth is evident in their willingness to delve deeper into these migrants' cultural backgrounds. As a result, Milly and Pablo initiate a language exchange. While the former learns Spanish from the boy and he, in turn, receives English lessons to better navigate American society (Alvarez, *Finding Miracles* 67-69), this exchange not only deepens the protagonist's understanding

of Pablo's cultural background but also rekindles her connection to her birth country, highlighting a sharp contrast to her previous disinterest in her place of origin. On the other hand, by engaging closely with Mari, Tyler learns to respect Mexican traditions like Las Posadas or the Three Kings Day (Alvarez, *Return to Sender* 142-43; 163-64), which starkly contrasts with his previous critique of Mari's cultural background. In the context of this growing bond, Mari also learns from Tyler, who shares with her insights about life in rural Vermont, helping her settle into a new environment (89-90).

These stronger bonds, facilitated by the protagonists' engagement in relational solidarity with Pablo and Mari, lead to a more proactive approach to participating in solidarity struggle with vulnerable others, aiming to change the oppressive structures that dominate them. This stronger determination to fight against systemic oppression becomes evident towards the end of the stories, as Milly and Tyler engage in acts where Gaztambide-Fernández's three types of solidarity (relational, transitive, and creative) come together. Milly exhibits this disposition after deciding to go to her birth country to find out more about her adoption, finally reconciling with a part of herself she had previously avoided. With the help of the Bolívars, she discovers that her biological parents are from Los Luceros, the birthplace of the rebel leaders who fought for the country's freedom. There she meets Doña Gloria, an old woman who keeps a memory record of everything that has happened in the town over the last few decades, including births and the horrors of war. Although she cannot help Milly find out what happened to her biological parents, this encounter helps the protagonist understand the forms of imperial and gender violence suffered by many women from her birth country, prompting her to reflect on the power structures that constitute the imperial self and the racialized other. This reflection is enabled by Doña Gloria's testimony:

> I am tired, the body can resist no more […] But how can I die, tell me? Who will remember then? […] I was raising this one's mother to remember the stories […] That was after I lost my daughter to the bombing in Los Luceros. My granddaughter had become my hope and my future memory. But that was not to be. That Friday… […] The guardia came, and they did their business with my granddaughter,

> and then they cut her throat. This child was there when it happened, she saw what they did. They were merciful. They did not kill her. They cut off her tongue. So she knows the stories, but she cannot tell them. (Alvarez, *Finding Miracles* 201-2)

None of Doña Gloria's relatives can take on her role as the keeper of community memories because they are either dead or severely disabled as a result of war. She describes a war context where US-trained national guards inflicted violence in rebel territories, resorting to brutal murders, amputations, and other cruel methods of subjugation, including rape, as hinted at by Doña Gloria: "They did their business with my granddaughter" (201). This testimony allows Milly to 'travel' to Doña Gloria's world and ponder on the opposing subject positions created by what María Lugones calls "coloniality of gender," which refers to the "racialized capitalist gender oppression" experienced by women of color in all domains of existence ("Towards a Decolonial Feminism" 747). Thus, Milly becomes aware of the intertwined power structures that enabled US-trained national guards to dominate, inferiorize, and murder women from Los Luceros, depriving Doña Gloria and many other people of hope for the future. In so doing, she engages in relational solidarity with Doña Gloria and other war victims, pointing out the symbolic orders that place US-raised girls like her and racialized women on opposite ends.

This instance of relational solidarity is immediately followed by a request from Doña Gloria to Milly and Pablo, urging the protagonist to engage in transitive solidarity with her and other war victims: "'I'm counting on you,' she said. It was like she was sending us on a mission for something. 'To do what?' Pablo wanted to know. 'To bring more light,' Doña Gloria replied" (Alvarez, *Finding Miracles* 225). This request, which hints at a possible brighter future, inspires Milly to join forces with Doña Gloria —and thereby with other war victims— in their struggle to preserve the memory of the horrors endured by the country: "Someday, I kept thinking, I've got to write them all down! […] Just as my parents kept that box in their room with my [adoption] papers, I now had a memory box in my head […] One day, when I was ready to write, I would open that box" (237). Opening the

memory box entails disseminating the stories she has been told since she arrived in her birth country, forging alliances with victims whose harrowing experiences have deliberately been kept hidden from the public sphere as a consequence of political repression. These coalitions across lines of differentiation, which insist on common interests as catalysts for transformation, succeed in challenging the structures that not only destroyed the lives of many citizens but also seek to obliterate these horrors from the national memory.

Tyler also engages in transitive solidarity with Mari by forging alliances with her in hopes of changing the structures that oppress her family, particularly when her parents are unfairly arrested during the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Agency's operation "Return to Sender," which targets and deports undocumented immigrants with criminal records[5]. Tyler's resolve to stand by Mari in her quest to free her parents from prison is accompanied by his contemplation of the power dynamics that set Euro-Americans against undocumented Mexican immigrants, elevating the former while criminalizing the latter. Just as he engages in relational solidarity with Mari and her family by empathizing with them and 'traveling' to their world, Tyler decides to fight alongside her, emphasizing their shared interest in combating oppression. Thus, they go to the Homeland Security Office to defend Mr. and Mrs. Cruz's rights, forging coalitions across lines of differentiation for the sake of social justice. Tyler stands by Mari's side as she tells the office clerk everything that has happened to her family in the past months, including her mother's abduction in the Mexico-US border, which they could not report due to their undocumented status, highlighting the lack of protection for immigrants. This determination to tell her family's real story helps secure the release of her parents from prison, although it is not enough to prevent the entirely family from being deported to Mexico.

Milly and Tyler's coalitional and transformational impetus is fueled by hope and love, which replace the boundary-making emotion of fear in the first part of the stories. As Sally J. Scholz argues in *Political Solidarity* (2008), hope is strongly linked to a view of solidarity that brings people together across differences, united not always by shared experiences or identities, but by their sense of what needs to be done together in the pursuit of justice:

> Hope is the only necessary moral feeling for political solidarity. Political solidarity is primarily a movement of social change. Members strive to bring about liberation, create conditions free from oppression, and struggle for justice […] Hope means that they believe the future can be better than the present. The moral sentiment of hope motivates activity within solidarity because it fosters the desire for the final ends or goals (substantive and formative) of political solidarity (81-82).

This type of moral-political solidarity, which aligns with the novels' perspective of solidarity grounded in common interests, is driven by hope for a fairer and brighter future. It can therefore be argued that Milly and Tyler's belief in a better future for a war-torn country and Mari's family contributes to propelling them towards solidarity-based alliances, fostering a desire for social change. This implicit wish to change the oppressive and antidemocratic circumstances that affect marginalized others is referred to as "love" in Chela Sandoval's *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000), where she defines it "as a social movement [that] is enacted by revolutionary, mobile, and global coalitions of citizens-activists who are allied through the apparatus of emancipation" (184). Thus, love as a catalyst for social transformation also drives the alliances formed by Milly and Tyler with vulnerable others to confront dehumanizing conditions. This political dedication starkly contrasts with the protagonists' previous inability to see beyond themselves.

The protagonists' evolution is the clearest instance of creative solidarity in both novels. The final pages of *Finding Miracles* portray a socially-committed and forward-looking Milly who has reconnected with her birth country, embracing her birth name —Milagros— as well as her Americanness. On the other hand, *Return to Sender* concludes with Tyler acknowledging the connections between himself and Mari, expressing hope that she could someday live freely and happily in the United States. Thus, the characters under discussion transition from being self-absorbed tweens who perceive the world through a Euro-American prism to becoming empathetic and future-oriented individuals who stand alongside others in the fight for social justice, creatively negotiating and rearranging the colonial dynamics that pit the Euro-American self against the racialized other. This instance of creative solidarity foregrounds an understanding of identity as open

to the other, relational, and fluid, thereby revealing new horizons against which we might not only imagine, but also produce new ways of being.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis above foregrounds how solidarity shapes Milly and Tyler's evolution from self-absorbed tweens to caring, socially committed, and future-oriented individuals. They engage in critically reflective dialogues with others, undertaking a process of interrogating structural differences and engaging in self-examination that involves a sincere effort to venture into unfamiliar territories. Furthermore, they learn to accept responsibility for fighting oppressions that do not directly affect them as individuals, showing their concern for the collective. Their belief in a brighter future and their desire to counter dehumanizing conditions are the fundamental driving forces behind the coalitions they forge with vulnerable others, building bridges of hope and love where there were once walls of fear. These hope- and love-infused coalitions contribute to creatively rearranging the versions of identity imposed by colonial modernity. Encounters with racialized others are therefore revisited from a decolonial perspective, foregrounding a view of identity as open to the other, relational, and fluid.

These efforts to portray encounters in line with the three varieties of solidarity in Gaztambide-Fernández's "pedagogy of solidarity" highlight the role the texts under study play in fostering solidarity among young readers. Consequently, it can be concluded that these Latinx YA novels function as pedagogical works that advocate an ethics of solidarity in today's polarized and dehumanizing climate. This timely contribution not only prompts young readers to question beliefs rooted in colonial epistemologies but also orients them towards a fairer and brighter future, presenting hope as a vital element in societal transformation, increased vitality, and social justice. By revealing new horizons of hope, love, and compassion, the novels under study acquire both pedagogical and political significance, directly challenging the prevalent notion that young adult literature is inherently superficial and simplistic.

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NOTES

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2 Because of its simple writing style and the inclusion of a teenage protagonist whose experiences may resonate with young readers, *The House on Mango Street* is considered a young adult narrative, even though it was never intended to be read as such, as Sandra Cisneros has acknowledged on several occasions.

3 Tweens (or pre-teens) are children between the ages of 8 and 12.

4 As the author explains in "In Her Own Words: A Conversation with Julia Alvarez", a section following the reader's guide to *Finding Miracles,* Milly's birth country is left unnamed to highlight that, during the latter half of the twentieth century, Latin America was plagued by US-supported dictatorships and civil wars (275). In other words, by not specifying the country, Alvarez prompts readers to consider the widespread nature of this situation throughout the Americas.

5 Although the Operation "Return to Sender", which lends its name to the novel, was initially intended to raid and deport undocumented immigrants with criminal records, later investigations of ICE indicated that "a vast majority of those arrested had no criminal record, and many had no deportation orders against them" (Bernstein 1), revealing that the operation was intended at a broader range of immigrants.