

## **Chapter 2. Space of Flows vs. Space of Places: Negotiating the Paradoxes of a Global Age in Julia Alvarez's *Return to Sender***

Sometimes it's only in the world of story that we understand the human side of political and loaded issues.

—Julia Alvarez, *Return to Sender*

### **2.1. Globalization and Its Contradictory Paths: Opening and Closing Borders**

The opening quotation alludes to the main reason that drove Julia Alvarez to write her young adult novel *Return to Sender* (2009). In “In Her Own Words: A Conversation with Julia Alvarez” (2009, 3-10), a section which follows the reader's guide to *Return to Sender*, the author explains that, during the time she served as a translator at schools in Vermont, she saw Mexican immigrant children living in fear of deportation, while Vermont youngsters felt confused by the growing presence of Mexican families in that state. The inability of these young people to make sense of this complex situation, and the lack of acknowledgement this state of affairs receives from society at large, is the motivation driving this novel (2009, 3-10). Thus, *Return to Sender* portrays Mari, an undocumented Mexican girl who moves from North Carolina to Vermont, and Tyler, a Vermont boy whose parents have hired Mari's father and uncles to work in their dairy farm. In particular, the story concentrates, on the one hand, on Mari's struggle over place and belonging in a racist environment that paradoxically relies on Mexican labor for its survival and, on the other hand, on Tyler's doubts about whether or not the flow of undocumented Mexicans to Vermont jeopardizes his place-bound identity. The boy's concerns arise as a result of the increasing arrival of Mexican immigrants to a place rated as “one of the whitest states of the nation” (Clark and Teachout 2012, 178).

Significantly, Alvarez chooses to set her story between 2005 and 2006, coinciding with the time when the Operation “Return to Sender” was set in motion.

This operation, which lends its name to the novel, was an initiative by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Agency to raid and deport illegal aliens with criminal records, although as Nina Bernstein reports in a 2009 article for the *New York Times*, later investigations of ICE raids indicated that “a vast majority of those arrested had no criminal record, and many had no deportation orders against them, either” (2009, 1), revealing that the operation was actually intended at a much wider spectrum of immigrants.

Not much has been written about this novel. “Maya Socolovsky’s “Cultural (II)lteracies: Narratives of Epistolary Resistance in Julia Alvarez’s *Return to Sender*” (2015) is the only academic piece of writing dealing with this text. In it, Socolovsky explores the ways in which the novel demonstrates reading and writing as ideological practices, paying special attention to how Mari creates, through her letters and diaries, transformative spaces of writing. It shows, for instance, how writing is for the female protagonist a space where she can voice a view of undocumented workers that departs from the narratives that criminalize these people. While these questions will not be entirely absent from my analysis, the focus of this chapter is placed on other issues. In the pages that follow I will analyze how the two children protagonists negotiate their identities in an environment characterized by the pressing needs of employers for undocumented workers and the continuous deportation of the latter. Special attention will be paid to the dilemmas of identity and belonging propelled by these contradictory dynamics, as well as to the strategies devised to solve them.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, this chapter also looks into how these identity negotiations reconstitute and are reconstituted in the spaces of the American nation

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<sup>1</sup> Even though the focus of this dissertation is on Latina girls, it is necessary in this chapter to offer a full analysis of Tyler’s development, for each character’s personal growth is interdependent with the other. This means that, in order to understand the girl’s self-development, it is imperative to trace the boy’s, and vice versa.

and the state of Vermont. This, in turn, will enable a critical consideration of the way personal identities and these particular places are conceptualized.

Before proceeding to the matter at hand, it is important to take a closer look at the conflicting dynamics of globalization that are shortly introduced in chapter 1. This complex global dialectic is accounted for by sociologist Manuel Castells in *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture. Volume 1. The Rise of a Network Society* (1996). Here, he contends that globalization is characterized as leading to a dialectical tension between the global flows of goods, people, and information (the “space of flows”) and the historically rooted spatial organization of human experience (the “space of places”) (1996, 421-423). Political scientist Sara Kalm explains that these opposing and conflicting dynamics are rooted in two different conceptualizations of space: first, a globalist imagination of de-territorialized and unbounded space; and second, an essentialist conception of space as divided into firmly bounded, fixed, and unchanging places (2005, 14-19). Many scholars seem to imply that the tension between these geopolitical imaginations lies at the heart of the emergence of exclusivist nationalisms and localisms in different parts of the world (see Harvey 1989; 1996; Massey 1994). In this sense, geographer David Harvey notes how one response to time-space compression has been the sense of anxiety that leads to people withdrawing into some notions of a settled place that can be defined against and defended from others, reason why he deems place as almost necessarily reactionary (1989; 1996). This means that place is interpreted as an evasion; as a retreat from the (actually unavoidable) dynamic and change of life. In this reading, place and locality are foci for a form of romanticized escapism from a rapidly changing world, equating place with stasis and reaction.

Geographer Kevin Robins goes beyond this last remark as he suggests that these problematical perceptions of place might have been triggered by the arrival of the “periphery” at the “core,” and not so much by the influx of people and goods

from core countries (in Massey 1995, 52). One only needs to examine contemporary immigration policies across Western areas to validate his argument. Looking at the European Union, expert in migration law Elspeth Guild identifies a “typology of European inclusion and exclusion,” which serves as an organizing principle around which territorial and social inclusion and exclusion are drawn (in Aas 2013, 29). This classification posits citizens of the European Union as the most desirable immigrants, followed by citizens of other Western nations, while the least desirable are those from countries mostly located in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America (in Aas 2013, 29-30).

The United States has a similar hierarchy of immigrant desirability, as evidenced by its immigration policies, which “have generally reflected the desires, interests, and purposes of Americans of European descent, thus resulting in the United States having a very high percentage of Americans of European descent” (Nevins 2002, 122). In his discussion of Guild’s typology, criminologist Katja Franko Aas argues that it is based on a “pre-established racialized, colonial, ranking” (2013, 30), inasmuch as it places people from predominantly white affluent societies on top of the hierarchy, while relegating the designated others to the very bottom. Yet, if Aas only discusses the European case, my contention is that the hierarchy that is present in the United States also reproduces the colonial ranking attributable to the European Union, for it has historically aimed at prioritizing the interests of European Americans over those of other populations.

This colonial typology of inclusion and exclusion shows that old colonial hierarchies remain in place. In this regard, drawing on decolonial scholarship, it can be argued that the current global ethnic/racial hierarchy of Westerners and non-Westerners continues to establish important divisions between different people, calling into question the mythology of the so-called decolonization of the world (Quijano 1993; 2000; Mignolo 2000; 2011; Grosfoguel 2002). This is especially

evident in post- 9/11 America. The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon shifted the U.S. administration's focus to the war on terror, and immigration was quickly reframed as a security issue, prompting the tightening of border controls (d'Appollonia 2012, 1-4). Consequently, immigrants from non-Western nations came to be seen as threats to national security (Galindo and Vigil 2006; d'Appollonia 2012; Nicholls 2013). These fears and paranoia of the post- 9/11 era were fueled by nativism, which is defined as a political and social force aimed at protecting the interests of certain established inhabitants of a nation.<sup>2</sup> In the case of the United States, nativism is deeply rooted in notions of white supremacy that deem Anglo Saxons to be natives of the country (Pérez Huber et al. 2008, 42), even though they derive from immigrant stock themselves. Very importantly, this force was not only behind the retooling of border controls, but also informed the xenophobic attitudes encountered by many immigrants (reflected for instance in vigilantism or racialized evictions). In this sense, numerous scholars in the area of critical race theory consider Mexicans to be the main targets of nativist attacks in contemporary American society (Pérez Huber et al. 2008, 40).

However, despite constant pressures to diminish their presence in the country, Mexican immigrants (regular and irregular) continue making their way into the U.S. Only minor decreases have been noticed between 2010 and 2014 (Zong and Batalova 2016). The political and economic links that have been established between the two countries since Mexico lost half of its territory to the U.S. in 1848, together with economic stagnation and overpopulation in the sending nation, have propelled this rising migration flow. In recent years, the availability of a large supply of low-wage jobs in the service sector has facilitated the absorption of regular and, above all, irregular Mexican immigrants (Sassen 1996, 225-26). The country's reliance on

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview of nativism in Western Europe and the United States, see Lucassen 2005 and Schrag 2010.

these people for jobs that resemble slavery shows how racism is entangled with the international division of labor and capitalist accumulation at a world-scale (Quijano 2000; Grosfoguel 2002). This entanglement, a defining feature of global coloniality itself, is a major component of what Ruben Andersson calls the “illegality industry” in his book *Ilegality, Inc: Clandestine Migration and the Business of Bordering Europe* (2014). This term denotes “the system in which illegal immigration is both controlled and produced –its configuration, its workings, and its often distressing consequences” (2014, 12). Employers, smuggling (and trafficking) networks, security companies, and states help produce illegality, while at the same time making economic profits out of it (2014, 12). In this industry, then, “illegality is not just produced; it is also productive” (2014, 274). On the disadvantaged side of this industry is the ethnic immigrant, the so-called “illegal.” It should be made clear that the term “illegal” is pejorative, stigmatizing, and even incorrect, implying as it does that immigrants are criminals when they have usually only committed an administrative infraction (2014, 17). Yet, it is a very convenient discursive construct for states; a political label that signifies threat. In the particular case of the U.S., this discursive construction has served to use these immigrants as scapegoats for economic and political crisis, and also to legitimate the increased integration of military equipment, tactics, and personnel into border protection and enforcement efforts (Nevins 2002; Lind and Williams 2013), keeping the illegality industry going. These political maneuvers add complexity to the lives of undocumented Mexicans, which make up the majority of immigrants living in the U.S. without authorization (Gonzalez-Barrera and Krogstad 2017). In this sense, they are not only vulnerable to racial prejudice, not to mention labor exploitation, but are constantly threatened with deportation (Howell 2014; Pyke 2014). These socio-spatial boundaries stand in opposition to the frequency and relative easiness with which the illegality industry opens the country’s borders for these people. This, in turn, unveils the dialectical

tension between space of flows and space of spaces, in that racism and deportation rely on a view of place as bounded and rigid, whereas the opening of borders for undocumented immigrants conveys a globalist imagination of de-territorialized and unbounded space. In the next section, we will see how the main characters deal with these two geopolitical views.

## **2.2. Open Borders, Exclusion, and Cultural Schizophrenia: Dilemmas of Identity and Belonging**

The complex global dialogue accounted for above complicates Tyler and Mari's path to find their place in the world, a process of self-discovery that is presented to readers through third-person chapters about the boy and the girl's lengthy unmailed letters and diary entries. These child-centered accounts capture Mari's feelings of exclusion and the dilemmas of identity and belonging encountered by both characters.

David Sibley's *Geographies of Exclusion: Society and Difference in the West* (2002/1995) and Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) offer interesting insights on exclusion that can illuminate my understanding of Mari's marginalization in the U.S. society, a discriminatory practice motivated by her status as a member of an ethnic minority. Sibley's insights are indebted to Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, which refers to the individual's attempt to distance oneself from objects that represent undesirable characteristics (2002/1995, 8-11). In Western societies, he argues, ethnic minorities are often regarded as abject and outside the mainstream (2002/1995, 49). This perception is key to understanding their exclusion in Western countries, which is discursively represented as the "purification of space" (2002/1995, 77-87). Sibley defines this notion as a process of social control through which a dominant social group constructs socio-spatial boundaries that contribute to the marginalization of ethnic minorities and other social groups judged as abject

(2002/1995, 77-87). By this logic, then, exclusion, or the purification of social space, is predicated upon a sense of displeasure triggered by difference. The emotional responses that propel these dynamics of exclusion against ethnic minorities are a central aspect of Ahmed's work (2004). Also drawing from psychoanalysis, this feminist theorist explains that hate reestablishes distance from bodies whose difference is imagined as a threat to the object of love –the white nation–, while at the same time aligning white bodies with the white nation (2004, 42-43). These emotional workings involve, then, a “spatial reorganization of bodies” (2004, 49), which, in the words of Sibley (2002/1995), is intended to “purify” social space; that is, to expel the “defiled” and “defiling” others from the community.

As I will show, boundaries play an important part in Mari's struggle for self-definition, operating at different spatial levels, and each corresponding to a particular site of exclusion: the nation, the locality, and the home. Sibley views these sites as potential spaces of exclusion for those deemed as undesirable and, far from treating them as discrete problems, he demonstrates how, to some extent, one has effects on the other (2002/1995, 90). As for Mari's marginalization, these spaces of exclusion also condition one another. Thus, we will see how, for instance, the nation's nativism not only informs discriminatory attitudes at the local level but also provides cues for behavior in Mari's family as they relate to their domestic environment.

Nativism is the force fueling different episodes of discrimination that affect Mari. One of the most outstanding examples takes place at the school bus, where two of Mari's classmates, Ronnie and Clayton, insult her with very bad words: “These boys say the very same things that the kids in North Carolina say about me being an ‘illegal alien’ who should go back to where she came from” (2009, 65). According to Law scholar Catherine Dauvergne, the pejorative term “illegal alien” conceals the pervasive power of prosperous nations to exclude the others from within (2008, 17). More precisely, she contends that the labeling of people as “illegal” is part of a

defensive pattern commonly used by Western countries to build walls around themselves when their borders cannot keep outsiders out (2008, 17). Similarly, Ahmed argues that the repetition of signifiers like this elicits or mobilizes emotional responses that, in turn, serve to effect divisions between those considered to be the true inhabitants of the nation and those that are seen as endangering the community (2004, 60). In so doing, nations are asserting a place-bound identity that is at odds with the flow of people, goods, and ideas that is also at work in the present global era.

Nonetheless, I shall argue that the insults thrown at Mari by her classmates might not only be motivated by the desire to exclude foreigners from the nation, but also by a purely local concern, thus showing how the nation and the locality as sites of exclusion reinforce one another. In order to demonstrate this, it is necessary to consider Vermont's racial geography. In "In Her Own Words: A Conversation with Julia Alvarez" (2009, 3-10), Alvarez refers to the setting of the novel as "lily-white Vermont," pointing to the lack of racial diversity in that area. Even if this situation began to change with the arrival of Mexican immigrants in the 2000s, recent official statistics still reveal a striking contrast: 94.6 percent of Vermont's population in 2016 was Caucasian, whereas only 1.9 percent was Hispanic (United States Census Bureau n.d.). Geographer Robert M. Vanderbeck argues that this lack of racial diversity is central to how the state has been represented and represents itself (2006, 641). He contends that Vermont has historically been imagined as "one of the last remaining places of *authentic Yankee whiteness*" (2006, 641; my emphasis). This category, Vanderbeck argues, has generally referred to independent white Anglo-Saxon Protestants who cherish notions of liberty, democracy and equality (2006, 646). Thus, Vermont's imaginary geography is clearly implicated in the exclusion of those people who do not fit the description above. In this sense, Vanderbeck notes that the targets of exclusion have changed throughout time: from Jews, Irish, and Italians to

U.S. Southerners (2006, 646-50). The latter have been rejected because of their slaveholding and segregationist past, which is defined against the progressive character associated with Vermont (2006, 649). In this regard, Vanderbeck argues that the assumptions about the liberal character of this northern state have complicated the recognition of discrimination against those people who do not fall within any category of whiteness (2006, 650).

The exclusionary power of Vermont's imaginary geography as it applies to ethnic minorities is perfectly illustrated in the novel under study, as shown by the sign that reads "TAKE BACK VERMONT" (191) on Mr. Rossetti's lawn. This demand expresses Mr. Rossetti's wish to protect Vermont's white essence against the increasing arrival of Mexicans to that state's dairy farms. *Return to Sender* is indeed set at a time when a great number of farmers began to hire undocumented workers from farming areas in Mexico (mainly Chiapas and Yucatán) to boost Vermont's farming industry, which drives the state's economy. This is the case with Tyler's family, the Paquettes, who decide to employ Mari's father and uncles in view of the difficulty of finding local help willing to work for long hours, with almost no days off, showing how the rightless status of undocumented workers makes them the perfect candidates for jobs that locals find totally abusive. Interestingly, the shortage of local farm labor is identified by Radel et al. (2010, 189) as the major factor stimulating the ongoing migration of undocumented Mexican workers to Vermont. This increasing flow of migrants inevitably calls into question the state's myths about its alleged racial homogeneity. A more dynamic view of this northern state is nonetheless at odds with those Vermonters who see place as bounded, an example of which is Mr. Rossetti. Turning to the episode of the school bus, my contention is that the same fixed view about Vermont that Mr. Rossetti holds could also underlie Ronnie and Clayton's exclusionary attitude. This contention gains strength when considering the importance of whiteness in Alvarez's novel, which is not only

reflected in Mr. Rossetti's explicit demands but also in Mari's awareness that her physical appearance might raise suspicion in an all-white area: "Tío Felipe can also tell you that this state is full of white people, so Mexicans stand out and that makes it easy for *la migra* to catch us" (201). Thereby, the lack of racial diversity in the state complicates Mari and her family's attempts at making Vermont their new home.

Besides feeling excluded from the host society, Mari finds herself trapped at home. This situation inevitably refutes the "home as haven" thesis, which sees domestic environments as sources of comfort in a world full of dangers and conflicts (Sibley 2002/1995, 93). Mari's feelings of entrapment in her own home are motivated by the threats posed by *la migra* and her father's patriarchal values. On the one hand, because the border patrol might catch Mexicans easily in white Vermont, Mari and her family are left with no choice but to stay at home most of the time, fearing that *la migra* might be behind any expected noise they hear, as she recounts:

After that call, we were all very nervous as we always are when we hear news of someone being nabbed by *la migra*. It is as if a cloud hangs over our family and darkens our world . . . So when the doorbell rang, we all jumped. For one thing, in the four months we had been living here, that doorbell had never rung . . . At first, none of us even knew what it was. One ring, and then another, another. It reminded me of the priest ringing the independence bell in México to wake up the people from freedom. But since we feared it was *la migra*, this ringing was more the sound of the end of our family's freedom. (101)

The sound of the doorbell and recent news of other deportations make Mari and her family sense that they are in constant danger of being caught by the border patrol. This feeling informs the rules and instructions that Mari's father, Mr. Cruz, gives to her daughters. Thus, the female protagonist and her little sisters, Luby and Ofie, are not allowed to leave their house alone or send letters to their relatives for

fear that they will be apprehended. I contend that these severe restrictions reflect how the power of the nation to determine who belongs to the American society invades the home, thereby demonstrating how the nation as a site of exclusion conditions the domestic sphere. This shows, therefore, how these spaces are tied together by nativist discourses, which in turn shape the two locales, taking the power of exclusion to both of them.

On the other hand, marianismo and machismo values subordinate Mari to her father at home in different ways. Due to her mother's absence, the female protagonist is required to act as a surrogate mother for Ofie and Luby, which instills in her a burden too big for her age: "Papá says I am to be the mother to my little sisters. 'But who will be my mother?' I ask him. He just bows his head and gets so quiet for days on end. I'm not going to make him more sad by asking him that again" (21). Mari thinks she still needs to be taken care of by a mother; however, she decides to bear the burden in silence so as not to upset her father. Even though she finds her new role unfair, she understands that her father feels completely lost after her mother disappeared on her way back from a visit to Mexico. This reveals, nonetheless, the powerful role that machismo and marianismo play in shaping Mr. Cruz's worldview, as he is unable to picture himself nurturing his daughters. Besides, in confiding that duty to his eldest daughter, Mari's father is somehow acting as an authoritarian head of the family that does not make room for the negotiation of decisions among family members.

On the other hand, because Mari is on the threshold of adolescence, she is not allowed to be alone with Tyler in her own house. Mr. Cruz seems to have very narrow ideas about the type of relationship boys and girls undergoing puberty should have. Therefore, he is not happy with them having unsupervised interactions in places where they could become intimate. This illustrates the tremendous influence that the patriarchal ideal of female premarital chastity has on Mari's father, who

insists on guarding his daughter's virginity at all costs, even if that means to hinder the girl's relationship with the only friend she has in Vermont.

I argue that these gender restrictions, together with the deportation threat dynamic, render the home as a site of exclusion for Mari, allowing us to dismiss the "home as haven" thesis. This thesis has been overtly contested by a wide range of feminist scholarship, for it overlooks the stratified relationships that subordinate women to men in the private realm (McDowell 2003/1999; Domosh and Seager 2001). In my view, the patriarchal dynamics that regulate women's domestic performance and the threats posed by *la migra* allow us to characterize The Cruces' house in accordance with Sibley's notion of the home as a "locus of power relations" (2002/1995, 92), a notion that successfully captures the polar tensions between family members.

It could then be argued that Mari is denied the right to lead a comfortable life in Vermont even if her family has been encouraged to settle in that northern state to work in its farming industry. This situation, which reflects the dialectical tension between space of flows and space of places, is not an isolated one in Vermont. In this sense, Radel et al. argue that the survival of Vermont's farming industry has come to depend on undocumented Mexican workers, whose lack of documentation prompts employers to house them in enclosed spaces of farm buildings, forcing them to live like prisoners (2010, 190). Thus, they can benefit from their work without risking being sanctioned by the authorities for employing undocumented workers. These terrible working conditions, and employers' willingness to continue making profits out of these immigrants, serve to exemplify what Carty and Macias call a "schizophrenic" attitude towards unauthorized Mexican immigration, which is best reflected in the message "we need your labor but you are not welcome as citizens"

(2014, 7).<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the demonization of undocumented Mexican immigration goes hand in hand with continuing recruitment of Mexican workers.

This contradictory attitude mirrors Mari's cultural schizophrenia, that is, her inability to determine where she belongs. The exclusion she faces in her daily life makes it very difficult for her to find a place she can call home. In "Place and Identity: a Sense of Place," feminist geographer Gillian Rose contends that immigrants who experience exclusion in the host countries usually develop a sense of place that does not evoke belonging at all (1995, 96). This means that for immigrants the host nation is often infused with negative feelings, leading to a sense of displacement. So is the case with Mari, who thinks of the United States as a place that turns its back on Mexican immigrants: "I feel like Mary and Joseph at all the *posada* stops when they're turned away . . . No room for us in this country" (143). The biblical episode she mentions recounts how Mary and Joseph were denied shelter on their way to Bethlehem, an episode that bears some resemblance to her situation in the United States. Self-defined as a Catholic, the female protagonist usually refers to biblical episodes like this or prays to the Virgin of Guadalupe, which brings her closer to Mexico. However, Mari feels she cannot relate to her country of origin completely either. The gender restrictions her family imposes on her explain to a great extent the distance that has grown between the female protagonist and Mexico, as she points out in a letter addressed to her relatives in Las Margaritas:

Abuelito and Abuelote and Abuelota and Tío Felipe and *toda la familia*, I certainly hope that Papá is wrong about how you do not allow girls and boys

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<sup>3</sup> Although I am aware of the fact that "schizophrenia" is a complex and serious mental illness and therefore its applicability to account for cultural and social attitudes can be problematic, I use the term "schizophrenic attitude" to denote conflicting or inconsistent social postures, characterized by unusual disparity. On the other hand, I use "cultural schizophrenia" to describe the confusion and the impact of having non-American origins, a bicultural experience, and experiences of straddling the cultural discourses of living in the United States.

to be special friends. Because if this is so, I hate to say, but just like my sister Ofie, I would not want to live in México. (210)

Mari migrated to the United States when she was four and she has never visited her country of origin since then. Thus, she has been raised mostly in America. Their parents, on the contrary, moved to the United States as adults, hence their ties, commitment, and level of attachment to Mexico are greater than Mari's. As a consequence, Mari and her parents have developed completely different frames of reference. This explains why the protagonist does not identify with many of her parents' values, as is the case with their gendered codes of behavior. In a similar vein, she criticizes the fact that they never allowed her and her sisters to go trick-or-treating when they were living in North Carolina:

As for us, no matter how hard we explained the American tradition, my sisters and I were not permitted to go around begging for treats. "That is a lack of respect," Mamá explained. "With so many beggars who really need alms!" Sometimes, even if I had been born in México, I felt a huge desert stretching between my parents and who I was becoming. (102)

Here, the female protagonist acknowledges that she is becoming someone completely different from her parents, who come to epitomize a part of Mexico that she dislikes. Her upbringing in the United States has therefore made a great impact on her identity, even though she knows that her lack of legal privilege prevents her from enjoying place-rights in America. While her education in the United States separates her from her parents, the fact that she is not a citizen represents a wall between her and her sisters: "I am not like my sisters, who are little American girls as they were born here and don't know anything else. I was born in México, but I don't feel Mexican, not like Papá and my uncles with all their memories and stories and missing it all the time" (21). All this leads her to a state of profound alienation and frustration. Interestingly, as Walter Nicholls argues in *The Dreamers: How the*

*Undocumented Youth Movement Transformed the Immigrant Rights Debate* (2013, 4), this inability to relate somewhere is one of core aspects that gave way to the formation in 2010 of the DREAMers social movement, which took its name from the DREAM Act (acronym for Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors), an unenacted legislative proposal for young undocumented immigrants that would first grant conditional residency and upon meeting further requirements, permanent residency. Nicholls explains that the “recurrent feelings of embarrassment, awkwardness, silence, and shame” deriving from the stigma of not belonging in America despite having been brought up there led undocumented youths to unite for a common cause and form the powerful political group of the DREAMers (2013, 4). In this sense, Alvarez captures one of the many voices of frustration that some years later (the story is set between 2005 and 2006) would coalesce into a very important social justice movement in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

Mari’s disappointment at not being able to find a place of her own goes parallel to Tyler’s struggle to determine if hiring undocumented immigrants jeopardizes his own group affiliation. This quandary arises after Mr. Paquette has a tractor accident that leaves him unable to work, an event that leads the family to employ Mexican workers, following the example of many of their fellow farmers. However, even if Mr. and Mrs. Paquette tell Tyler that their farm depends on

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<sup>4</sup> The DREAMers’ fight to remain in the United States legally has dominated the country’s immigrant rights debate over the past few years, pressurizing the Obama administration to pass Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) in 2012. This measure granted relief to an entire category of young undocumented immigrants, who otherwise would have been subject to deportation. This program did not provide legal status, but research on DACA participants found that those youngsters who qualified for DACA were able to obtain driver’s licenses, find well-paid jobs, and many were able to go to college. DACA was without any doubt a crucial victory in its own right, but, as importantly, it set the stage for the broader immigrant movement to demand that the program was extended to all undocumented immigrants in the United States (“DACA for all”). Thus, the importance of the DREAMers phenomenon should be understood broadly: they have improved the situation of many undocumented young people, yet they have also altered the status of the broader undocumented population. As an example, we can refer to the executive order introduced by Obama on November 17, 2014 to provide temporary residency to five million immigrants with tenuous legal status. For more information, see Nicholls (2013) and Chávez et al. (2015).

Mexican labor for its survival, he cannot help but feel suspicious about the newcomers:

Good thing his mom added that last part about coming to help us. Tyler hates to admit it, 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? (42)

Tyler's suspicion is thus fueled by the post-9/11 paranoia, which other than prompting a tightening of border controls, has given rise to a patriotic fervor that seeks to protect the country from "racialized others," i.e., those people perceived as nonwhite and non-American. Fear is of crucial importance here. According to Sara Ahmed, fear "works by establishing others as fearsome insofar as they *threaten to take the self in*" (2004, 64; emphasis in the original). Thus, it is dependent on fantasies that place the other human being in the place of being an absolute threat – "threat to one's self as a self, but to one's very life, to one's very existence as a separate being with a life of its own" (2004, 64). As seen in the quotation above, Tyler's fear of the newcomers is predicated upon the fantasy that the latter might destroy his farm and his beloved country. In this sense, Ahmed argues, fear and the fantasy of threat not only effect divisions between bodies, but also justify violence to the other (2004, 64), as is apparent in the racism and mistrust that taints Tyler's relationship with Mari for much of the story.

In order to help the male protagonist overcome his concerns about foreign workers, Mrs. Paquette encourages him to get to know Mari, Luby, and Ofie, which he grudgingly accepts to do. His first encounter with the Mexican girls (who happen to be the first Mexicans he has ever met) is indeed marked by his reluctance to open himself to the newcomers. As a matter of fact, he finds everything the girls say or do strange, and even criticizes some aspects of their culture, such as the Catholic

tradition of naming girls after the Virgin Mary: “‘So you’re all María Something,’ Tyler observes smartly. In Spanish class Ms. Ramírez said María was a real popular name in Spanish. But this is ridiculous. Even the cows without names get their very own ear-tag numbers” (44). Yet this lack of respect for the cultural other is temporarily gone when Mari and Tyler find something in common: their love for astronomy. Thereby, they develop a friendship which is broken again after Tyler finds out that only Luby and Ofie are in the United States legally. As unauthorized immigration goes against the laws of the country, the male protagonist refuses to be friends with Mari and tells her: “I’d rather lose the farm than not be loyal to my country” (70). This statement reveals the national conviction that patriots have to conform to the laws of the country, which instills in Tyler a fear that he will be considered a traitor if he hosts undocumented immigrants. Consequently, he decides to put an end to his friendship with Mari scarcely after it had begun, thus prioritizing his place-bound identity over his farm and over the person that until that time had been his friend.

Given the fact that Mari is illegally in the country, Tyler starts to think of her as a criminal, going as far as to spy on her through his telescope “in case she is up to something illegal” (79). At work here is the widespread association between Latinxs and lawbreaking. Political scientist Steven W. Bender (2002; 2003), who studies the relationship between stereotypes and the maltreatment of Latinxs under American law, contends that this identification is based on two main beliefs: first, Latinxs are thought to have sneaked into the country illegally, thus giving rise to the pejorative label “illegal alien”; and second, young men in particular are assumed to be gang members and/or drug dealers. The assumption that all Latinxs are undocumented is epitomized in *Return to Sender* by Ronnie and Clayton, who call Mari “illegal” without knowing if she has legal documentation or not. On the other hand,

discovering the truth about the girl's status allows Tyler to further criminalize her as he starts to keep an eye on her to protect the prevailing social order.

Nonetheless, even if the male protagonist seems determined to turn his back on Mari forever, the knowledge he gains following his decision to break his relationship with the immigrant girl makes him feel dubious about what patriots and criminals are. More precisely, the lessons about global justice and equality that he internalizes lead Tyler to realize that the identity categories he believed to be clear-cut are now blurred:

Tyler feels confused. It's as if he's lost in some dark wood inside his own head. Seems like a lot of his treasured ideas and beliefs have gone into a tailspin recently. It used to be he knew what was right, what was wrong, what it meant to be a patriot or a hero or a good person. Now he's not sure. Take his dad, who has to be the most patriotic American Tyler has ever known. But even Dad has had to employ Mexicans without papers to help his farm. (187)

As the excerpt above shows, the male protagonist seems to question whether or not he is less of a patriot if he hosts unauthorized immigrants. This inner conflict, as well as Mari's inability to determine where she belongs, get to be solved by actively engaging in a process of remaking identities.

### **2.3. Reconceptualizing Identities: Towards a Critical Cosmopolitan Perspective**

A wide range of scientific literature shows that globalization has caused major global problems, such as the increasing inequalities between groups of people, countries, and regions, inequalities that are very often racialized (Sassen 1998; Grosfoguel 2002; Ibrahim 2005). The factors stimulating undocumented Mexican immigration to Vermont (e.g., poverty in the sending nation and American employers' willingness to benefit from cheap labor) and the frequent racism and exploitation these immigrants have to endure in the host society are illustrative of these global disparities. While

there is no denying that globalization perpetuates these inequalities, it can be argued that it has also led to the context in which individuals increasingly see themselves as “world citizens” with duties and responsibilities in an interconnected world. This section will demonstrate that the children characters under scrutiny remake their identities by engaging with a global ethic of mutual recognition and justice embedded in the highly contested concept of world/global citizenship. This remaking process is to be understood as a crucial stage in the psychological maturation of both characters, which is the main focus of the novel.

Broadly speaking, the concept of global citizenship represents a contrasting form of identification, one that foregrounds the similarity and unity of humankind rather than the particular communal identities of nationalisms. Whereas most discourses on global citizenship agree on this general definition, there are other aspects that are amenable to different readings and interpretations. In my view, the reconceptualization of identities at the core of *Return to Sender* can be read as an example of critical or decolonial cosmopolitanism. As critical pedagogy scholar Tammy Birk explains in “Critical Cosmopolitanism as a New Paradigm for Global Learning” (2016, 40), this approach is born as a reaction against traditional cosmopolitanism, or universal or unmodified cosmopolitanism. As suggested by its name, traditional cosmopolitanism tends to endorse a type of universalism that conveys an abstract idea of humanity, ignoring and minimizing difference, particularity, and localism (Friedman 2004; Birk 2016). It also has a history of collusion with Western imperialist projects that present a Euro-American generic and genderless citizen as the normative one (Sypra 2006; Birk 2016). Finally, traditional cosmopolitanism can become a cover for an observed and elitist worldview, largely because traditional cosmopolitan thought is generally from above, the Global North, and/or metropolitan centers (Beck 2002; Birk 2016). Critical cosmopolitanism, on the contrary, goes beyond this narrowness. In this regard, a small but increasing

number of thinkers –among them, Paul Rabinow, Walter Mignolo, Gerard Delanty and Michael Bérubé– have identified critical cosmopolitanism as the most promising modification of cosmopolitanism, as it sustains the social justice commitment of the cosmopolitan project without erasing particularity, difference, and local attachment (Birk 2016). Birk summarizes its basic tenets as follows:

I argue that critical cosmopolitanism is an ethic and a practice that challenges binary thinking; thinks the global and the local relationally; resists abstract universal truths about human or global community; insists on a strong and broad ethical concern for the other that does not disregard difference; complicates and decolonizes ways of thinking about social identity and power; and challenges the uncritical commodification of cultural difference. (2016, 41)

Interestingly, this ethical and critical bent accounts for the “cosmopolitan turn” in education (Strand 2010, 229). This means that critical cosmopolitanism is viewed by a growing number of theorists and educators as the most complex, transformational, and socially relevant framework for pedagogical and curricular transformation in global learning (Birk 2016; Pashby 2016). This is reflected in *Return to Sender*, since Mari and Tyler’s teacher, Mr. Bicknell, follows an educational approach based on critical cosmopolitanism, which takes a strong hold on both children, as we will see. Yet, the school teacher is not the only character that instills this way of thinking and acting in the protagonists. Tyler’s late grandfather is also crucial in this regard. His ideas, which get to the boy through his living relatives, help him dismantle his narrow views on patriots and criminals.

The male protagonist’s transformation begins after his grandmother tells him how his grandfather approached immigration. He finds out that, thanks to his grandfather, his uncle Larry reconsidered hiring undocumented Mexican workers to

keep his farming business afloat and, after the accident, his father chose to follow suit:

“Actually, dear, your uncle Larry’s had Mexicans for a while over at his place,” Grandma explains. “Your dad wouldn’t hear of it, until, of course, the accident made him reconsider. But when your uncle Larry told us, you know what Gramps said? He said, ‘We Paquettes came down from Canada back in the 1880s. Nobody but nobody in America got here –excepting the Indians– without somebody giving them a chance.’ That’s what he said . . . So, honey, I think Gramps would understand.” (87)

Gramps’ conviction that immigrants should be given a chance is in line with the sense of cosmopolitan responsibility advocated by critical cosmopolitanism. Under this view, it is thought that responsibility is something people extend to others in distress because our lives interdepend and are implicated in one another (Birk 2016; Pashby 2016). In other words, we are strands in a web that binds us all and, consequently, we cannot remain insensitive to everybody else’s problems, but we should take a stand and do something about it, an idea that is also at the core of Anzaldúa’s ethics of radical interrelatedness (Keating 2009). Tyler becomes aware of this thanks to his grandfather’s lesson, thus abandoning his anti-immigrant feelings for a commitment to help undocumented workers pursue the rights they have as human beings, in this case their right to a better life.

In this sense, it is important to note that Tyler’s newly acquired sense of responsibility is not something that simply relies on one’s goodwill to recognize the suffering of others. In fact, postcolonial perspectives on global education insist that those readings of responsibility tend to leave old hierarchies of power intact:

Despite claims of globality and inclusion, the lack of analysis of power relations and knowledge construction in this area often results in educational practices that unintentionally reproduce ethnocentric, ahistorical,

depoliticized, paternalistic, Salvationist and triumphalist approaches that tend to deficit theorize, pathologize or trivialize difference. (Andreotti and de Souza 2011, 1)

From this viewpoint, responsibility should instead involve the need for mutual learning and a deeper grasp of the situation that needs to be changed (Andreotti and de Souza 2011; Jefferess 2012; Birk 2016; Pashby 2016). This implies, as Walter Mignolo argues in “The Many Faces of Cosmo-polis: Border Thinking and Critical Cosmopolitanism” (2000b, 723), a critical and dialogic encounter with those that have been “othered” by the Eurocentric, imperialistic, and racist discourses of modernity. These critical cosmopolitan principles redefine to a great extent Mari and Tyler’s relationship. Thus, their friendship becomes a process of mutual recognition and understanding that entails what bell hooks calls “repositioning” (1992, 177) or what Alfonso de Toro refers to as “the recognition of the Other as the different-other with same rights” (2006, 29). hooks develops the notion “repositioning” in the context of interracial relationships to describe the process of occupying the subject position of the other to dehegemonize the self and subvert practices of racism. The latter’s conceptualization constitutes the main tenet of “Latin-Culture,” a model of coexistence for hybrid societies that is built on William Luis, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Guillermo Gómez Peña’s respective insights on cultures and identities. This model is developed with the aim of devising new strategies for social coexistence in a world characterized by the loss of the ‘natural’ link between cultures and the social and geographical territories. Thereby, “Latin-Culture” proposes that a simple encounter with a different-other demands the negotiation and recognition of an irreducible difference in a common space. Summarizing, hooks and de Toro’s conceptualizations share three fundamental aspects that redefine the relationship between Tyler and Mari: the establishment of a

cross-cultural dialogue, the recognition of differences in a common space, and the rejection of the reactive boundary-making that shapes both identity and citizenship.

The male protagonist begins to reposition himself as he learns about Mari's culture and the complexities of immigrant families. This inevitably carries with it a process of self-reflexivity that is foundational to a critical cosmopolitan orientation. As its name suggests, this process refers to the "capacity to critically examine and reflect upon one's habits of thought and feeling" (Birk 2016, 46). This critical thinking exercise is apparent after Mari teaches Tyler the meaning of the Mexican song "La Golondrina," which evokes the loneliness and nostalgia felt by Mexican expatriates: "So this is what the three Marías feel, so far from home! And to think that Tyler has made them feel even more lonesome with his unfriendliness and spying. He wishes he had words that would let them know he is sorry, that they do belong here" (91). This song, then, opens the way for Tyler to grasp the girls' feelings of displacement and question his previous bad behavior towards them. He understands, therefore, that Mari and her sisters find themselves in a difficult situation they have not chosen and that they only wish to belong somewhere, just as anyone else does. Similarly, he comes to comprehend Mari's deep fears that *la migra* might separate her from her little sisters, who are American citizens. All this, in turn, allows him to gain a deeper understanding of the human side of illegal immigration, thus gradually departing from the racist narratives that criminalize undocumented immigrants. On the other hand, he also learns to respect Mexican traditions like Las Posadas and the Three Kings Day, which contrast starkly with his previous critique of Mari's cultural background.

Despite the repositioning process Tyler has initiated, he still has some reservations regarding immigrants, as he refuses to publicly acknowledge how hard Mari's family is working on his farm for fear that others might discover that his family is breaking the law. This reaction infuriates Mari, who feels that Tyler still

considers her family as criminals who should be kept underground. However, the boy overcomes these final reservations thanks to Mr. Bicknell, whose ideas about cosmopolitanism are crucial for Tyler to see immigrant labor as paramount for the development of Vermont and the United States. This important step in Tyler's transformation occurs after he listens to Mr. Bicknell's speech against racist attitudes in the community, a speech he delivers to a town meeting in an attempt to convince the attendees to reject a motion against undocumented workers and their employers. The teacher talks people into disapproving the proposal by reminding Mr. Rossetti, the motion's main advocate, and the rest of the attendees of their immigrant past:

My point, Mr. Rossetti, with all due respect, is that Rossetti is an Italian name . . . I know, I know. Your family's been here forever, since the 1880s, when Vermont needed cheap labor to work on the marble and granite quarries in Proctor and Barre . . . What if Vermonters had raised an outcry about these foreigners endangering our sovereign state and nation? Many of us wouldn't be here. Plus we'd have missed out on great builders, hard workers, and terrific pizza . . . And one more thing, Mr. Rossetti . . . Not only would we Vermonters have missed out on this rich heritage had we booted out all those Italians, we wouldn't have you here today to keep us all on our toes . . . I'm serious. Mr. Rossetti is passionate about his country. Whether or not we share his ideas, we would do well to learn that much from him . . . But the bottom line is that this country, and particularly this state, were built by people who gave up everything in search of a better life, not just for themselves, but for their families. Their blood, sweat, and tears formed this great nation. (190-91)

Here, the school teacher emphasizes the fact that Vermont and the United States have been shaped by migration processes. Thus, rather than seeing places as homogeneous entities that must be maintained pure in the face of globalization, Mr. Bicknell suggests that Vermont and the United States have to be seen as constructed

out of social relations that stretch well beyond these two places, a view that echoes Doreen Massey's notion of a progressive, outward looking "global sense of place" (1994). This concept denotes a way to "hold on to that notion of geographical difference, of uniqueness, even of rootedness if people want that, without being reactionary" (1994, 5). Such an outlook acknowledges difference and "includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local" (1994, 7). By this, Massey suggests that what gives place its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is formed out of a particular constellation of relations that are never local. Thereby, she imagines a more dialogic and dynamic relationship between the global and the local, destabilizing the matter-of-factness of the binary. By seeing Vermont and the United States in this light, Mr. Bicknell is inviting the attendees to challenge the self-evidence of dualistic thinking about place as well as the seemingly 'natural' relationship between identity and location. This outward and extroverted view on places goes in line with his famous statement "we are all citizens of one planet, indivisible with liberty and justice for all" (72), which he usually repeats in his lectures. Thus, he thinks that people are connected, like an intricate spiderweb, on account of which they owe each other help to build a life according to the fundamental rights of freedom, equality, and well-being. Drawing on this globalist ethic, then, he urges the meeting attendees to respect and help immigrants secure their right to a better life, while also praising Mr. Rossetti's love for his country, thus showing that cosmopolitanism and patriotism can be considered mutually inclusive aspects.

Importantly, these two modes of thought and action have often been regarded as defending competing claims. Martha C. Nussbaum's essay "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism," which opens the edited collection *For Love of Country?: Debating the Limits of Patriotism* (1996), addresses these tensions. Here, she wishes

to expose young Americans to cosmopolitan values during their formal education in order to counter what she considers to be “an emphasis on patriotic pride [which] is both morally dangerous and, ultimately, subversive of the worthy goals patriotism sets out to serve” (1996, 4). Among these patriotic goals are the moral ideals of justice and equality” (1996, 4). Her essay goes on to argue that these ideals “would be better served by . . . the very old ideal of the cosmopolitan, the person whose alliances is to the worldwide community of human beings” (1996, 4). Such stark contrast between both approaches is not evoked in Bicknell’s speech, but I contend that, in reprimanding Mr. Rossetti for his racism against immigrants, he is in fact opposing the dangerous form of patriotic pride referred to by Nussbaum –an exacerbated devotion epitomized nowadays by President Donald Trump. What this teacher does, I believe, is advocating for a form of patriotism that does not implicate the rejection of the culturally different other; that is, a way of loving one’s country that is compatible with the ethics of respect and responsibility that critical cosmopolitanism entails. These globalist lessons have indeed a strong impact on the people at the meeting, as they reposition themselves in favor of undocumented immigrants, who go from being criminals to becoming crucial agents of historical progress. These views also have a profound effect on Tyler, who passes a note to Mari expressing the following: “*Thank you for helping save our farm*” (191; emphasis in the original). This reaction demonstrates that he no longer views immigrants as criminals, but as valuable and hard-working people who contribute to building Vermont and the United States, thus putting forward a more fluid conceptualization of places.

The female protagonist also internalizes the cosmopolitan lessons taught by Mr. Bicknell, as she is gradually able to see herself as belonging to the world despite the constant threats of deportation. Besides, she comes to embrace the globalist ethic referred to in this section, as she becomes more determined to defend her own rights

and help others preserve theirs. Proof of this is the letter she writes to the President of the United States to demand fair treatment for her and her family:

Please, Mr. President, let it be okay for my father and uncles to stay here helping this nice family and helping our own family back home buy the things they need. Every week, my father and his brothers each contribute forty dollars to send to our family in Mexico. This total is more than their father used to make in a whole month. He was a farmer, working from sunrise to sunset . . . But the companies that buy corn and coffee did not pay enough for him to be able to even buy the stuff he needed for the next planting. I know this must seem like an untruth because coffee costs so much in this country . . . A big cup [is] almost two dollars! Mr. President, please believe me that those two dollars are not reaching my family. In fact, as Tío Armando says, we have come north to collect what is owed to us for our hard work back where we came from. (60-61)

Mari points towards the hegemonic relations of power that allow the United States to take advantage of countries that are confronting poverty, overpopulation, and other difficult scenarios. In so doing, she is somehow stating that her family's decision to move to the United States is part of a structural imbalance of power that permits that some countries are exploited by others. Such declaration is not strictly articulated in these terms, but at least allows readers to see that the host nation is clearly implicated in the unfair situation she is denouncing. The same can be said about Mr. Bicknell's speech. I argue that his allegation does not address directly the unequal relations of power that place Mexico in a disadvantaged position within the global economy, a marginal status that the United States helps to create and perpetuate. Notwithstanding this shortcoming, he voices an effective critique of the socio-spatial boundaries that are set for immigrants in a society that has ironically relied on them since its foundation. In fact, we have seen that this novel refuses to

adopt an emphatic but uncritical position towards the complex situation at issue here, inviting people to become agents of change who can make a difference.

In the letter above, the female protagonist is asking the President to reverse the unfair situation she is speaking out against; however, the fact that she cannot send this document for fear that the border patrol could trace her family to their address in Vermont does not allow her to effect much transformation. She acts differently when it comes to the diary in which she registers all her feelings and thoughts about the injustices that have happened to her family ever since they migrated to the United States: “So I’m going to write down exactly what happened. If I am finally taken away to jail, I will leave you, dear Diary, to tell the world the whole truth of what we have been through” (265). In this way, she seeks to raise awareness about the abuse of immigrants’ rights and thus open the door for possible changes in this respect. This particular decision is made after her parents are unfairly arrested as part of the Operation “Return to Sender.” Mari’s mother, who reappears after being missing for most part of the story, is taken to prison because of an alleged relationship between her and the smugglers who abducted her in the Mexico-U.S. border. On the other hand, Mr. Cruz is imprisoned for confronting the border patrol agents when they were arresting his wife for a crime she did not commit. At issue here is a problematic situation that stems from the increasing militarization of the Mexico-U.S. border, which has become a very vulnerable place for undocumented immigrants, especially for women, who are usually abducted and raped by *coyotes* (human smugglers) (Falcón 2007; O’Leary 2012). These crimes result from Mexican women’s increasing reliance on the service of smugglers to cross into the United States without authorization, a situation that is ultimately triggered by the escalation of border enforcement (Falcón 2007; O’Leary 2012). More precisely, far from detaining illegal immigration, the growing militarization of the border after 9/11 has led immigrants to resort to the services of smugglers and traffickers who, insofar as they

have exclusive control over the people who have paid them to go North, often gain access to the bodies of women. In this regard, the United Nations estimates that 70 percent of women and young girls who cross the border unaccompanied are sexually abused in some way (in Beck 2012, 118). Sadly enough, these horrendous crimes are often marked in the physical terrain through what is known as “rape trees,” which refer to the practice of hanging women’s bras and underwear in trees as a trophy or a sign of conquest (Vanderboegh 2005).

Mari’s mother has been a victim of this violent situation. On her way back to reunite with her family in the U.S., she and the *coyote* who accompanied her got held up by another gang of *coyotes*, whose leader turned her into a slave, keeping her separate from her husband and daughters for more than a year. Rape is not explicitly acknowledged, but hinted at on several occasions throughout the story. The first hint unfolds upon reuniting with Mari in Washington D.C., where she is released by her captors:

“He forced me to be his... servant,” she said, choosing each word carefully.

“I had to cook for him and take care of his clothes and do whatever he told me. He threatened that if I tried to run away, not only would he find me and kill me, but he would track down my family and do the same to them.” (239)

It could be argued that Mrs. Cruz chooses not to go into every detail of the abusive situation she endured because she does not want her twelve-year old daughter to become acquainted with that reality. Such secrecy is also perceived by Tyler when Mrs. Cruz is taken to Vermont: “But according to Mari, the stories Mrs. Cruz has been telling her husband about her captivity must be truly awful, because Mari is not allowed to even know what they are. ‘I hear them sometimes at night in the kitchen –my mother talking and crying, and my father crying right along’” (251). In relation to this matter, my contention is that, because this text is aimed at young audiences, Alvarez chooses to soften or fail to be very explicit about the gruesome

atrocities that can happen to undocumented women when crossing into the United States. Yet, the quotations above and the constant references to Mrs. Cruz's terrible physical and psychological state (reflected in her missing teeth, bruises, anxiety, and panic attacks) allows the protagonists and readers to catch a glimpse of the trauma she went through while held captive.

As suggested earlier, Mrs. Cruz undergoes another traumatic experience when she is arrested for an alleged relationship between her and the smugglers who abused her. Instead of considering her the victim she really is, the border patrol believes her to be another smuggler of the gang, a mistake that infuriates Mr. Cruz, who cannot help but lose his nerves and hit one of the officers. Thereby, the couple ends up in jail, which leads the Paquettes to take Mari and her sisters to another place in order to prevent the female protagonist from being apprehended by the border patrol. Paradoxically, the refuge chosen to keep the girls safe is Mr. Rossetti's home. Mr. Bicknell's speech and the old man's subsequent relationship with the protagonists make him reposition himself in favor of undocumented workers and their families, changing his previous racist ideas for a commitment to help The Cruces build a life in America. Mari is indeed aware of Mr. Rossetti's change of attitude, but knows that that is not enough to change her family's complicated situation. For this reason, and driven once again by the cosmopolitan lessons she has learned over the past year, she decides to take further action. Very importantly, this time her determination to act goes beyond stating her problems and demands in a diary for everyone to read, but is extended to include real actions performed in real places. Thus, she goes to the Homeland Security Office to defend her parents' rights, an action she performs with the help of Tyler. The female protagonist tells the clerk at the Office everything related to her mother's abduction and argues that, because of their illegal status, her father could not report her mother's disappearance, thus drawing attention to the lack of protection for immigrants. Her determination to tell their real story contributes to

releasing her parents from prison. However, she cannot prevent all the family from being deported to Mexico.

Important considerations can be made here. First, it has to be noted that the protagonists join forces to get Mari's parents out of prison, forming an alliance across differences for purposes of social justice. This coalitional and transformational impetus is the main defining feature of Anzaldúa's theory-praxis of "spiritual activism" and Chela Sandoval's "methodology of the oppressed." These expressions of decolonial thinking and doing, which are presented as modes of global healing and liberation of violence, recognize differences, but insist on affinities as catalysts for transformation (Sandoval 2000; Anzaldúa 2002a; 2015; Keating 2006). What unites agents of change is, according to these thinkers, the principle of love; that is, their willingness to transform the status quo and reverse their so-called deviation from the dominant culture (Sandoval 1991; 2000; Anzaldúa 2002a; 2015; Keating 2006). This common context of struggle allows actors to rally across their differences and build a space of struggle for the sake of social transformation, moving beyond hierarchical and exclusivist identity positioning (Sandoval 1991; 2000; Anzaldúa 2002a; 2015; Keating 2006). Having said that, it can be argued that Mari and Tyler's wish to disrupt the power structures that consider The Cruces to be criminal aliens prompts them to leave their different cultural identities aside and build alliances among themselves. In addition, another aspect that unites the protagonists in their struggle is their subaltern position as children in a global context in which they never have a say, an unfair state of affairs that is acknowledged and lamented by Tyler when telling Mari that he wishes her to stay in the United States: "It would be a better nation with you in it. If only this country would listen to its kids" (283). These unfair circumstances, then, motivate the formation of their alliance. This coalition is partially effective, for it is successful in getting Mari's parents out of prison, but not in allowing them to stay in the country that has been their home for the past years.

Secondly, it is worth noting that this coalitional and transformational effort necessitates Mari's change of attitude with regard to her illegal status to be successful. While this lack of legal privilege is initially a source of shame for her, she gradually learns to see this status as deprived from such negative connotations. This is especially evident after her parents are sent to jail, specifically when The Paquettes decide not to tell Ms. Ramírez that Mari is not an American citizen: "Honestly, I don't know why it has to be such a secret that I was born in Mexico" (276-277). This different outlook contributes to her coming out to defend her family's rights at the Homeland Security Office. This felt need to assert one's identity in a context where hiding in the shadows has become the norm is the strategy that comes to define the DREAMers social movement (Nicholls 2013, 121). Thus, asserting one's undocumented status is seen as a way to one's existence as rights bearing human beings.

The letters Mari and Tyler exchange following deportation demonstrate that they have managed to resolve their inner conflicts. They think of themselves "not just [as] patriots of a country, but citizens of a planet" (317), meaning that their acceptance of world citizenship is compatible with other levels of identity and community. Tyler considers himself to be Vermonter and American, while Mari states that she has two homes, one in Las Margaritas and one in "a special farm in the rolling hills of Vermont" (314). This illustrates what sociologist Ulrich Beck names "transnational place polygamy," a process by which individuals in a globalized world become attached to "several places at once, belonging in different worlds" through a process of cultural mixing, adaptation and the globalization of biography (2000, 73). From this perspective, then, "identity is complex and multiple," and hence "multi-placed, multi-scaled and multilayered forms of identification" are possible (Molz 2000, 520). Importantly, their different place-identities are far from being homogeneous and exclusive. Instead these are viewed as being shaped by their global

connections as much as by their local character, a conceptualization in accordance with Massey's notion of a progressive, global sense of place, which views places as dynamic, in process, and inclusive. On the other hand, Mari and Tyler's self-definition as global citizens is based on the interconnections that bind people together in pursuit of justice and equality for all. Nonetheless, even if their model of global citizenship views rights as dependent on membership in humanity, they know that Mari will not be able to claim place-rights in America unless she does it legally, thus concluding that the granting of rights will still be up to the nation in question.

At this point then, it could be said that *Return to Sender* features two empowered and empowering children characters that successfully navigate through the contradictory positions that coexist in a global era. This chapter shows that they overcome these challenges by engaging with a globalist ethic that fiercely contests traditional notions of identities that exclude people from the possibility of belonging and enjoying the most basic rights. In addition, their commitment to social justice is not limited to the discursive level, but is manifested in specific material changes they trigger, the most obvious example being that of Mr. and Mrs. Cruz's release from prison. Despite this potentiality for contestation and transformation, I argue that Mari's final deportation illustrates the still low level of practicality that critical cosmopolitanism has in the current period of global coloniality. In this regard, as Ulrich Beck argues in "The Cosmopolitan Society and its Enemies" (2002, 37), nationalism represents the major obstacle to cosmopolitan efforts, as Alvarez rightly shows when picturing Mari's inability to stay in the country where she has been brought up. However, I believe that these difficulties should not lead us to dismiss these utopian paradigms, for they allow us to develop a critical view of the world and open the way for a more inclusive society.