

Article Title: “MAY THE CIRCLE BE UNBROKEN”: LOOKING AT THE RELATIONS BETWEEN SELF, OTHER AND THE WORLD FROM A CRITICAL COSMOPOLITAN OUTLOOK IN JULIA ALVAREZ’S *FINDING MIRACLES*

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Abstract: This article analyzes the critical cosmopolitan discourse that permeates Julia Alvarez’s *Finding Miracles* so as to better understand the relations between self, other, and the world that are spotlighted in the text. In this young adult novel, Alvarez follows the self-discovery journey of Milly, a Latin American adoptee raised in Vermont, focusing on her evolution from an uncommitted girl to a critical reflective and socially responsible individual. This transformation begins when Pablo, a refugee from her birth country, settles in Vermont, which instills in the protagonist fears about her place in the world. To illustrate this evolution, this paper starts by examining the relation between strangers, embodiment, and place depicted in the first part of the novel. Thus, attention is paid to the anxieties triggered by Pablo’s status as stranger in the US. Drawing on critical cosmopolitan scholarship, this paper moves on to explore how Milly’s dialogical encounters with Pablo open a space of love and decoloniality that defies colonial structures, engendering in turn new ways of thinking about herself, others, and the world. Finally, this article argues that young adult novels like this enable the development of a young readership that can critically reflect upon social, cultural, and political issues.

Keywords: critical cosmopolitanism; young adult literature; Latin America; stranger; decoloniality.

Fighting Global Coloniality in Young Adult Literature by Latinx Writers

In her review article on Latinx children’s literature, Mary Pat Brady (2013) argues that Latinx young adult literature fills up a representation gap on the issue of Latinx youth.¹ She contends that, unlike most Latinx children’s texts, which tend to “emphasize extended, heteronormative, happy families and the broad-spirited facility of Spanglish,” Latinx young adult literature leaves greater room for exploring difficult and challenging experiences that shape the lives of many Latinx youngsters; for instance, migration, identity confusion, sexism, and racism (2013, 380). The incorporation of these themes in young adult fiction has major implications for readers as well as authors. On the one hand, since many Latinx adolescents must navigate the perils of oppression and

¹ The ethnic label “Latinx” is used in this paper to refer to people of Latin American ancestry born and/or raised in the United States.

marginalization, depicting these vexing issues means engaging with more culturally and historically accurate representations that may speak to a wide array of teenage readers (Aldama 2018; Fernández-García 2020). It is important to note in this respect, however, that authors must often juggle accuracy with the characteristics of their intended audience. Thus, they frequently realize that their implied teenage readers force them to be careful about what their characters say and perceive, choosing to cover explicit details of traumatic experiences and plant the seeds of hope. A hopeful tone—which is truly integral to young adult literature—is in fact ultimately conveyed to counterbalance the depiction of difficult situations, enabling readers to find pathways of looking into a possible brighter future (McDonough and Wagner 2016; Beyer 2020). Despite these implied demands to soften the darkest realities, critics argue that most Latinx young adult texts push readers to critically reflect upon the racialized, capitalist, and gender hierarchies that shape the characters’ quotidian dangers, foregrounding the continuity of the past colonial experience within present-day global racial structures (see Brady 2013; Aldama 2018; Fernández-García 2020). In other words, this type of literature scrutinizes what decolonial scholars come to designate as “global coloniality” (see Quijano 2000; Grosfoguel 2002; Mignolo 2011), serving a didactic purpose in fostering critical thinking skills among adolescents.²

This trend is exemplified by Julia Alvarez’s latest young adult novels, which include *Before We Were Free* (2002), *Finding Miracles* (2004), and *Return to Sender* (2009). Despite remaining understudied in literary scholarship, several critics have pointed out, in more or less explicit ways, the role of these texts in exposing and interrogating the colonial structures underlying the displacement of Latin American political exiles, war refugees, and migrant workers (see Martínez 2013; Brochin and Medina 2015; Fernández-García 2020). This paper examines *Finding Miracles*, which has received the least attention of all. Situated in a context of social upheaval, this novel follows the self-discovery journey of Milly Kaufman, a girl who was adopted from a Spanish-speaking, war-torn country when her American parents were working in the Peace Corps. Susana S. Martínez’s “Patriots and Citizens of the Planet: Friendship and Geopolitics in Julia Alvarez’s Young Adult Fiction” (2013) is the only academic piece of writing dealing with this narrative. In it, Martínez offers a very brief analysis of how the geopolitical borders of the American hemisphere are challenged by portraying characters connecting with others across differences. While these questions will not be absent from my discussion, the focus of this paper is placed on other issues. In the pages that follow, I will analyze the discourse of critical cosmopolitanism that permeates *Finding Miracles* so as to better understand the relations between self, other, and the world that are spotlighted in the text. Special attention will be paid to how Milly’s fears of the othered stranger and unawareness of the transnational dimensions of local settings change into a more empathic and socially responsible attitude towards both close and distant others. In this sense, this paper also looks into how this process of self-discovery opens up a space

² Decolonial and border thinking is a paradigm developed by Latin American and Latinx scholars to call into question the mythology of the so-called decolonization of the world. Thus, as suggested above, “global coloniality” denotes the logic of power that continues to establish firm divisions between European/Euro-American peoples and non-European peoples.

of love and decoloniality that exposes and dismantles the colonial structures underpinning contemporary US enactments of imperial violence in Latin America, namely, racism, gendered violence, and the lack of knowledge about the cultural other.

The following sections conduct an analysis that can contribute to literary criticism on Julia Alvarez's *Finding Miracles* as well as to research on the social construction of difference and the paradigm of critical cosmopolitanism. Thus, the second section draws mostly on Sara Ahmed's work on the cultural construction of emotions and difference to examine Milly's initial rejection of Pablo Bolívar, a fifteen-year-old Latin American refugee who settles in the city of Burlington, Vermont. In this regard, attention is paid to the anxieties triggered by the boy's status as a stranger in the US. These seemingly clear-cut demarcations between self and other, insider and outsider, are problematized in the fourth section, which concentrates on the critical cosmopolitan dialogue that takes place between Milly and Pablo. This plural and dialogic encounter will be analyzed through the lens of a critical cosmopolitan framework built upon the works of Gerard Delanty, Tammy Birk, Anjana Raghavan and other important cosmopolitan theorists. All this will pave the way for the development of a readership and a literary culture among young people that can critically reflect upon social, cultural, and political issues.

Strange Encounters: Fear, Difference, and Belonging

Set at the beginning of the 2000s, *Finding Miracles* opens with Milly's difficulty to do a self-knowledge activity at school. This inability stems from her failure to acknowledge her roots. In this sense, she feels estranged from the unnamed war-torn Latin American country where she was born, keeping her adoption hidden from others.³ At the same time, she cannot help but feel different from her adoptive US-born siblings. This existential anxiety acts as an acute stressor that causes her hands to itch terribly, a skin condition that she renames as an "allergy to herself" in the novel's opening chapter. These anxiety-related problems become even more severe when The Bolívars, a family of refugees from her birth country, move to Burlington. Their arrival in the city throws her into a state of fear and confusion that will eventually make her reconsider her ties to both the United States and her birth country.

The very first signs of this uneasy process of relocation become apparent on Pablo's first day at Ralston High. Milly seems not to care much about the new student until the teacher mentions Pablo's country of origin: "But then Mr. Barstow said something that made my hands begin to itch and my face darken with self-consciousness . . . Besides Em, I hadn't told anyone in this room that it [Pablo's homeland] was the place where I came from, too" (Alvarez 2004, 7-8). Learning that Pablo comes from her birth country serves, in fact, as an anxiety trigger that causes a rash on her hands, giving way

³ As the author explains in "In Her Own Words: A Conversation with Julia Alvarez," a section which follows the reader's guide to *Finding Miracles*, Milly's birth country is left unnamed to underscore the fact that throughout the second half of the twentieth century, Latin America was rife with US-supported dictatorships and civil wars (2004, 275). To put it differently, by not specifying the country, Alvarez encourages readers to reflect on how pervasive this situation was in the American hemisphere.

to a sense of discomfort that is projected onto the new student, whom she identifies as a stranger: “I didn’t want people pushing me to be friends with a stranger just because we’d been born in the same country” (2004, 26). Pablo’s othered status is further reinforced by setting him against her perceived superior Americanness: “Even though we were both from the same country, we had nothing obvious in common. We didn’t look at all alike . . . The point is: I totally pass as 100 percent American, and as un-PC as this is going to sound, I’m really glad” (2004, 12). Visible difference is therefore a signifier of strange(r)ness for Milly: “He *was* good looking, in a way you don’t see around Ralston, dark and foreign, out of place” (2004, 10; original emphasis). However, even if the protagonist’s labelling of Pablo as a stranger seems to be mainly a visual matter that manifests itself in the very moment of encounter, I shall argue that this identification uncovers broader historical and political processes that are decisive in the production of the stranger.

Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-coloniality* (2000, 7-10), it can be contended that the recognition of Pablo as a stranger is tied up with histories of previous meetings and experiences between “us” and “them” attached to that moment of recognition. This means that Pablo is recognized not as someone unknown to Milly, but as already constructed as *different* by colonial structures that divide the world into a hierarchy of superior and inferior people. This allows us to question the assumption that we can have an ontology of strangers: that it is possible for anyone to be a stranger (unknown), because strangers are *presumed known* via ideas that circulate in the media, policy, and culture. Ahmed argues that such production of differences should be “understood through thinking about the role of everyday encounters in the forming of social space . . . Such differences are then not to be found *on the bodies of others*, but are determined through encounters between others; they are impossible to grasp in the present” (2000, 9; original emphasis). Ahmed’s concept of the stranger as always already socially produced foregrounds the historicity and materiality of social relations embedded in the imagery, challenging simplistic notions of visible difference. To accept the figure of the stranger as simply present conceals the antagonistic relations that produce the stranger as a figure in the first place, and how “the stranger” comes into being through the “marking out” of space, bodies, and terrains of knowledge. Recognition cannot be based on the very present encounter, but on perceptions that have been built up over time as to who has the authority to be in a specific place. Thus, Milly’s recognition of Pablo as a stranger can be accounted for by paying attention to ideologies of white supremacy and processes of racialization that have shaped the United States since colonial times. These power structures deem Anglo-Americans to be the true inhabitants of the nation, while categorizing other ethnic groups as nonwhite and non-American (Pérez Huber et al. 2008). In particular, Latinxs have been regarded as dangerous others since the United States needed to justify its territorial designs on the US Southwest, which culminated in the Mexican American war (Bender 2003; Rodríguez Domínguez 2005). These racial schemas, which perpetuate themselves through prejudices and stereotypes, set conditions for the discrimination of Latinxs in the United States. This long-formed imagery takes hold in Milly, urging her to recognize the refugee boy as an unreliable and unwanted stranger.

Other than serving as identity descriptors, histories of previous meetings and experiences between Anglo-Americans and Latinxs demarcate socio-spatial boundaries between the two teenagers on the one hand and the US and Latin America on the other. These historical and political processes push Milly to draw physical and metaphorical lines between her and Pablo, giving way to the exclusion and rejection of the latter. Fear and the lack of knowledge about the cultural other, two by-products of these colonial processes, play a fundamental role in keeping these exclusionary dynamics going. As Ahmed argues in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, fear depends on fantasies that involve the prospect of injury or getting hurt: “The object that we fear is not simply before us, or in front of us, but impresses upon us in the present, as an anticipated pain in the future” (2004, 65). In Milly’s case, what appears to be the anticipated injury is the idea that Pablo may reveal her own strange(r)ness as a Latin American-born girl in the US community where she has ever lived, endangering her identity as an American. Desperate for a deeper sense of belonging, the protagonist feels that building a relationship with Pablo will push her away from the US community in which she struggles to find her place. These fantasies serve to identify the refugee boy as a fearsome and “polluted” stranger in the eyes of Milly. In other words, these delusions render Pablo as an undesirable being that may pass on his own strange(r)ness to the protagonist, equating the boy to a disease-ridden person. As David Sibley notes in *Geographies of Exclusion: Society and Difference in the West*, the metaphor of the disease and the fear of contagion have been repeatedly used to signal the threat social groups judged as abject (e.g., ethnic minorities) pose to the purity and stability of the dominant society, providing a perfect pretext for building walls: “The fear of infection leads to the erection of boundaries to resist the spread of the diseased, polluted others”, leading to measures that will attempt to locate these polluted others “elsewhere” (2002, 25). Milly’s concerns over contagion, in fact, effect a separation between her and Pablo, arousing scorn and rejection for the latter: “*Oh please, don’t ask them over, Em*, I was thinking. Just having Pablo nearby was like shining a spotlight on a part of my life I had avoided for so long” (Alvarez 2004, 9; emphasis in the original). The protagonist’s fears of the boy prompt her to exclude him from her circle of friends, keeping her best friend Em from welcoming the newcomer into the group. The following days are characterized by similar exclusionary dynamics, which include avoidance and social distancing on the part of Milly. Thus, every time the refugee boy is around her, the protagonist looks away and comes up with an excuse to leave, seeking to distance herself from the stranger. The walls that Milly builds between herself and Pablo also involve the relegation of the boy to another environment: “Maybe he’d only be here a few weeks before his family went back or moved away” (Alvarez 2004, 10). Terrified by the perceived risk of strange(r)ness infection, Milly not only excludes Pablo, but also wishes he left Burlington for good, placing him in a completely different context.

As said earlier, fears of the stranger go hand in hand with the lack of knowledge about the cultural other, making learning and mutual understanding virtually impossible. Milly’s lack of empathy and cultural sensitivity seems rather obvious: “He [Pablo] and his family are refugees. Mr. Barstow explained about Latin America dictatorships disappearing people and stuff” (Alvarez 2004, 25). Even if the instructor wants his students to become acquainted with other realities, Milly expresses very vague ideas

about the totalitarian regimes in the area, showing little interest in the lesson and no empathy with the plight of Latin American refugees. This xenophobic attitude also unveils an understanding of Latin America as a remote, war-torn zone that has no connection whatsoever with the United States. Thereby, these two areas are completely unrelated entities in Milly's mind, leaving no room for doubts or discussions about shared history or responsibility that may bring the two areas closer.

At this point then, it can be argued that Milly and Pablo's first encounters are shaped by colonial patterns that deem the boy as a polluted and polluting stranger, urging the girl to build walls to protect herself from becoming infected with Pablo's strange(r)ness. At the same time, these power structures picture the United States as a superior nation with no apparent ties to a weak and violent Latin America. The pages that follow will analyze how these colonial hierarchies are reversed by engaging in a dialogue with a critical cosmopolitan discourse.

Destabilizing Demarcations, Finding New Selves, and Restoring Social Justice: Towards A Critical Cosmopolitan Discourse

As several of its theorists argue (Mignolo 2000; Delanty 2009; Raghavan 2017), critical cosmopolitanism emerges as a reaction against traditional cosmopolitanism, or universal or unmodified cosmopolitanism. Far from being understood now as the privileged perspective of a mobile, rootless elite, this approach is seen as the most promising modification of cosmopolitanism, since it sustains the social justice commitment of the cosmopolitan project without erasing particularity, difference, and local attachment (Birk 2016). Critical pedagogy scholar Tammy 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)

In addition to putting forward a sense of planetary interconnectedness that destabilizes the matter-of-factness of binaries, this discourse involves a critical and dialogic encounter with those that have been "othered" by the Eurocentric, imperialistic, and racist discourses of global coloniality. Thereby, rather than conveying an ethnocentric, depoliticized, and paternalistic bias that trivializes difference, critical cosmopolitanism underscores the moral obligation to learn from the other and critically analyze the power structures that place this figure in a disadvantageous position. As Ulrich Beck holds in "The Cosmopolitan Society and its Enemies" (2002), this involves the questioning of the power structures that give way to oppressive circumstances, thus opening the door for social transformation.

I argue that this disposition of openness and involvement with others play a crucial role in Milly's path to maturation. Her initial hostility towards Pablo is gradually replaced by a more empathic and socially responsible attitude, which allows her to ultimately

reshape the way she relates to herself, others, and the world. This change in mindset can be traced to the moment when she learns about everything the Bolívars have been going through since a civil war erupted in their country, abandoning her fears for a more sensitive posture towards those she had identified as strangers:

“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 that jerk we once put in control.” *We* was the United States of America . . . We had helped some general to take over or start a civil war or something. I never can keep all the countries in the world connected through their stories . . . I felt even worse about rejecting Pablo now that I knew what he and his family had been going through. (Alvarez 2004, 49-50; emphasis in the original)

The protagonist learns about the gruesome reality of war in Pablo’s homeland – execution, torture, kidnapping, and destruction–, a reality that prompted him and his family to migrate to the United States. These lessons give way to a process of self-reflexivity that is foundational to a critical cosmopolitan discourse. As its name suggests, this process denotes the “capacity to critically examine and reflect upon one’s habits of thought and feeling” (Birk 2016, 46). It entails, then, the humility to examine cultural predispositions and stereotyping behaviors towards cultural others. This critical thinking exercise is apparent when Milly reflects on how insensitive she has been to a refugee boy in deep pain. She realizes that in her view of herself and the US as clear-cut entities that need to be protected from others, she has been blind to the plight of a family of refugees who fled their country in search of safety and opportunity.

Significantly, this reflection is not limited to recognizing her own prejudices and Pablo’s suffering. As much scholarship on critical cosmopolitan education sustains (Jefferess 2012; Birk 2016; Pashby 2016), a mere acknowledgement of the suffering of others tends to reproduce depoliticized and paternalistic approaches that trivialize difference, leaving hierarchies of power unquestioned. Milly’s reflection, by contrast, provides a critique of what geographer Doreen Massey (1993) has termed “power geometries,” that is, the unevenness within which individuals and groups are positioned in relation to flows and interconnections. This occurs when she points towards the structural imbalance that exists between the United States and her birth country. In this sense, she acknowledges the former’s responsibility in the violent conflicts that shake the latter, allowing readers to see that the horrific reality at stake here is not just a Latin American issue. In so doing, she tackles the question of US interventionism in Latin America, foregrounding the United States’ position as a colonizing hegemon. As mentioned earlier, these colonial relations created conditions for the emergence of US-sponsored Latin American dictatorships during the second half of the twentieth century. The establishment of these regimes fell within the strategy of US imperialism at the end of World War II. In the ideological context of the cold war, and fearing the spread of communism after the triumph of the Cuban revolution, the United States sought to tighten and consolidate its control over Latin America. Thus, the former provided itself with justification for both direct military intervention and more or less covert political

manipulation, backing a series of right-wing dictatorships that could suffocate leftist popular movements. Because this novel is aimed at young audiences, Milly does not delve into these questions, expressing as a result a rather mild and superficial critique of American geopolitics. However, she at least highlights the United States' part in the displacement of many Latin American refugees, turning some of her previous misconceptions upside down. On the one hand, she comes to see the United States and Latin America as interconnected territories, emphasizing links over space boundness. This realization conveys a view of these settings in accordance with Doreen Massey's notion of "a global sense of place" (1994, 2005). This notion establishes that the character of a place derives from historical and current participation in multiple processes and social relations with "the wider world" (Massey 1994, 155-156). In other words, one cannot explain locality or place only by looking inside it, or outside it; the "out there" and "in here" matter together and are dialectically interwoven, a view that helps to dissolve the local/global binary. The United States and Latin America come to be perceived in this light; that is, as places made out of social relations that link them to other parts of the world, following one of the main tenets of critical cosmopolitanism. As seen earlier, this reconceptualization goes parallel to a socially responsible attitude that, other than humanizing strangers, interrogates and displaces colonial structures of power, paving the path for social change.

This critical thinking exercise urges Milly to get closer to Pablo and establish bonds of friendship with him. In this relationship, understanding and mutual learning are the main guiding principles. Thus, the two teenagers show a commitment to learn more about each other's context, a learning process that takes language as the principal point of departure. On the one hand, Pablo asks Milly to teach him English to better navigate the US society, whereas the protagonist gets Spanish lessons in return, an exchange that allows her to reconnect with her birth country. In helping each other to master a second language and its cultural system, Milly sees how what she thought were rigid boundaries are now destabilized: "But that's because it's not your native language... My voice kind of petered out towards the end. I mean, was English technically my native language? Mom and Dad hadn't brought me to the United States until I was almost one year old" (Alvarez 2004, 68). Milly's reconnection with her country of origin makes her wonder whether English is her native language, opening an in-between space for the questioning of borders. This destabilization of demarcations can be understood in the light of Gloria Anzaldúa's *mestiza* consciousness and *nepantla* (1987, 2002a, 2002b, 2015), two concepts that have affinities with the discourse of critical cosmopolitanism in that they aim to critically interrogate the oppressive, oppositional binary structures of Western thought. Credited with opening the trajectory of decolonial and border thinking, Anzaldúa develops these theoretical tools to problematize the many borders and binaries that oppress the Chicana lesbian. The *mestiza* consciousness designates a multiplicity of identities that mingle and collide in the self, contradicting each other and standing in relations of conflict and mutual influence. These intersecting identities are negotiated in a liminal or borderline space known as *nepantla*, where transformation takes place:

Bridges span liminal (threshold) spaces between worlds, spaces I call nepantla, a Nahuatl word meaning tierra entre medio. Transformation occurs in this in-

between space, an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition in space lacking clear boundaries. *Nepantla es tierra desconocida*, and living in this liminal zone means a constant state of displacement –an uncomfortable, even alarming feeling. (Anzaldúa 2002a, 1)

Nepantla is then regarded as an interstitial site of negotiation where the *mestiza* grapples with multiple power dynamics, emphasizing instability and breaking in turn with longstanding hierarchies.⁴ It can be argued that Milly embodies a *mestiza* consciousness when negotiating and reconstructing her identity alongside conflicting language systems, complicating notions of native and second (foreign) language. This negotiation opens a threshold position (*nepantla*) where the unity and coherence integral to cultural hierarchies are destabilized. Such transformation prompts the protagonist to see herself as culturally complex, as a girl who no longer fits into rigid categorizations of Americanness. In doing so, she debunks the either/or parameters upon which the exclusion of difference is founded, a crucial step for the decolonization of otherness.

Language lessons coexist with conversations about the culture and history of “*el paisito*,” a designation the Bolívars use to refer to their homeland. These intercultural encounters serve the protagonist to gradually depart from xenophobic attitudes and embrace another cultural world that makes her reconsider who she is. A major turning point in her development occurs when she decides to go to her birth country to find out more about her adoption, finally coming to terms with a part of herself that she had always struggled to contain. She accompanies the Bolívars to *el paisito* just after the country has been liberated. Upon arrival there, they find a recovering nation that is still grieving the many losses that occurred during the war, including that of Pablo’s uncle, Daniel, who was murdered for publishing articles against the dictatorship. One of the first experiences that Milly goes through in *el paisito* is in fact her participation in Daniel’s memorial ceremony. Although the Bolívars do not want her guest to take part in such a sad event, Milly insists on attending: “I never in my life thought that I’d be part of anything this sad. But I didn’t want to be an overprotected American wimp about it. Especially when I thought about what Dad had said, how our government had partly caused some of this tragedy” (Alvarez 2004, 185). Driven by the imperative to acknowledge the United States’ responsibility in such heinous crimes, the protagonist refuses to act as an unconcerned American tourist who could not care less about the US-inflicted misery in *el paisito*. Instead, she is determined to witness some of the terrible consequences of the US-sponsored military dictatorship and subsequent civil war. Her stay in her country of origin is indeed characterized by constant ponderings about power geometries, reflections that make her aware of her privileges as a US national raised in a middle-class Anglo-American family: “Murders, disappearances, suicides. Suddenly, I felt spoiled, getting all upset about my parents. ‘My stuff is so stupid, compared’” (Alvarez 2004, 176). Such reflection shows how privilege is located on the same map as the suffering of others,

⁴ This subversive potential should not lead us to see the *mestiza* consciousness as giving way to a threshold position free from chaos, anxiety, and confusion, a contention that Anzaldúa seems to support in several of her works (2002a, 2002b, 2015). It must be borne in mind that *nepantla* often represents a painful process of negotiation that stems from the individual’s marginalization from discrete categories –Milly, in fact, experiences confusion when negotiating conflicting language systems.

challenging the uncritical commodification of difference. This critical cosmopolitan analysis is also evoked in Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), an essay on war photography that discusses the nature of armed conflicts, the limits of sympathy, and the obligations of conscience. In it, Sontag contends that in order to avoid sympathetic readings of the suffering of others that commodify the subject in pain, an analysis of privilege should come into the picture:

So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. To what extent, it can be (for all our good intentions) an impertinent –if not inappropriate– response. To set aside sympathy we extend to others beset by war and murderous politics for a reflection on how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may –in ways we might not prefer to imagine– be linked to their suffering, as the wealth of some may imply the destitution of others, is a task for which the painful, stirring images supply only an initial spark. (Sontag 2003, 102-103)

Instead of appropriating the suffering of others by expressing a sympathetic attitude towards the tragedy at stake, Milly recognizes her privilege, which is partly founded upon a structural imbalance of power that permits that *el paisito* is controlled and taken advantage of by the United States. The link between her privilege and the suffering that haunts her birth country becomes even clearer every time she meditates on the circumstances leading up to her adoption: “It’s like they’ve [Milly’s parents] benefited from someone’s tragedy. I mean, our happiness as a family comes out of somebody else having a horrible life” (Alvarez 2004, 251). The protagonist finds out that she was adopted in an orphanage for children who lost their families through war and political repression, a discovery that provokes painful thoughts. In this sense, she comes to accept that her being adopted and having a good life is possible thanks to a US-sponsored conflict that resulted in thousands of deaths, which instills in her and her parents a sense of guilt. These reflections on privilege and the pain of others let readers establish a causal relationship between the US’s position as a colonizing hegemon and the devastation found in *el paisito*, thus contesting depoliticized and uncritical understandings of the situation at hand.

Reflections on pain continue to unfold as Milly learns more about her adoption. With the help of the Bolívars, she discovers that her birth name is Milagros and that her biological parents come from the town of Los Luceros, the birthplace of the rebel leaders who fought for the freedom of the country. There dwell Dulce, Pablo’s aunt, and Doña Gloria, an old woman who keeps a memory record of everything that has happened in the town over the last decades, including births, won battles, and the horrors of war. The latter is in fact one of the few people who survived the savage attack perpetrated by US-trained national guards during the war, as Dulce explains to Milly: “‘People come to her.’ Dulce has stopped to catch her breath. ‘She has our history in her head. Thank God she was spared, or we would have lost so much of our past. Those *criminales* stopped at nothing’” (Alvarez 2004, 198). In her role as a keeper of community memories, Doña Gloria helps Milly narrow down the range of possible parents. By telling the old lady her birthdate, the protagonist gets the name of several women who delivered a baby girl around the time

she was born. Even though she is not finally able to discover which of those women is her birth mother, she learns a great deal about the place where her birth family comes from. In particular, she becomes acquainted with forms of imperial and gender violence suffered by many dwellers of Los Luceros, including Doña Gloria's family:

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 bombings 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 their 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 2004, 201-202)

Doña Gloria cannot pass on her memories to any family member because they are either dead or severely disabled as a result of war. Her daughter was killed in the bombings, while her granddaughter was brutally murdered by national guards. The rape of the latter can be read between the lines: "They did their business with my granddaughter" (Alvarez 2004, 201). Such a reading gains plausibility when looking at scholarship on gender and armed conflict. In this sense, it is contended that sexual conquest and sexual humiliation have been used as tools of war throughout history (see Skjelsbæk 2012; Cohen 2016; Baumeister 2018). Post- World War II Latin America is certainly no exception. During the civil wars that shook the area at that time, rape was used by government security forces against women in *guerrilla* groups and rebel territories, rendering rape or corporeal colonization as the ultimate war tactic (Skjelsbæk 2012; Cohen 2016). The use of rape as a weapon of war can be accounted for by considering the patriarchal notion that women serve as "symbolic markers of the nation and of the group's cultural identity" (Peterson 1998, 40). Thus, the rape of female bodies is understood within this context as a symbol of male power and conquest, as well as an attack on honor, identity, and group cohesion. Although these sexual crimes are not explicitly acknowledged by Doña Gloria—such avoidance may be dictated by Alvarez's understanding of her intended audience—the recurrent use of rape in Latin American civil wars may lead us to presume that such brutal harm was inflicted upon Doña Gloria's granddaughter and other women in the rebel town of Los Luceros. In the light of the above, it can be argued that rape allowed national guards to deprive their enemy of their honor and exercise absolute control on a rebel area, serving US imperial interests. To add to their brutality, as Doña Gloria recounts, national guards resorted to other torture methods such as amputations. In fact, they cut out her great-granddaughter's tongue, leaving her unable to speak about the massive trauma that all the community went through.

After providing these accounts of imperial and gender violence, Doña Gloria directs some words to Milly and Pablo: "'I'm counting on you,' she said. It was like she was sending us on a mission or something. 'To do what?' Pablo wanted to know. 'To bring more light,' Doña Gloria replied" (Alvarez 2004, 225). This request, which alludes to a possible brighter future, empowers the protagonist to work for social justice. This

social fairness commitment consists of building love and solidarity in ways that witness and address the traumas of epistemic, spiritual, and corporeal violence. In this regard, she sets out to write everything that has happened to her since her arrival in *el paisito*, including learning about the traumatic experiences suffered by Doña Gloria and other women: “Someday, I kept thinking, I’ve got to write them all down! . . . Just as my parents kept that box in their bedroom with my papers, I now had a memory box in my head . . . One day, when I was ready to write, I would open that box” (Alvarez 2004, 237). Opening her memory box entails disseminating the stories and life lessons she has learned in her birth country, taking over Doña Gloria’s role as a keeper of memories. This determination contrasts starkly with Milly’s past inability to talk about herself as well as her previous lack of political compromise. Now she knows that she will be able to share the experiences that have had a major impact on her since she reconnected with her birth country, while bringing to light events and memories that have been hidden from the public space deliberately as a consequence of political repression. This commitment to help Doña Gloria—and by extension all other female victims—reappropriate a transparent historical memory can be understood through the lens of corporeal cosmopolitanism, an approach that falls within the parameters of critical cosmopolitanism. This paradigm is thoroughly discussed in Anjana Raghavan’s *Towards Corporeal Cosmopolitanism: Performing Decolonial Solidarities* (2017), a study that emerges out of an interest in the affective and corporeal dimensions of subaltern people’s stories. These questions, which have been traditionally absent from liberal cosmopolitan thought, contribute to an understanding of how embodied experiences of gender violence in the context of global coloniality are crucial in the articulation of love and solidarities.

Drawing on decolonial and feminist research, sociologist Anjana Raghavan (2017) presents corporeal cosmopolitanism as linked to global coloniality and the production of otherness. In this sense, she explains that this colonial logic of racial and gender otherness precludes non-white female bodies from liberal cosmopolitan thought (2017, 44). Corporeal cosmopolitanism, on the contrary, seeks to bring into intervening existence the othered body as a site of knowing, feeling, and experience connected to the world, challenging universalizing, colonial tendencies that exclude this body from the *nomos* of humanity itself (2017, 45). Thus, it legitimizes, for example, the embodied experiences of caste-gender violence that *Dalit* women experience as an existential reality, a fact that involves processes of pain that are critical to “understanding what it means to be human, and in building solidarity” (2017, 70). The painful experiences that result from these forms of violence lead *Dalit* women to fight for female healthcare, weaving a web of love and solidarity that requires abjuring binaries on multiple levels, including religion, language, and ethnicity (2017, 47). These corporeal solidarities, Raghavan argues, are decolonial in that they not only address the complexities of global coloniality, but also challenge their effects, turning their embodied experiences of violence into valuable sites of knowing and resistance (2017, 158). Although caste-gender violence is not at the center of the novel under analysis, my contention is that Milly’s determination to help Doña Gloria share the trauma of her community can be also considered an example of corporeal cosmopolitanism. In this sense, she relies on the principle of love and the embodied experiences of gender violence narrated by the old

lady to form coalitions across lines of differentiation. Love is understood in this context as “a deeply embodied, spiritual, political practice” that channels pain and trauma into a creative and decolonial force, challenging the effects of a colonial matrix of power (Raghavan 2017, 170). Driven by this political and affective motor, Milly and Doña Gloria forge alliances, reconfiguring themselves as subjects outside binary oppositions and existing dominant relations (i.e., self/other, insider/outsider, subject/object). These corporeal solidarities are inherently decolonial because they do not stop at acknowledging colonial violence –i.e., the violation of women’s bodies to serve US imperial interests. As a matter of fact, these coalitions engage with subaltern critiques, anger, pain, and sorrow as responses to the violence and damage, seeking to record all the trauma involved. According to Raghavan, memory is crucial to turn the effects of global coloniality upside down:

The conception of cosmopolitan solidarity is impossible with a mere acknowledgment of colonial violence, which most liberal narratives are happy to do . . . The demand to *move on* is a state of amnesia, and violence; is not at all the same as the path of healing. Memory is central to healing, as is openness, repetition and the disruption of linear time and space. Trauma is a spiral, and, sometimes explosive, and corporeal articulations of cosmopolitan solidarity cannot operate in linear frameworks of progress, or moving forward. The movement can only be towards places of less fear, pain and fracture –it cannot be a movement of forgetting. (2017, 166; emphasis in the original)

As stated above, liberal demands to forget the past are in reality injunctions not to publicly recall past injustice, thus inflicting more violence on the victims. Therefore, healing can only come through the pain of remembering. Such ordeal opens up secure spaces for the expression of embodied experiences of trauma and the articulation of a subaltern critique of colonial violence, keeping alive the memory of what cannot be repeated. Significantly, this act of remembering challenges global coloniality in at least three different ways; first, by turning a painful experience into a space of reflection, critique, and healing. Second, by bringing the subaltern body into the notion of knowing as an embodied act, challenging universalizing, colonial orientations that exclude this body from the concept of humanity. Third, by rejecting exclusivist identity paradigms that sustain the antidemocratic trajectories of global coloniality. As shown earlier, these collective acts of remembrance are made possible by leaving aside differences and reject polarity thinking. The actors involved in these solidarities cast themselves out of binary oppositions, embracing the identity narrative of *nos/otras*. This paradigm, which suggests a position of being simultaneously self and other, is discussed at length in Gloria Anzaldúa’s posthumous book *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality* (2015). Presented as an alternative to the either/or model, the narrative of *nos/otras* is embraced by *nepantleras*, a term Anzaldúa uses to refer to those individuals who live amidst different cultures and power forces:⁵ “Rejecting identification with a single position, we [*nepantleras*] shift from one position to another, listening to all sides . . . The *nepantla* mind-set eliminates polarity thinking when there’s

⁵ The term *nepantlera* is used in Anzaldúa’s post-*Borderlands* work as a synonym for *mestiza*.

no inbetween, only ‘either/or’; it reinstates ‘and’” (2015, 82). Thus, in refusing to adopt an unambiguous subject position, *nepantleras* follow the paradigm of *nos/otras*, creating new stories of identity and rethinking reality in ways that challenge global coloniality.

The story ends with the protagonist making strong claims about how she relates to herself, others, and the world. As said earlier, her trip to her country of origin constitutes the main spur to refashion herself anew. There she learns about the story behind her adoption and the place where her birth family comes from, which allows her to reconnect with *el paisito*. Importantly in this regard, the suffering she witnesses in her biological parents’ hometown urges her to see that pain as somewhat linked to her own existence, empowering her to claim her birth name: “I mean, everyone who wants to can keep calling me Milly, but I’ll also answer to Milagros” (Alvarez 2004, 260). This decision, which comes after a tough learning process, goes hand in hand with the dismantling of identity boundaries. Thus, she finds herself renaming *el paisito* as her native country, while still considering the United States as her home, a negotiation exercise that breaks once again with rigid categorizations based on the exclusion of difference. What used to be a foreign land where dangerous strangers came from is gradually perceived as a place interconnected with other parts of the world. In this sense, Milly comes to see herself as the result of these interconnections, questioning in turn exclusivist paradigms that divide the world into a hierarchy of colonizers/bodies-at-home and strangers. It could be therefore contended that, like a *nepantlera*, the main character embraces the identity narrative of *nos/otras*, for she continuously reconfigures herself outside binary oppositions, doing away with polarity thinking where there is no in-between.

The final scene showcases Milly’s view of the world as an intricate web of connections that bind people together, a notion epitomized by the Native American tradition chosen to close the wedding between her grandmother and her partner Eli Strong. Milly’s grandmother, nicknamed Happy, travels to *el paisito* with her husband-to-be and the whole Kaufman family to reunite with the protagonist. Upon finding a new Milly-Milagros and witnessing a country on a path to reconstruction, Happy decides to marry Eli in order to commemorate new beginnings. The ancient tradition selected to close the ceremony consists of forming a circle and passing around a drop of blood to the person standing next in order. Just like a blood family, the attendees follow the tradition until reaching the end of the circle. Yet, in Milly’s mind, the circle extends well beyond the attendees at the ceremony:

Finally, Pablo pulls his gaze away and turns to touch his mother, who passes it on to his father, to Aunt Joan, to the cousins, then on to Riqui, Camilo, Dulce, finishing with Esperanza, –a lucky sign, I think, seeing as her name means hope. Actually, in my head the circle doesn’t stop here at all. The spark gets passed on to Em and Jake and Dylan and the kids at Ralston . . . On and on, the spark gets passed, person to person, to the tune of Alfie singing, “May the circle be unbroken,” The way I figure it, with six-billion people in our family right now, that many sparks sure could make a whole lot of light. (Alvarez 2004, 263)

The protagonist pictures a wider circle that includes the six-billion people that inhabit an increasingly interconnected world, drawing connections between a local

enclave and the global. By recalling the stanza “May the circle be unbroken,” Milly ends her interior monologue with a wish for a future in which such connections will prevail over borders and boundaries, putting an end to violence, wars, and fear.

Conclusion

At this point, then, it can be argued that Milly’s process of self-discovery opens up a space of love and decoloniality that exposes and reverses colonial power structures. In reading her personal transformation through the lens of critical cosmopolitanism, this paper has foregrounded Milly’s evolution into a more empathic and socially responsible individual. As demonstrated above, the critical and dialogic encounters she has with Pablo, Doña Gloria, and others urge her to become aware of the historical, cultural, and political networks that constitute and connect people located in several specific nations. In addition, these experiences teach her to critically reflect on and dismantle the mechanisms that perpetuate the long-standing distinctions between self and other, insider and outsider, colonizer, and colonized. In this sense, she abandons her fears of the stranger for a political commitment to help war victims better navigate the US society and share their trauma with the rest of the world, contributing to healing the wounds of colonial horror. Racism and the lack of knowledge about the cultural other are therefore substituted by an affective engagement with people from a different cultural background, weaving a web of love and solidarity that challenges the terrible effects of global coloniality.

This social justice commitment, as well as the strengthened ties that develop between Milly and *el paisito*, helps her reshape her sense of self. In this regard, she reconfigures herself out of binary oppositions, listening to all sides, while also wishing for an increasingly interconnected world where barriers will no longer stand. This rather romantic wish fulfills one of main purposes of much young adult fiction, that of projecting a sense of hope that transports young readers from a hard-anchored present to a future that involves collaboration across cultural and national boundaries. In this sense, Milly’s desire also has the potential to motivate young readers to explore, question, and learn to become something more than they are now, orientating their thoughts and actions. This link between hope and change emphasizes the didactic nature of *Finding Miracles*, a text that, other than inviting teenage readers to adopt a critical attitude towards colonial violence, may direct their future possibilities. Thus, far from being regarded as simplistic writing to be dismissed as merely entertainment, young adult narratives such as *Finding Miracles* demonstrate their significance in challenging hegemonies and educating young readers.

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