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Towards an ethics of solidarity in Pam Muñoz Ryan's *Esperanza rising and Mañanaland*¹

ANDREA FERNÁNDEZ GARCÍA*
Universidad de Oviedo (Spain)

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ethics of solidarity that pulses through Pam Muñoz Ryan's *Esperanza rising* (2000) and *Mañanaland* (2020) as a response to the inherited colonial structures that shape the characters' lifeworlds. Drawing on decolonial and postcolonial feminist frameworks, as well as Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández's three modes of solidarity –relational, transitive, and creative–(2012), this ethical orientation foregrounds the protagonists' development into socially committed and future-oriented adolescents. Through their journeys, they learn to inhabit the perspectives of others, interrogate beyond what is known, and build alliances across differences for the sake of a better future, thereby challenging the logic of coloniality. Ultimately, this paper highlights the timely contribution of these YA narratives in inviting young readers to imagine a more just and compassionate world, instilling a much-needed sense of hope in today's increasingly polarized global landscape.

KEYWORDS: Solidarity, YA literature, Pam Muñoz Ryan, decolonization, hope

***Address for correspondence:** Departamento de Filología Inglesa, Francesa y Alemana, Campus de Humanidades. Universidad de Oviedo. Calle Francisco Rodríguez García, S/N, 33011, Oviedo (España); email: fernandezgandrea@uniovi.es

1. INTRODUCTION

As literary scholar Frederick L. Aldama contends in “The Heart and Art of Latino/a Young People’s Fiction”, the last two decades have witnessed a surge of Latinx young adult literature aimed at fostering empathy and critical thinking among teenage readers (2018, p. 12). To this end, an ever-larger share of Latinx YA authors –among whom are Julia Alvarez, Guadalupe García McCall, and Daniel José Older– reject overly affirmative, glorious, and bland versions of *Latinidad* in favor of an examination of vexing themes, such as migration, identity confusion, racism, and sexism (Aldama, 2018; Boffone & Herrera, 2022; Fernández-García, 2020, 2022). This does not mean, however, that a hopeful tone—so integral to YA fiction—is out of the question for these writers. In fact, much of their literary output illustrates that fostering critical reflection, empathy, and social justice through an exploration of traumatic experiences is compatible with opening pathways to envision brighter futures (Boffone & Herrera, 2022; Fernández-García, 2022).

The coming-of-age novels *Esperanza rising* (2000) and *Mañanaland* (2020) by Chicana YA writer Pam Muñoz Ryan are examples of this trend. Situated in a context of forced displacement, gender violence, and racism, these texts feature Latinx teenage characters that develop strong social activism goals and a spirituality of emancipatory hope. *Esperanza rising*, Muñoz Ryan’s most widely known and studied novel, has received considerable critical attention for its potential to prompt reflection on racial discrimination while inspiring a sense of hope (e.g., Beck, 2013; Johnson & Gasiewicz, 2016; Rhodes, 2021). These attributes –together with its historical focus on the Great Depression and the lived experiences of Mexican migrant farm workers– have likely contributed to its widespread adoption in US classrooms, particularly in grades 4 through 7. Though less frequently discussed, *Mañanaland* has similarly been praised for its treatment of oppression and its hopeful vision for refugees and survivors of gender-based violence (Berglind, 2020; Rivera, 2020).

Despite the thematic richness and pedagogical potential of these novels, scholarly engagement with Muñoz Ryan’s fiction remains limited. This is especially surprising given how consistently her work grapples with issues of identity, injustice, and ethical responsibility –concerns that resonate deeply with Latinx YA literature and broader sociopolitical contexts. While both *Esperanza rising* and *Mañanaland* have been recognized for their critique of violence and their hopeful outlook, their role in cultivating an ethics of solidarity against the backdrop of what decolonial thinkers have come to designate as “coloniality” remains underexplored (e.g., Grosfoguel, 2002; Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2000). Born in Latinx and Latin American academic circles, decolonial and border thinking seeks to highlight the continuity of the past colonial experience into present-day global racial hierarchies. Coloniality involves, therefore, the continuation of

firm divisions between European/Euro-American peoples and non-European peoples long after the judicial colonialism has expired. This paper aims to explore the ethics of solidarity that pulses through *Esperanza rising* and *Mañanaland* as a response to these inherited colonial structures.

By offering a close, comparative reading of both novels through decolonial and postcolonial feminist frameworks, this article helps fill a critical gap in scholarship on Muñoz Ryan's work. It repositions her as a key voice within Latinx YA fiction and underscores the literary and ethical significance of her work. In particular, it highlights how the novels portray Latinx teenagers forging solidarities across difference in ways that foster relational knowledge, ethical imagination, and social and personal transformation. At a time marked by resurgent white nationalism and the alt-right – exemplified by the early months of Donald Trump's return to the Oval Office, with executive orders aimed at slamming the door on migrants and revoking birthright citizenship to children of immigrants– such narratives offer urgent counterpoints.² They invite young readers to envision more just and inclusive futures rooted in dignity, empathy, and hope.

To clarify the structure of my argument, the analysis below is divided into two sections. The first draws primarily on Sara Ahmed's work on the cultural construction of emotions and their related boundary-making processes to examine how Esperanza and Max, the main characters of *Esperanza rising* and *Mañanaland* respectively, negotiate the self/other divide in the first part of the story. Particular attention will be paid to the emotions of fear, disgust, and guilt, and to how the characters' initially individualistic responses unfold within a polarized social context. This individualist ethos, along with the seemingly rigid demarcations between self and other that the characters uphold, is critically reassessed in the second section. There, the focus shifts to Esperanza's and Max's development into caring and socially responsible teenagers. I shall argue that this transformation is enabled through their participation in relations of solidarity that challenge structural inequality and turn distressing emotions into love and hope.

This evolution will be explored through an interdisciplinary dialogue with theories of solidarity that shed light on the ethical vision at the heart of the novels. On the one hand, this paper draws on an intersectional approach to coalition-building developed by postcolonial and decolonial thinkers such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, María Lugones, and Gloria Anzaldúa. Their works offer a lens for understanding solidarity as dynamic, situated practice grounded in difference and mutual accountability. This perspective is complemented by the contributions of educator Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández, particularly his influential "Decolonization and the Pedagogy of Solidarity" (2012), in which he outlines three interrelated forms of solidarity –relational, transitive, and creative– each committed to decolonization and anti-racist critique. Reading the selected

YA novels through these frameworks not only deepens our understanding of Muñoz Ryan's literary contributions but also fosters the development of a critical readership and a literary culture that conceive of solidarity not only as a powerful tool for social and personal transformation but also as a valuable resource of hope.

2. NEGOTIATING THE SELF/OTHER DIVIDE: DISPLACEMENT, GENDER, AND SOCIAL INEQUALITIES

Conforming respectively to the genres of historical fiction and fantasy, *Esperanza rising* and *Mañanaland* depict specific contexts of social unrest rooted in colonial structures, shaping Esperanza's and Max's self-perception and their relationship with others. The former character is presented as a twelve-year-old Mexican girl living on a wealthy ranch in Aguascalientes in the 1930s. Although a decade has passed since the Mexican Revolution, resentment against large landowners like her father, Sixto Ortega— who owns acres of arable land while many peasants lack even a garden plot— remains strong. Despite Esperanza's insistence that her father has given land to many of his fieldworkers, daily life on the ranch mirrors the racial and class stratification of post-revolution Mexican society. The Ortegas, a wealthy, white elite family of Spanish descent, hold economic and political power in the region, while Alfonso, Hortensia, and Miguel, a family of Zapotec Indians who have long served them, are stuck in an immobile social location: "We were born servants and no matter how hard we work we will always be servants" (2000, p. 36). Thus, despite attempts on the part of the post-revolutionary government to forge a unified identity through the notion of *mestizaje*, colonial hierarchies of race and class persist, highlighting how coloniality and legacies of Spanish colonialism continue to shape social relations.³ This colonial schema, based on a Spanish/Indigenous binary, conditions Esperanza's worldview at this point, as she recognizes the distinct social positions occupied by her family and their Indian workers. These vast differences are made clear when the protagonist dismisses Miguel, Hortensia and Alfonso's son, as a potential suitor:

But now that she was a young woman, she understood that Miguel was the housekeeper's son and she was the ranch owner's daughter and between them ran a deep river. Esperanza stood on one side and Miguel stood on the other and the river could never be crossed. In a moment of self-importance, Esperanza had told all of this to Miguel. Since then, he had only spoken a few words to her. When their paths crossed, he nodded and said politely, "Mi reina, my queen," but nothing more. There was no teasing or laughing or talking about every little thing. Esperanza pretended not to care, though she secretly wished she had never told Miguel about the river. (2000, p. 18)

Even if Esperanza expressed an interest in Miguel during her childhood, she later realized the impossibility of an interclass –and interracial– marriage. The river metaphor is used here to represent the seemingly unbridgeable “colonial difference”, a key term in decolonial and border thinking that points to “the irreducible difference of the colonial configuration marked by the spatial articulation of power” (Yountae, 2017, p. 21). This metaphor reinforces a rigid social hierarchy that positions the white-imperial self and the dark-colonial other at opposite ends. While the protagonist experiences a moment of remorse after reminding Miguel of his supposed inferiority, her worldview remains largely intact in the immediate aftermath. She continues to perceive herself as rightfully belonging to a superior social class, one in which the Indian servants that attend to her capricious whims have no place.

Strong socio-spatial boundaries are also at the core of *Mañanaland*, which features Max, an eleven-year-old boy born to a family of bridge builders who reside in the fictional village of Santa Maria, in the country of the same name. Located “somewhere in the Américas” (2020, p. 3) in quasi-modern times,⁴ Max’s hometown served in the past as a safe space for people escaping a dictator in the nearby country of Abismo, whose name, meaning “abyss”, conjures a hellish world of suffering and terror. Caught between criminalizing discourses of migration and myth-like stories about brave guardians who helped people from Abismo escape persecution, Max grows up navigating competing discursive frames. Ortiz, his soccer teammate, voices the former set of beliefs, revealing a racist angst that is projected onto the so-called “hidden ones”, that is, migrants from Abismo who hid in Santa Maria. These people are constructed as inferior and undeserving subjects in the eyes of many citizens, including Ortiz’s family: “My parents said the hidden ones were dangerous—murderers and thieves—the worst of the worst. Why do you think they were cast out of their own country?” (2020, p. 18). Published during Trump’s first term, *Mañanaland* features several characters that echo the anti-immigrant rhetoric associated with his administration. Coincidentally, or perhaps not so coincidentally, Muñoz Ryan puts into Ortiz’s mouth the exact same designations, “murderers” and “thieves”, that Trump notoriously used to describe Mexican and Central American migrants and refugees crossing into the United States. This rhetorical echo contributes to what Zygmunt Bauman calls a “veritable ‘moral panic’”, a widespread social anxiety in which large segments of the population come to believe that some perceived evil threatens the wellbeing of society (2017, pp.1–2).⁵ This phenomenon often emerges in contexts of (im)migration crises like the one unfolding in *Mañanaland*, where fear and hostility are directed at displaced and marginalized populations.

Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s *The cultural politics of emotion*, it can be argued that this deep sense of generalized fear, which relies on colonial legacies of the construction of the racialized other, “works by establishing others as fearsome insofar as they *threaten*

to take the self in" (2004, p. 64). Thus, it is dependent on fantasies that construct the other human being as an absolute threat "not only to one's self as self, but to one's very life, to one's very existence as a separate being with a life of its own" (2004, p. 64). As seen in Ortiz's accusations, fears of the hidden ones are predicated upon the fantasy that the latter may murder the native population of Santa Maria and take away their possessions, revealing anxieties about shifting demographics. The hidden ones are thus resented as being responsible for the collapse of a familiar order and way of life, blamed for the existential insecurities, uncertainties, and disorientations that characterize periods of massive displacement of people. In short, they are seen as a source of fear, a perception that effects divisions between bodies, thus illuminating the relation between this emotion and exclusionary processes of the racialized other. Attempts to exclude the latter from Santa Maria are evident not only in Ortiz's racist rhetoric but also in the passing of the Harboring Law, which criminalizes both the hidden ones and those who assist them, effectively outlawing not just migration, but solidarity itself.

Although Max is skeptical of the damaging rumors surrounding the hidden ones, he initially shows little empathy for their plight. While he admires the bravery of fellow citizens who once aided the hidden ones secretly, this admiration does not extend to a meaningful attempt to humanize those who were helped. Instead, Max continues to view the hidden ones as distant others, revealing the imprint of an either/or logic of self and other imposed by colonial epistemologies. His inability to imagine himself in their position suggests the internalization of colonial schemas that draw rigid boundaries between the native population of Santa Maria and migrants from Abismo, boundaries that foster apathy and emotional detachment towards the latter.

The gap between Max and the hidden ones, and between Esperanza and indigenous people, begins to narrow as the characters develop a better understanding of the forms of violence driving forced displacement in their respective contexts. In Max's case, his wish to know more about the guardians leads him to a clearer comprehension of the forces that compelled the hidden ones to flee their homeland. Both his father and grandfather – referred to in the story as Papá and Buelo – are pivotal figures in this regard. Through their testimonies, Max learns of the two main forms of oppression behind the hidden ones' exile: first, a totalitarian regime that targeted not only those who "fought on the wrong side of [the] dictator" (2020, p. 70) during the civil war in Abismo, but also civilians who remained neutral; and second, a patriarchal order that subjugated women: "A different type of oppression. Countrymen fighting countrymen about what a woman could and could not do. Some of them were mothers whose families had banished them because there was no father to support them. Others wished to escape their husbands who had mistreated them. Some were servants who were considered less than human" (2020, pp. 91–92). This nuanced account emerges after Max discovers, to his dismay, that Papá and

Buelo are members of the Brigade of Women, an underground network which has helped women from Abismo escape gender-based violence since the outbreak of the civil war. Moving beyond literal bridge-building, Papá and Buelo help Max bridge the divide between myth and reality. The legendary guardians he once imagined as heroic figures hiding migrants in magical ruins are refigured as ordinary, compassionate individuals who, to this day, continue to guide abused women and children through Santa Maria to safety, quietly resisting the legal apparatuses and narratives of fear that criminalize migration. Even if these revelations awaken Max's genuine interest in the hidden ones, his perception of them still elicits emotional responses that perpetuate unequal power relations, as it will be further discussed below.

While the boy learns about forced migration thanks to his family's stories, Esperanza experiences it firsthand, a major twist that shatters her world of luxury and idleness, bringing her closer to the indigenous peasants that she looks down on. This occurs after her father is murdered by bandits, an event her greedy uncle Luis uses to seize the ranch and coerce Ramona, Esperanza's mother, into marrying him. When she refuses, Luis retaliates by setting fire to their estate, leaving his sister-in-law and niece with no choice but to migrate to a racially segregated labor camp in San Joaquin Valley, California. Like the women and children fleeing Abismo in *Mañanaland*, Esperanza and Ramona are driven out of their home because of a violent situation rooted in gender inequality. These female characters are all subject to patriarchal structures that, in the case of post-Revolutionary Mexico, deny women the right to inherit land, leaving them easy prey to abusive male relatives.

When these unequal power relations turn Esperanza into a poor migrant overnight, she shockingly learns that she must face a similar reality to that of Alfonso, Hortensia, and Miguel, who are also left homeless and penniless after the fire. Now fellow migrants, they become her primary support system to build a new life in the United States, as Ramona reminds her: "Esperanza [...], [w]e have little money and Hortensia, Alfonso, and Miguel are no longer our servants. We are indebted to *them* for our finances and our future (2000, pp. 52–53). Although she begins to recognize their shared circumstances, her perception of indigenous people continues to provoke emotional reactions that reinforce the very divisions her experience sets out to undo.

Disgust and guilt are the primary emotions hampering the formation of strong bridges towards racialized others at this point. Esperanza experiences disgust most acutely during her journey to California, which she undertakes alongside many indigenous peasants also fleeing poverty and hardship. Much like the fear towards the hidden ones in *Mañanaland*, Esperanza's disgust towards indigenous people reveals a relation between this emotion and exclusionary processes of the racialized other. In the case of disgust, Ahmed understands that this link becomes clear when considering the

spatializing logics of disgust reactions “and their role in the hierarchising of spaces as well as bodies” (2004, p. 88). Since “it involves a relationship of touch and proximity between the surfaces of the bodies and” those entities perceived as a threat, disgust can be seen as “fundamentally dependent upon contact” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 85). More precisely, its spatializing function lies in the desire to avoid contact with an object identified as an actual or potential threat of contamination (Ahmed, 2004, p. 85). This dynamic is clearly illustrated in Esperanza’s reaction upon getting on a train crowded with indigenous peasants: “We cannot travel in this car. It... it is not clean [...] Papa would never have had us sit here and Abuelita wouldn’t approve” (2000, p. 67). A similar response arises when she refuses to let an indigenous girl hold her doll for a few moments: “Mama, she is poor and dirty...” (2000, p. 70). In both instances, Esperanza’s impulse to distance herself from indigenous travelers is linked to her assessment of them as disgusting, a perception that “depends on histories of contact that have already impressed upon the surface of the object” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 90). This means that there are colonial ideologies of race that repeat themselves through time, thereby mediating the protagonist’s assessment, which explains why indigenous bodies are “already seen as dirt, as the carrier of dirt” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 82). As Esperanza’s responses show, this association between dirt and indigenous bodies creates boundaries and establishes distance from the latter, uncovering patterns of social and spatial stratification while preventing bridges from being built.

Self/other dynamics are further reinforced through Esperanza’s and Max’s sense of guilt. The girl feels guilty after becoming aware of the benefits that come with white skin privilege within the racial hierarchy: “Miguel looked at Esperanza, wrinkled his forehead, and shook his head [...] ‘Have you ever noticed? [...] Those with Spanish blood, who have the fairest complexions in the land, are the wealthiest.’ Esperanza suddenly felt guilty and did not want to admit that she had never noticed or that it might be true. Besides, they were going to the United States now and it certainly would not be true there” (2000, pp. 79–80). Her guilt, however, is superficial and unexamined; rather than prompting critical reflection on racial hierarchies, it leads her to naively assume that such inequalities will not exist in the United States. This assumption, which serves more to ease her conscience than to challenge structural inequalities, effectively obscures her privileged position as a white girl and leaves power relations unquestioned.

Max expresses similar feelings of guilt after deceiving Father Romero into believing that he sometimes substitutes for his father in the Brigade of Women. As a result of this deception, he is entrusted with escorting Isadora, an abused girl from Abismo, to Mañanaland so she can join her sister Rosalina, a mission he only accepts in the hope of finding his missing mother there. Having grown up with feelings of hopelessness and emptiness due to his mother’s absence, Max sees a ray of hope upon finding out that she

could be in Mañanaland, a feeling that engenders a sense of guilt for not fully serving the cause of the Brigade: “Max stared at the floor, nodding and avoiding his eyes. If he [Father Romero] knew the real reason Max had volunteered, he wouldn’t call him selfless” (2020, p. 134). Like Esperanza, the boy’s guilt consists of a fleeting feeling of wrongness and remorse that fails to translate into a critical interrogation of his own position and the structural forces behind displacement. Instead, it reveals a self-centered perspective that obscures the broader injustices at play. These attitudes resonate with Audre Lorde’s conceptualization of guilt as unproductive and an obstacle to communication and informed action:

[G]uilt [...] is a response to one’s actions or lack of action. If it leads to change then it can be useful, since it is no longer guilt but the beginning of knowledge. Yet all too often guilt is just another name for impotence, for defensiveness destructive of communication; it becomes a device to protect ignorance and the continuation of things the way they are, the ultimate protection of changelessness [...] I have no creative use of guilt, yours or my own. Guilt is another way of avoiding informed action, of buying time out of the pressing need to make clear choices. (2017, p. 114)

According to Lorde, guilt prevents conversations between individuals who recognize their own situated universalisms and understand each other as equal participants. These dialogues, which entail taking the perspective and needs of the other into account, may enable change. As shown above, however, the guilt experienced by Esperanza and Max has the opposite effect, as it does not allow them to move beyond monological perspectives, hampering the development of a stronger commitment to bonding, understanding, and assisting those that are different. Following Ahmed’s work on emotions (2004, p. 32), it can be argued that the sole purpose of guilt here is to align Esperanza and Max with privileged bodies and against racialized others. In so doing, it reproduces the self/other binary that underpins colonial epistemologies, thus stalling the ethical and political transformation that might emerge from truly affective, dialogical encounters.

At this point then, it can be contended that, although Esperanza and Max become aware of the forms of oppression driving forced displacement, their perspectives in the early stages of the narrative remain shaped by colonial epistemologies. These frameworks lead them to interpret the world through a self/other binary that fuels distressing emotions and individualistic responses within a broader context of violence and injustice, ultimately hindering both self-reflection and the potential for solidarity. The following pages will analyze how these colonial logics are gradually disrupted through the protagonists’ engagement in relations of solidarity, paving the path for a better tomorrow.

3. WEAVING SOLIDARITY: TOWARDS SELF-TRANSFORMATION AND A BETTER TOMORROW

The ethics of solidarity that runs through *Esperanza rising* and *Mañanaland* emphasizes the conscious and ethical choice of communities to struggle together –an approach developed by a broad range of postcolonial and decolonial feminist thinkers in response to the boundary-setting and exclusion embedded in the notion of sisterhood promoted by Western feminism, which has traditionally overlooked the axes of race and class (e.g., Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002; hooks, 1984; Lugones, 1987, 2003; Mohanty 2003; Sandoval, 2000). This relational and difference-sensitive perspective is most clearly articulated in Mohanty's *Feminism without borders: Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity* (2003), where she proposes a model of solidarity based on “mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities. Rather than assuming an enforced commonality of oppression, the practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together. Diversity and difference are central values here—to be acknowledged and respected, not erased in the building of alliances” (2003, p. 7). Seen in this light, solidarity does not require shared oppression and the erasure of difference to be effective. Instead, it is grounded in common differences, forming the basis for deeper solidarity across unequal power relations. Solidarity thus entails co-implication, mutuality, and shared interests, while also demanding knowledge and understanding of the distinct histories and experiences of women.

Drawing on the work of Mohanty and other postcolonial and decolonial feminist thinkers, such as Sara Ahmed and Chela Sandoval, Rubén Gaztambide Fernández (2012) introduces his “pedagogy of solidarity”, which, like Mohanty's approach, is rooted in a decolonial, antiracist and anticapitalist framework. His pedagogical model is equally grounded in relationality and the affirmation of difference: “A decolonizing pedagogy of solidarity must shift the focus away from either explaining or enhancing existing social arrangements, seeking instead to challenge such arrangements and their implied colonial logic [...]. It is about imagining human relations that are premised on the *relationship between difference and interdependency, rather than similarity and a rational calculation of self-interests* (2012, p. 49) [emphasis added]. In this sense, Gaztambide-Fernández (2012, p. 50) explains that this pedagogy brings a commitment to relational, transitive, and creative solidarity –three distinct yet interconnected forms of interaction with difference that lie at the core of the novels under discussion.

Relational solidarity highlights an intentional and meaningful commitment to interdependence and reciprocity as guiding values and tangible outcomes, which requires reflecting on the “material conditions and symbolic orders through which both self and other are constituted as such” (2012, p. 52). This reflection on power relations usually

involves what decolonial feminist María Lugones designates as “world-travelling” (1987, 2003). Originally introduced in her 1987 paper “Playfulness, ‘world’-travelling, and loving perception” and then revisited in her 2003 book *Pilgrimages/peregrinajes: Theorizing coalition against oppression*, this concept serves as a vital tool within the context of feminist coalition politics. It refers to the intentional act of crossing boundaries and entering the world of another, ultimately reshaping one’s sense of self (1987, pp. 16–17). This symbolic act of traveling, which involves not just stepping into the shoes of others but also critically engaging with structural differences, is a task undertaken by *nepantleras*, a term used by Chicana decolonial feminist Gloria Anzaldúa (2015) to describe those individuals who, like the women of color central to Lugones’ works and characters such as Esperanza and Max in their encounters with the other, live amidst intersecting power forces.⁶ Through active listening and mediating across identities and positions, *nepantleras* become aware of the ignorance and fear that divide and diminish us, thus making possible the formation of meaningful and transformative alliances (2015, pp. 92–93).

The building of reparative coalitions is at the heart of transitive solidarity, which centers on standing alongside the oppressed to transform the objective reality that has made them “beings for another” (Freire, 1968, as cited in Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012, p. 54). In other words, it involves joining forces with the other to challenge the dehumanizing conditions that oppress them. Sally J. Scholz’s *Political solidarity* (2008) and Chela Sandoval’s *Methodology of the oppressed* (2000) propose related forms of transitive solidarity, though with greater emphasis on the emotional forces that sustain collective struggles. As Scholz argues, hope is deeply connected to a view of solidarity that brings people together across differences, united not always by shared experiences or identities, but by their sense of what needs to be done together in the pursuit of justice: “Hope is the only necessary moral feeling for political solidarity. Political solidarity is primarily a movement of social change. Members strive to bring about liberation, create conditions free from oppression, and struggle for justice [...]. Hope means that they believe the future can be better than the present. The moral sentiment of hope motivates activity within solidarity because it fosters the desire for the final ends or goals (substantive and formative) of political solidarity” (2008, pp. 81–82). In this moral-political framework, solidarity is sustained by the self’s investment in the struggle to improve the life of the other, motivated by the hope for a fairer and brighter future. Love, on the other hand, is described by Chicana decolonial feminist Chela Sandoval “as a social movement [that] is enacted by revolutionary, mobile, and global coalitions of citizens-activists who are allied through the apparatus of emancipation” (2003, p. 184). In this sense, love becomes a powerful affective force driving the desire to dismantle the

oppressive conditions affecting marginalized communities, ultimately acting as a catalyst for social change.

Finally, creative solidarity “is concerned with the multiplicity of cultural practices that might evolve in such encounters [encounters with difference], as a way of countering the versions of ‘culture’ and ‘identity’ that are imposed by the colonial project of modernity” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013, p. 57). This involves engaging with others in ways that might rearrange or reinvent encounters with racialized others, challenging epistemologies that have perpetuated colonial power structures and hierarchies.

Acts of solidarity in the novels emerge through instances of relational solidarity, initiated when the main characters engage in critically reflective dialogues with those they perceive as othered. I argue that these encounters compel Esperanza and Max to venture into unfamiliar territories, triggering a process of self-examination and interrogation of structural differences that evokes emotional responses, particularly feelings of shame.

Esperanza undergoes this experience once settled into her new life in a Mexican farm labor camp during the Great Depression. There the protagonist struggles to earn a living alongside indigenous migrants, including Miguel and his family, and other Mexicans and Mexican Americans with disparate backgrounds, origins, and perspectives. Working arm in arm with this diverse workforce, Esperanza becomes aware of the differences that are the outcome of injustice and structural inequality, giving way to a critical reflection on her passive attitude towards power differentials, which awakens her sense of shame: “‘The fact remains, Esperanza, that you, for instance, have a better education than most people’s children in this country [...]. Americans see us as one big, brown group who are good for only manual labor’ [...]. Miguel’s explanation was familiar [...]. There were special sections at the movie theater for Negroes and Mexicans. In town, parents did not want their children going to the same schools with Mexicans [...]. *Sometimes she felt as if she lived in a cocoon, protected from much of the indignation*” (2000, pp. 187–188) [emphasis added]. Contrary to Esperanza’s earlier comments on structural inequality, which instilled in her an unreflective sense of guilt, her attention to the homogenized racialization of Mexicans and other ethnic groups as inferior makes her feel ashamed about living detached from the reality of racism for so long and not taking a stand against it. Whereas guilt is conventionally conceived of as a response to an action, shame is a self-reflective affect tied to how the self feels about itself and, as such, can prompt change in the form of self-evaluation (Ahmed, 2004; Lorde, 2017; Sedgwick, 2003). Esperanza’s self-evaluation involves recognizing her past indifference towards racism. Following Ahmed’s insights on shame, it can be argued that this very recognition allows Esperanza to “enter into shame” (2004, p. 103), initiating a critical questioning of the colonial logics that promote white privilege and supremacy.

Unlike the self-assessment that Esperanza undertakes before entering into shame, which involves acknowledging forms of racism affecting all Mexicans in the United States, including herself, Max's journey toward the same emotion is bound up with his willingness to go into a world entirely unfamiliar to him. This occurs when he engages in a dialogue with Isadora and finds out how serious her struggles are compared to his. Isadora reveals that she and her sister Rosalina are running away from the man that took them in after their parents died, a life marked by pain, violent coercion, physical threats, and the loss of freedom. When Isadora points out that Max is lucky to feel safe and loved, it prompts him to turn to self-scrutiny: "Max felt a pang in his chest, for everything he had that Isadora didn't. Suddenly, his problems felt small" (2020, p. 171). The protagonist's acknowledgment of his own privileges goes hand in hand with Lugones' willful exercise of "world-travelling", which, as noted earlier, implies understanding "*what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes*", embracing ambiguity and reconstructing the self (1987, p. 17). Max embodies this "playful" and "loving" attitude, to use Lugones' terms (1987), when he confronts the stark contrast between Isadora's world and his own. In this act of "travel", he comes to recognize the connection between her displacement and the patriarchal regime that deprives Isadora and Rosalina of their right to a happy and safe life. At the same time, he realizes how privileged he appears from Isadora's perspective. This way of cultivating awareness and undoing ignorance –or *los desconocimientos*, as Anzaldúa terms it (2015)– is central to the work of a *nepantlera*, leading to the dismantling of colonialist approaches that view the world through "imperial eyes" (Pratt, 1992) and enabling Max to move beyond the narrow confines of his own experience and enter into shame.

In addition to mobilizing emotional responses that address the characters' myopic selfishness, Esperanza's and Max's reflective dialogues with those regarded as others prompt a critical scrutiny of the power structures depriving many Mexican fieldworkers and hidden ones of hope. After several weeks in the camp, Esperanza senses a stagnation among laborers reluctant to strike for better conditions, such as her co-worker and housemate Josefina: "There are many of us who don't want to get involved in the strike because we can't afford to lose our jobs, and we are accustomed to how things are in our little community" (2000, p. 134). This resignation and lack of hope prove contagious, leading Esperanza to fear that striking might endanger her plans to bring her grandmother to the United States and pay for Ramona's valley fever treatment. Marta, a young Mexican American strike leader, challenges this viewpoint, framing the strike as a path toward a better future for all Mexicans. While the protagonist never fully endorses Marta's cause, she becomes increasingly attuned to her motivations. "Traveling" to Marta's world, Esperanza learns about her struggles and her father's revolutionary legacy, which helps her bridge conflicting positions in relation to striking, acting as a *nepantlera*.

Ultimately, she recognizes that avoiding starvation is also “the strikers’ point” (2000, p. 204). Beyond staging a dialogue between opposing views, this reflective process exposes how race and capitalist exploitation, through coloniality, confine Mexican fieldworkers to disadvantageous positions and limit their hopes to a better life.

Whereas Esperanza’s dialogue with Marta is crucial for her recognition of how coloniality restricts laborers’ opportunities, Max’s conversations with Yadra, a member of the Brigade and former hidden one, open his eyes to the pervasive power of patriarchal structures and their ability to inflict hopelessness in the lives of many women. Through his “travel” to Yadra’s world, Max learns that, unlike most hidden ones, she managed to escape the rigid gender norms of her home in Santa Maria, realizing that “cruelty doesn’t only happen across borders” (2020, p. 195). It can thus be argued that by placing himself in Yadra’s position, Max dispels reductionist understandings of gender-based violence and critically examines the patriarchal structures that deny many women the possibility of living with hope and freedom. This cultivated awareness, achieved by crossing boundaries and engaging difference, reinforces his development as a *nepantlera*.

These instances of relational solidarity, which take the experiences of oppressed individuals as their point of departure, lay the foundation for a stronger commitment to weaving relations of solidarity. In other words, Esperanza’s and Max’s critically reflective dialogues with marginalized figures prepare them for a more active engagement in solidarity struggles. This deliberate and purposeful commitment becomes evident near the end of the story, when both characters engage in actions where Gaztambide-Fernández’s three types of solidarity –relational, transitive, and creative– converge.

Esperanza shows this disposition when Marta is faced with the threat of deportation during an immigration raid. This stressful moment is the result of the Mexican Repatriation, which gave counties the power to deport anyone who looked Mexican, regardless of nationality.⁷ Immigration raids on farm labor camps often targeted outspoken strikers, such as Marta, who here fears she may be deported despite being a US citizen. The young striker begs Esperanza not to turn her in, when the protagonist finds her hiding in a corner: “Please, Esperanza. Don’t tell. I can’t get caught. I must take care of my mother” (2000, p. 208). This plea brings the two girls together: “Esperanza stood frozen for a moment [...]. But then she thought about Marta and her mother holding hands, and couldn’t imagine them being separated from each other” (2000, p. 208). In evoking a visual memory of mother and daughter being affectionate to each other, the protagonist draws a parallelism between her devotion to Ramona, whom she has been taking care of since she fell ill, and Marta’s love for her mother. In so doing, she emphasizes their connections and common interests while also recognizing their differences and questioning the symbolic order that enables the separation of Mexican families: “It didn’t matter if Esperanza agreed with her cause or not. No one should have

to be separated from her family” (2000, p. 211). This relational stance is directly followed by a display of transitive solidarity consisting of giving Marta a bundle of asparagus and an apron to pass as a worker and avoid being caught. In helping the young striker avoid deportation, Esperanza joins forces with Marta and, by extension, with others in the camp committed to the fight for Mexican human rights –people who, until then, had been “on the other side of the river” (2000, p. 222). These coalitions across lines of differentiation, which insist on common interests as catalysts for transformation, succeed in challenging the structures that oppress Mexicans in Great Depression-era California.

Max develops a more active orientation towards weaving relations of solidarity with others after a man attempts to take Isadora back to Abismo. To ease her anxiety, Max draws attention to their common characteristics, building a bridge between their seemingly different lives. The protagonist reveals that his missing mother was also a hidden one, not only highlighting their shared experiences of oppression and common grief over losing a mother, but also casting a critical eye on the structures that set people from Santa Maria against women from Abismo, while still acknowledging the differences between them. This relational facet gives way to a transitive stance that consists of joining forces with Isadora to arrive safe and sound at the last station, where another guardian is waiting to take them to Mañanaland. This coalition across differences is grounded in a shared determination to challenge two dehumanizing regimes: a heteropatriarchal system that legitimizes gender violence and a colonial order that limits Santa Maria citizens’ solidarity with racialized others.

This drive for coalition and transformation is fueled by hope and love. Drawing on Scholz’s work on political solidarity (2008), it can be argued that Esperanza’s and Max’s belief in a better future –one in which Marta, Isadora, and everybody else are treated fairly– contributes to driving them towards solidarity-based alliances, promoting the desire for social change. This wish to transform oppressive and antidemocratic circumstances in the context of marginalized communities aligns with Sandoval’s conception of love as theorized in *The methodology of the oppressed* (2000). Thus, love as social transformation also propels the alliances that Esperanza and Max forge with Marta and Isadora to counter dehumanizing conditions, a political commitment that contrasts starkly with the protagonists’ past inability to look beyond themselves.

These hope- and love-infused alliances are the clearest instance of creative solidarity in the novels. In this sense, it can be contended that, in rallying across differences for the sake of social justice and a better future, Esperanza and Max reconfigure themselves outside binary oppositions and existing dominant relations (i.e., self/other, insider/outsider, subject/object). More precisely, while these teenagers remain aware of the differences that exist between them and their co-fighters, they understand that their shared commitment to emancipation places them “on the same side of the river”,

to use Esperanza's own words (2000, p. 251), creatively negotiating and reshaping colonial hierarchies and exclusive identity formations. This instance of creative solidarity foregrounds an understanding of identity as open to the other, relational, and fluid, highlighting the role of literary expression in reimagining encounters with the other.

On the other hand, these socially committed and more balanced relationships help Esperanza and Max mature into more hopeful and future-oriented teenagers. Esperanza understands that it is only through solidarity coalitions that Marta and her mother are able to remain together in the United States, and that her own grandmother can eventually be brought to join them, encouraging her to dream of a better future: "She soared with the anticipation of dreams she never knew she could have, of learning English, of supporting her family, of someday buying a tiny house. Miguel had been right about never giving up, and she had been right, too, about rising above those who held them down" (2000, p. 250). Solidarity alliances also enable Max to develop a more hopeful attitude towards the future; however, unlike Esperanza, his sense of hope is accompanied by a fleeting flicker of disappointment. Although he succeeds in handing Isadora over to the last guardian, he is told that, according to the code of the Brigade, he cannot accompany them to their destination. At the same time, Max finds out that Mañanaland is not a real place, but rather a state of mind, a metaphor for hope. Even if this realization means that he can no longer picture her mother in a particular physical location, he concludes that a better tomorrow is still possible through collective action. Just as solidarity opens new horizons for Isadora, Max begins to believe that better possibilities may lie ahead for him as well: "Solo mañana sabe. But in my mind, I am hoping for good luck, too" (2020, p. 239). These final dreams and aspirations foreground Esperanza's and Max's trusting, hopeful, and positive orientation towards the future, a perspective made possible by building bridges of solidarity where there had once been walls.

4. CONCLUSIONS

As shown throughout this paper, *Esperanza rising* and *Mañanaland* engage with and convey an ethics of solidarity grounded in co-implication, mutuality, and a shared interest against colonial power and privilege, qualities clearly expressed in the three forms of solidarity –relational, transitive, and creative– that the texts depict. This ethics foregrounds Esperanza's and Max's evolution from self-centered perspectives to a commitment to listening to and supporting vulnerable others. This development, which replaces the excluding emotions of fear, disgust, and guilt with the alliance-enabling affects of love and hope, involves not only venturing into unfamiliar worlds, but also critically scrutinizing the power structures responsible for their own privilege and others'

misfortune, ultimately forging alliances that work to minimize wounding and creatively reconfigure versions of identity imposed by coloniality.

Considering the dual role of children's and YA literature as both mirrors and, crucially for our purposes, windows into other lives and possibilities, my contention is that the novels under discussion may be seen as powerful educational tools. They have the power not only to shape young readers' worldviews but also to nurture an ethical imagination by presenting narratives grounded in kindness, safety, and hope. In an increasingly polarized and unstable global climate –where political and economic agendas often take precedence over the human dignity and welfare of the most vulnerable, especially children– such literature becomes all the more essential. These texts invite young readers to imagine a more just and compassionate world, fostering empathy, critical thinking, and a sense of agency. In a time of increasing uncertainty, we need more YA literature that nurtures hope, not as passive optimism, but as an active commitment to imagining and building a better future. Literature, in this sense, becomes a vital source of hope, empowering young readers to see change as both possible and necessary.

NOTES

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² These are the executive orders titled “Securing our borders” and “Protecting the meaning and value of American citizenship”, respectively, both issued by Trump upon taking office on January 20, 2025.

³ After the Revolution, the Mexican government embraced the *mestizo* ideology to create a unified Mexican identity of primarily Indigenous and Spanish ancestry. Although this belief system was intended to remove ethnicity from the national consciousness, in actual practice Mexican constructs of *mestizaje* favored white skin color over darker-skinned Indian heritage. In fact, even today Mexican citizens gain economic and social rewards as they move up the ladder of *mestizaje* and adopt Euro-American culture and values. For more information, see Joshua Lund's *The mestizo state: Reading race in modern Mexico* (2012).

⁴ Different indicators, such as the presence of cars, lead to the understanding that this is at least a quasi-modern world.

⁵ For more information on the workings of othering that shaped the lives of Latinxs during Trump's first term, see Esther Álvarez-López and Andrea Fernández-García's *Cosmopolitan strangers in US Latinx literature and culture: Building bridges, not walls* (2023).

⁶ The term *nepantlera*, which appears in Anzaldúa's post-*Borderlands* work, builds on the concept of the *mestiza* first introduced in her seminal text *Borderlands/la frontera: The new*

mestiza (1987). This influential work has inspired several decolonial feminist thinkers, including María Lugones and Chela Sandoval, whose scholarship is also referenced in this paper.

⁷ In response to job scarcity and rising anti-Mexican sentiment among Anglo Americans, President Herbert Hoover initiated the Mexican Repatriation, which ran from 1929 to 1939. Though originally framed as targeting “birds of passage” (i.e., temporary workers), this nativist-driven effort extended to US-born Mexicans. An estimated 400,000 people of Mexican descent—most of them US-born—were rounded up in informal raids and deported from California alone. For more information, see Camille Guerin-Gonzales’ *Mexican workers and American dreams: Immigration, repatriation, and California farm labor, 1900–1939* (1996).

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