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From Rhizome to Stolon Subject:

The Representation of Contemporary Migrant Characters in Julia Alvarez's *Return to Sender.*

Belo Horizonte

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The Representation of Contemporary Migrant Characters in Julia Alvarez's *Return to Sender.*

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Dear Dad, you left so early! Some people say that mothers usually tell stories to their children, and this is true. But your stories, Dad, were the greatest ones. Your imagination fed mine for life. I remember that my fear of rainstorms gone with a story told by you, and this same story helps me to face all the storms I have to deal with day by day. You will always be an important part of my life as well as of this work, because more than anybody else you stood by my side at every moment of weakness and doubt whether I was doing the right thing. You always said that everything would be OK at the end, and that I might keep going. Now, I am here to say that you were right. Everything is OK.

I dedicate this work to my beloved father, Alberto, who will read it from the stars; to my mother, Maria, and my brother, Jean, for supporting me throughout my journey, keeping always the lights on; to my missing and missed Mexican family: Humberto, Emília, Celestina, Juan, Fabian, Yasmin, and Esteban, wherever you are. With all of you, I learned that love, home, friendship, family, imagination, and stories do not have borders.

Querido pai, você partiu tão cedo! Algumas pessoas dizem que mães costumam contar histórias para suas crianças e isso é verdade. Mas as suas, Pai, eram as melhores. Sua imaginação alimentou a minha por toda vida. Eu me lembro que meu medo por tempestades passou com uma história contada por você e essa mesma história me ajuda a enfrentar todas as tempestades que eu tenho que lidar dia após dia. Você sempre será uma parte importante da minha vida assim como deste trabalho, porque, mais do que qualquer pessoa, você esteve ao meu lado em cada momento de fraqueza e dúvida se estava fazendo a coisa certa. Você sempre disse que tudo ficaria bem no final e que eu deveria continuar. Agora, eu estou aqui para dizer que você estava certo.

Está tudo bem.

Dedico este trabalho ao meu amado pai, Alberto, que o lerá das estrelas; a minha mãe, Maria, e ao meu irmão, Jean, por terem me apoiado ao longo da minha jornada mantendo sempre as luzes acesas; a minha desaparecida e saudosa família Mexicana: Humberto, Emília, Celestina, Juan, Fabian, Yasmin e Esteban, onde quer que vocês estejam. Com todos vocês aprendi que amor, lar, amizade, família, imaginação e histórias não têm fronteiras.

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ABSTRACT

The Dominican American writer, Julia Alvarez, often portrays in her works immigrant subjects that experience biculturalism. In *Return to Sender*, Alvarez problematizes the issue that involves Mexican immigration in the United States. This dissertation investigates the emergence of a new Mexican immigrant subjectivityfrom this cultural encounter. With the advance of technologies, the contemporary world seems a space without boundaries and limits. Individuals connect with a multiplicity of places and cultures, establishing bonds, fostering business, and raising families. In other words, they promote what Gloria Anzaldúa calls "cross-pollination" (*Borderlands* 99), creating roots everywhere. This immigrant that establishes connections and has roots everywhere is recognized and represented in literary realm as a rhizomatic immigrant. This term is originated from biology and refers to species of underground stems commonly mistaken to roots due to the fact that both have similar function. Biology also presents another particular species of rhizomes that occurs above the ground known as stolons from which I borrow the term to name this contemporary immigrant subject that comes out from the darkness of anonymity and confinement, seeking for oxygenation, ventilated spaces, fluidity, and visibility. Under the light of this analogy, this work dialogues with biology in order to analyze the emergence and behavior of the Stolon immigrant in Julia Alvarez's narrative, as well as to investigate whether the representation of the character's writing in form of letters and diary, is an extension of her own Stolon subjectivity.

RESUMO

A escritora dominicana-americana, Julia Alvarez, frequentemente retrata em suas obras sujeitos imigrantes que vivenciam biculturalismo. Em*ReturntoSender,* Alvarez problematiza o tópico que envolve a imigração mexicana nos Estados Unidos. Essa dissertação investiga o surgimento de uma nova subjetividade imigrante mexicana a partir desse encontro cultural. Com o avanço das tecnologias, o mundo contemporâneo parece um espaço sem fronteiras e limites. Indivíduos se conectam com uma multiplicidade de lugares e culturas, estabelecem vínculos, fomentam negócios, e criam famílias. Em outras palavras, eles promovem o que Gloria Anzaldúa chama de "polinização cruzada" (*Borderlands* 99) criando, assim, raízes em todo lugar. Esse imigrante que estabelece conexões e tem raízes em todo lugar é reconhecido e representado do campo literário como imigrante rizomático. Este termo é originário da biologia e se refere a espécies de caules subterrâneos comumente confundidos com raízes devido ao fato de ambos terem funções semelhantes. A biologia também apresenta outra espécie particular de rizomas que ocorrem sobre o solo conhecidos como Estolhos de quem tomo o termo por empréstimo para nomear esse sujeito imigrante contemporâneo que sai da escuridão do anonimato e confinamento buscandooxigenação, espaço ventilado, fluidez e visibilidade. Sob a luz dessa analogia, este trabalho dialoga com a biologia de forma a analisar o surgimento e o comportamento do imigrante Estolho na narrativa de Julia Alvarez, assim como a investigar se a representação da escrita da personagem em forma de cartas e diário é uma extensão da sua própria subjetividade Estolho.

INTRODUCTION

> This is the wonderful thing about stories. The impossible is possible. There are no borders. Like swallows, like stars, you don't have to stop where one country or language or race or religion or gender or time period ends and another begins. (Alvarez, *Return* 323)

Two great areas of study are the objects of my interest in this thesis: biology and literature. The first time that I heard about those two disciplines discussed together was during an undergraduate course given by Professor Eliana Lourenço on Postcolonial Studies, specifically when the concepts of the Diaspora (especially as discussed by Avtar Brah) and rhizomatic immigrants (by Deleuze & Guattari) were introduced and discussed by the professor. The appeal of these topics to me increased during the subsequent semester while I attended a course on Immigrant Literature offered by professor Gláucia Renate Gonçalves, when I was introduced to literature written by people living away from their homelands, influenced by their roots, memories, and imagination, but at the same time searching for new opportunities of life and space. The apex of my desire to associate these two different areas of knowledge culminated in a lecture presented byProfessor. JacquesFux entitled "A Matemáticaem George Perec e Jorge Luiz Borges: Um EstudoComparativo"[Mathematics in George Perec and Jorge Luiz Borges: A Comparative Study], in the Seminar "MigraçõesLiterárias" [Literary Migrations] at UFMG. This lecture is an example of how a dialogue between science and literature is possible and may open up a common space that enriches readers and researchers from different areas.

It is important to start this work reflecting on the notion of the words immigration, emigration, and migration in the globalized world. Roberto Marinucci states in his work "MigraçõesInternacionaisContemporâneas:as Razões da CrescenteIntensidade" [Contemporary International Migrations: the Reasons for Growing Intensity] that international migrations have become more complex and diverse. Many countries are at the same time recipients and addresses of migrantsand some of them are just places of transition (1). In other words, they send people as well as receive them. MacistiandPugliese affirm thatit is almost impossible to draw up a flow map, unless "someone manages to draw something like a bowl of noodles" (qtd in Marinucci1) in the contemporary world. In many of traditional countries of migratory flow, international displacements are nourished by a culture of migration. Thus, migration becomes a habit, a step towards to the process of the social initiation of youth in the contemporary setting.

In contemporary society, migration is not only the way to overcome poverty or improve financial support to needy households from undeveloped countries. It has become widespread as a life choice for better opportunities and conditions of work in an increasingly competitive world. It is neither limited to the economic necessity of unfortunates nor it can be understood as an answer to an economic crisis, because people may migrate, for example, for study, academic research, or for life experience abroad.In this sense, Muñiz et al explain in their article "Why do People Move to Work in another Place or Country," published in the online site AAG Center for Global Geography Education,that

> One of the most important spatial flows shaping the global economy today is the migration of people at local, regional, territorial, and continental scales. Migration today is a strong expression of spatial flows, which gives not only life and energy to the dynamic global economy, but also to changes in demography, societies, and cultures.

The borders between the terms immigration (entrance) and emigration (exit) become blurred in the contemporary world, in the sense that people have dislocated with high frequency in the two forms. The old expressions of spatial movement of people have been transformed into new forms of migration flow.The term migration is often used to designate any kind of movement in contemporary world such as entering, exiting, remaining, returning or just transiting elsewhere when applied to transnational movements. The term migration is used in the title of this thesis in a broader sense: to highlight and designate any kind of movement, such as the characters' emigration from Mexico to the U.S., their immigration into U.S. territory, their transiting among the states, and their return to Mexico. I have chosen the term migration because it embraces all the notions of people's flow in the contemporary world, and to make easier for the reader to comprehend and imagine these dynamic movements. The term immigration will be used to reinforce the condition of the Mexican characters in the novel and to highlight the historical process of immigration in the United States. Along my analysis of Alvarez's novel, the use of the termsimmigrant and immigration is widely used.

As I analyze and explore Alvarez's novel from a perspective of a possible dialogue between science and literature, I borrow some concepts proposed by scientists to explain metaphorically the emergence of a new contemporary subject. From the use of the scientists' general concepts, I propose new terms and ideas concern to this new contemporary subject. In order to do so I begin by reflecting on the way scientists and writers observe the world around them. Scientists are usually skeptical, objective, and work with facts, empirical observation, prediction, and evidence to explain and sustain their claims and theories. In other words, scientists search for a final truth that must be proven by comparing, contrasting, refuting, and/or validating such facts. On the other hand, writers normally use imagination, hunches, revelations, life experience, history, and feelings - fictional and subjective elements that do not need to be proven, but felt and perceived by readers in a particular construction of

meanings. There is no final truth in literature. Actually, a literary work may or may not encompass any truth at all. Thus, scientists and writers seem to walk on opposite paths. Therefore, one might ask what kind of literary research may arise from the possible encounter of these two areas? In what way could one work with literature focusing on some aspects of science without losing the focus on literary analysis? Such questions intrigued me and I became fascinated with the possibilities of dialogues that could take place between natural sciences (that has always pervaded my imagination, observation, and the way I perceive the world around me) and literature (which is the prolific terrain where everything is possible).

Julia Alvarez's novel, *Return to Sender,* published in 2009 was selected for this research because it has the fruitful possibilities of giving place to dialogues between the self, the other, and the sciences. Alvarez brings to the fictional universe of *Return to Sender* elements from nature (biology) and cosmos (astronomy) connecting them with characters' lives and behaviors. This set of scientific information provided by Alvarez works as metaphors in the novel and is formative to the growth and maturation of the characters' subjectivity[1]. For example, she identifies and describes stars and constellations such as the North Star, the Big Dipper, Cepheus, and the Northern Cross (52), movements of Swallows (53), butterflies (54), plant's cycle, and genes and genetic traits (20) among other items.

I became interested in the way the author expresses feelings, anxieties, doubts, fears, desires, and expectations of characters that experience a culturally split subjectivity. From the study and analysis of Alvarez's works, I formulated questions such as these: how difficult it is to have a culturally bipartite self; how suffocated a person can be who perceives that s/he is culturally "different" from the milieu s/he inhabited; how the "differences" pointed out and emphasized by others can cause rejection and suffering to those who live far from home; how desperate a person feels who lives out of his/her own space, sometimes in the darkness of anonymity, voiceless, and faceless; how such people represent their confinement and

insulation; what if any is there escape valve.

With the emergence of Cultural Studies in the 1960s, most of these questions arose and these culturally split subjects, their behavior, and dislocation processes also became the focus of literary production and investigation. Cultural Studies concentrate on how issues related to ideology,social class, nationality, ethnicity, sexuality and gender act on a particular culture and also on cultural interactions. In the contemporary, globalized setting, characterized by a great flux of information and people, the movement and interrelation of those subjects focused on by Cultural Studies have been analyzed in a broader context.Concepts such as of rootedness, belonging, uniqueness, identity, and homely are discussed and confronted to ideas of uprootedness, displacement, multiplicity, subjectivity, and others.

In most of Alvarez's works, she depicts many of the issues related to Cultural Studies. She also presents new ideas that arise from Cultural Studies and are reformulated according to the new contemporary approach. She portrays characters 'in motion' and full of 'emotion': migrants in the literal sense, always departing, arriving and/or returning, and migrants in the psychological sense, moving toward self-discovery, searching for place, space, voice, and recognition. Those movements are part of the migrant subject's maturation process in Alvarez's work. She problematizes how characters perceive and represent their subjectivities within the multiplicity of migratory movements and cultural encounters intertwined in the increasingly globalized world, forminga cross-boundary generation (diasporic people, migrants, exiles, refugees, travelers, workers, students) that is learning toposition itselfcriticallyin relationto others and to all thespaces they inhabit. Movement beyond boundaries is not always an easy and simple event, however, especially for immigrants. Conflicts may arise and traumas and memories caused by the dislocation process may haunt the subject's imagination and memory.

Alvarez portrays mainly women characters that transit between two cultures and she

gives voice to these silenced minorities of "double marginality" (Kelley 42). The author depicts subjects that cross borders, characters that settlein another place, and discusses the many ways these characters experience the awkwardness of being between cultures. Alvarez's work "privileges the cultural limbo of migratory groups as an important site of fictional investigation" (Mitchell *Immigration*27), and the cast of characters carry on deep dialogues between their human nature and elements of the natural world, trying to construct a bridge, a connection between these two worlds. These split characters develop a double perspective searching for answers or "truths" for their existential questions. They have a glimpse at this inner world, in a microscopic and deep perspective, and another glimpse at the outer world, in a macroscopic and wide perspective. I would dare say that there are two "parallel universes" that communicate and interact in many ways in *Return to Sender*, and Alvarez accomplishes this connection by using many of her experiences as animmigrant to construct the connection between these two "universes".

Julia Alvarez is a Dominican-American writer who was born in New York. When she was still a very young child her parents decided to return to their homeland in the Dominican Republic. At the age of eleven, she experienced one of the crucial events that changed her life: her father had been involved in a coup against Dictator Rafael Trujillo and she was forced to move with the entire family back to the United States. Alvarez expresses her feeling about this change: "I lost almost everything: a homeland, a language, family, connections, a way of understanding, a warmth" (Rosario-Sievert qtd in Sirias 2). In fact, it was the cultural collision with English that Alvarez credits with turning her into a writer and states that she "landed not in the U.S., but in English"(Garza, qtd in Sirias 2) referring to the most difficult obstacles faced by immigrants: language and culture. This constant back and forth movement was crucial to form Alvarez's split subjectivity that her work so highly reflects. Her narratives represent fictionally the lives of immigrants, non-white, non-mainstream subjects who were

considered until quite recently of interest only to the fields of Sociology and Anthropology.

After many years living in the United States, Alvarez decided to visit the Dominican Republic. The online Encyclopedia of World Biography has an article in which Alvarez describes the moment she returns to the homeland and the whirl of sensations that fills her earliest childhood memories for the first time:

> All my childhood I had dressed like an American, eaten American foods, and befriended American children. I had gone to an American school and spent most of the day speaking and reading English. At night, my prayers were full of blond hair and blue eyes and snow.… All my childhood I had longed for this moment of arrival. And here I was, an American girl, coming home at last.

In fact, this place of contradiction may not be a comfortable territory to inhabit, as Gloria Anzaldúa points out in the preface of her work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, and these conflicts pursue Alvarez and her characters, as well as most other trans-border subjects. In this sense, the author's experiences as animmigrant is similar to what her fictional characters undergo: a cultural clash that, ultimately, turns into an attempt to understand the significance of home, borders, belonging, memory, imagination, and biculturalism. Although Alvarez and her characters share some of similar situation experienced by immigrants, *Return to Sender* is not considered an autobiographical production, but a prose fiction novel that contains some ordinary events experienced by most immigrants such as problems with language, culture clash, displacement, and so on. These experiences allow a glance into the never ending possibilities of human encounter and the possibility of a paradoxical harmony within a conflicting multicultural diversity that does not necessarily demand a choice of which side to belong to.

Edward Said offers a possible way out for subjects that live in-between cultures,

explaining that “exile, immigration and the crossing of boundaries are experiences that can ... provide us with new narrative forms” (225). Thus, Alvarez constructs a narrative that connects cultures, languages, spaces, memory, history, roots, and routes. Like a traveler through time and space, Alvarez lives in the present and remains with a look at the future as well as revisits the past through writing and history in *Return to Sender*. Similarly to what the Mexican - American professor and writer, Ilan Stavans,writes in a recent interview entitled “The Writer in Exile” about being an “outside” writer, Alvarez’s writing is a way of saying“I was here, this is what I thought, this is what I perceived. This is my signature; this is my name”.Stavans explains that being the owner of a divided self, “[b]eing bicultural is being troubled. It’s a source of constant conflicts”, but according to him, “only in paradise are there no conflicts.” In this sense, being bicultural Alvarez transfers to the fictional realm the same conflicts she experiences in her life,proposing some interesting solution to these conflicts. Strategies of negotiation and adaptation enable Alvarez’s characters to deal with conflicts and also to move in all directions, searching for space, recognition, and identity in the host culture.

In a recent interview to Jane Lindholm at Vermont Public Radio, Alvarez calls herself as a “Dominican, hyphen, American.” She declares: “As a fiction writer, I find that the most exciting things happen in the realm of that hyphen - the place where two worlds collide or blend together.” Alvarez was also questioned by the interviewer about the use of bilingualism in her writings and how the switching from Spanish to English, and vice versa, in her everyday life works. First, she explains: “I don’t have those borders in my head so things move back and forth” and depending on the way people pronounce her name (if in English or Spanish) she will give a different answer. She promptly adds:

> If I’m thinking about my parents, Mami and Papi, and a sort of reflecting on something, of course I’m hearing them in Spanish because that’s the way we talk to each other, but If I’m thinking about my friend Judy or some American

> kid in school that I'm talking to I'll be thinking in English because that's the language we're moving from inside out.

Thus, she clearly makes a distinction between the Spanish she speaks in the private sphere of home with her parents and the English that she speaks in public. This same language configuration appears in Alvarez's writing and it is not different in *Return to Sender.*

In the same interview, Alvarez explains that she uses Spanish in her works "when it seems like that there's not a word in English to capture what that character has to say". She states that bilingualism is used in her work because, in many cases, a word in English does not carry the same meaning she wants to express. Hence, she uses Spanish words to translate a feeling for which there is no corresponding term in English. The alternation between the languages becomes a communicational advantage, and Alvarez concludes the interview by confirming this advantageous position, saying that it is "wonderful to have this kind of flexibility and being able to move between these worlds". Therefore, the fluidity in the intersection of cultural spaces and language in Alvarez's work suggests, as Kelli LyonJohnson points out in her work *Julia Alvarez: Writing a New Place on the Map,* that "Alvarez's narratives are never closed but instead continually transformed through historical and cultural changes" (13).In fact, Alvarez portrays in *Return to Sender* characters that have their lives transformed by historical and cultural changes, and she provides creative and imaginative solutions to deal with these changes. The characters find solutions to their existential conflicts in the representation of these conflicts in the world of art and imagination.

According to a biographical piece published in the online site "The Book Reporter," Alvarez's experiences as a contemporary migrant were formative for her in becoming a writer. She states:"What made me into a writer was coming to [the U.S.] … and all of a sudden losing a culture, a homeland, a language, a family … I wanted a portable homeland. And that's the imagination". Arjun Appadurai suggests that there is a new role for the imagination in

contemporary society. The imagination, he writes, "is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order" (31).In other words, the role of imagination is to amalgamate, in some way, distances, differences, and displacements experienced by contemporary subjects. Alvarez's imagination and writing are tools used to maintain multiple connections among people, cultures, and places, reflecting a new global order in which the configuration of spaces and borders seems to be fluid. Moreover, Alvarez's imagination and writing becomes not only an example of boundary-crossing, but also the vehicles by which the author "negotiates the estrangement of continuity and traverses the subject of consciousness" (Stefanko 55). In this way, Alvarez carries in her baggage more than clothes: she carries memories, losses, roots, and seeds of imagination that will populate her literary works as well.

Alvarez perceives that cultural memory and experiences lived by her might be places she can continually revisit, renew, and re-invent. Her narrative does not restore an essential origin of belonging, but she transforms her memory and experiences through an active and imaginative interpretation of them. Alvarez suggests that memory and imagination persecute the lives of those who live far from home, and they are ways to maintain these people connected with their cultural origin, history, and homeland. However, in the fictional realm of *Return to Sender*, Alvarez presents characters that do not use memory and experiences to look back to the past nostalgically, in a deep desire to return. They look mainly to the future, acting to construct positive changes to them in the host country.

It is common that manyimmigrants remain connected to their cultural roots, memory, past, and homeland. Such a condition turns their lives into a painful wait to return. It is difficult to have one's body in one place and one's heart, memory, and soul in another, but even so returning is not the final goal of all immigrants. Many immigrants do not desire or expect to return. Alvarez visualizes this particular subject that arises from the encounter of

American and Mexican cultures in the contemporary and globalized setting of *Return to Sender*: an immigrant subject that desires to visit her homeland in Mexico and then return to the U.S. The novel presents two different worlds, cultures, and generations that collide. The characters of this story struggle to construct a possible harmony in the conflictive space of differences. Alvarez' novel *Return to Sender,* the object of this study, portrays experiences lived by those who cross borders to settle their lives elsewhere. For many, living elsewhere can be difficult or not, in the sense that "[e]lsewhere is not a bad place at all. It is simply elsewhere …or a door to over there" (Brand 13). Thus, Alvarez is always elsewhere, mapping spaces and searching for doors that enable multiple entries and exits.

Alvarez declares in her official online site that the seed for the novel came when shebecame involved in translating at local Vermont schools for the children of Mexican immigrant workers. She explains that "these workers do the milking on many dairy farms. Without them, many of the small farmers could not survive, as they, too, are being squeezed by the high cost of farming and a dearth of workers" (News, *Juliaalvarez.com*). Seeing how confused and frustrated the Mexican children and their classmates were about how to understand this situation and which position they should adopt in relation to the other, she thought about the need of a story that could help people to understand what was happening to them.

The book's title was chosen as reference to the operation made in 2006 by the American Immigration and Customs Enforcement - ICE - a very suggestive acronym because it indicates the coldness of the operation that raided workplaces to arrest illegal immigrants and deport them to their homelands. Alvarez herself explains that

> Workers without papers were taken away on the spot, leaving behind children who were cared for by friends, relatives, or older siblings. These children are the casualties of their parents' decision to leave behind their

homelands in order to survive. (*Return* 322)

Traumas caused by being taken away from homeland, family, culture, and roots are inevitable, and these traumas will be processed and expressed by immigrants in different ways. In the case of Alvarez's novel, they are externalized through writing, imagination, and transformation of the subject.

The book's title also makes an allusion to the phrase stamped by the U. S. Postal Service on letters that are incorrectly addressed or lacking proper identification. In *Return to Sender,* Alvarez portrays the crossing-border journey of a Mexican family to the United States: an eleven-year-old Mexican girl, Mari Cruz, her two younger "Mexicanamerican" sisters, Ofie and Luby, their father and two uncles, and also a missing mother. I write "Mexicanamerican" without hyphen or space as an effort to emphasize that this word indicates a rupture with old binary power implications and to represent, in a contemporary setting, an inseparable junction by the hyphen, dash, or space, because Alvarez invertsold power relations between Mexico and the United States by portraying a new spatial and economic configuration. The American farm owners become dependent on Mexican immigrant workers to keep their farms productive. By exposing the fragility, dependence, and need of American characters, Alvarez questions the power structure and draws the reader's attention to a new social, economic, and political order. Also, this configuration may be Alvarez's "lyrical way of rising above differences" (qtd in Brydon 12) and to propose and construct an alliance of mutual aid.

Another interesting point in Alvarez's novel is the fact that the entire fictional rural and agricultural community of Vermont, where the novel is set, is composed of immigrants from many countries and their offspring. This multi-rooted community of Vermont is full of foreign surnames that refer to the immigrant constitution of the American population. Alvarez portrays hybrid subjects formed by the encounter and combination of many cultures.

Specifically, in the case of Mexican and American characters depicted in the novel, the place of encounter of these cultures produces subjects that develop strategies of "rearticulation, translation of elements that are *neither the One … nor the Other …* but *something else besides*, which contests the terms of territories of both" (Bhabha 28, author's emphasis). Bhabha's perspective points to the imperialist implications in relation to the binary structure colonizer-colonized and the way the subjects that arise from this encounter, named the third subject, deal with differences among cultures. *Return to Sender* portrays this third subject and this third space that is portrayed in a mutual economic dependency different from that discussed by Bhabha. This mutual dependency may generate situations in which conflicts and differences may be smoothed over.

The tensions between Americans and Mexicans are not recent and they are the fuel of many discussions in the social sciences. Historical studies reveal that with the appropriation of the northern territory of Mexico by the United States, Mexican immigrants use this argument to justify and emphasize that they are not "invaders" or "aliens" they are reintegrating the land ownership that was usurped from them in the past. I will apply Bhabha's concept of the third subject, space, and vision in Alvarez's novel to demonstrate that the characters develop strategies of articulation, negotiation, adaptation, and mutual aid that go beyond the borders of history and cultural rootsin *Return to Sender*. These characters are, in this sense, hybrid subjects that more than disrupt old binary structures that make them look in one direction only (the direction of the sovereign), reinforcing dichotomies and differences, they now extend theirsight in a stereoscopic perspective. In sum, I want to highlight that cultural encounters imply in more open andventilated grounds and spaces that go beyond the mere space of intersection. Thus, rearticulation, translation of elements, argumentation, and negotiation are intensified in the place of the cultural encountersin Alvarez's novel.

The nine chapters of *Return to Sender* suggest a gestational period of characters'

subjectivities that occur in different ways throughout the narrative. Strategically, the titles are chosen after the seasons of the year during which life develops and changes. Similarly, Alvarez's cyclical narrative also demonstrates that the conflictive experiences that mark the author's life - staying and returning, arriving and departing-are also experienced by the characters, giving the readers the dynamic sensation that they are part of the process of change, like the seasons. The sub-titles are named according to the important events that occur on a dairy farm that effectively change the lives of those who inhabit it. The communion with nature functions as a source of inspiration for the journey of self-discovery and maturation experienced by the characters. Through the contemplation and understanding of nature and the connection to it, life completes its cycles, presenting conflicts but also pointing to solutions.

The novel is a polyphonic narrative. There are two first person narrators and one third person narrator that harmonically tell the story from different perspectives. Jacqueline Stefanko asserts in her article "New Ways of Telling: Latinas' Narratives of Exile and Return" that:

> The utilization of multiple narrators contributes to the critique that the theory of the subject of consciousness as a unitary and synthesizing agent of knowledge is always already a posture of domination. Polyphonic narration is one mode of crossing the threshold into the anomalous, impure, and unstable. That crossing enables the reader and writer to participate in the breaking down of constructed, pure boundaries and to engage in complex heterogeneous dialogues. (51)

Thus, in an attempt to give voice to the immigrant character in *Return to Sender*, Alvarez constructs a narrative that enables readers to participate actively along with the characterin the process of theconstructionof meaning, discussing and understanding different points of view

as well as flowing through fluid and permeable spaces, in a dynamic process that allows reflections on the three perspectives of the story.

The first verse of the song *La Golondrina*[2](The Swallow), a famous immigrant anthem, opens the novel and represents a journey of departure, arrival, remaining and/or return. It also suggests that aerial borders are inexistent for migratory birds that freely fly back and forth from north to south, and that the geographical borders viewed from above are equally inexistent. In other words, Alvarez uses swallows to represent open spaces and the possibility of transposition of these spaces. Geographical borders and demarcated spaces are merely political constructions. Taking into account that Avtar Brah defines borders as a "political construction as well as an analytical category" (*Cartographies*180), one might say that geographical borders are arbitrary lines, constructed by political and social interests to reinforce differences. *La Golondrina* is sung throughout the novel during important events to remind us that along the journey to the north the "swallow gets lost in the cold winds and never finds its way back. This is the fear of those who leave home as well as those who stay behind awaiting their return" (Alvarez, *Return* 322). The song also emphasizes that people always need a safe and happy place to belong to (Alvarez, *Return* 322). One might ask: where is this place in the case of the Mexican characters of *Return to Sender*? Is it their home in Mexico or their new home in the United States?

The characters construct a cultural web that allows for interactions in order to negotiate strategies of coexistence. Thus, the dialogues betweenMexicans and Americans are constructed mainly from the perspective of two characters: Mari Cruz, the one-and-a-half[1] oldest daughter of a Mexican family, and Tyler Paquette, the youngest son of an American family, both of whom begin journeys of self and other-discovery in different ways: Mari uses writing and Tyler the observation of stars and planets through his telescope. Thus, while Mari

[1]. One-and-a-half generation is a term coined by Rubén Rumbaut (1991) to characterize the first immigrant generation that was educated and came of age in the U.S. See more in Min Zhou 1997.

looks down, Tyler looks up to find answers to their existential questions. The universes represented by these two characters blend together to compose a new universe that is a multicultural space.

Throughout their journeys of self-discovery, themes related to psychological, cultural, social, political, and economic issues are discussed and confronted. In this sense, animmigrant subject transformation progressively takes place. In the case of Mari, she goes from a subjugated to an emancipated position, flowing among those social segments. Furthermore, in the contemporary world, where borders are theoretically open due to technological advances flow among people and places are constant. In this setting, the novel's characters negotiate their inner and outer spaces in relation to others, and from this interaction a new generation of immigrant arises, one more connected with the world, more conscious of itself, andmore critical to the point of questioning the old and well-known stigma of dominated, subjugated, and inferior people. Thus, the fictional Mexican immigrant does not want to be hidden, suffocated, or afraid of exposing its bicultural subjectivity.

Alvarez uses historical facts, themes, and motifs from both American and Mexican culture to illustrate and enrich her narrative and often intertwines these elements, suggesting a possibility ofcultural communion. In the first pages of the novel, readers are immersed in the past, in the time of the American westward expansion,when the Native Americans,especially the Cherokee, were forced by the government to leave their territories and settle in relocation areas west of the Mississippi River. This historical reference reminds readers that migratory movements are not recent events. The path the Native Americans traversed was terrible and most of them died from starvation or disease. The few natives who survived called this journey The Trail of Tears.And yet, the movement of leaving home/homeland to cross borders is not always associated with a painful and tragic event.

Walter Ewing explains in his article, entitled "Opportunity and Exclusion: a Brief

History of U.S. Immigration Policy", that the United States and colonial society were constructed by successive fluxes of immigrants from all over the globe, and "public and political attitudes in relation to immigrants have always been ambivalent and contradictory, and sometimes hostile" (1). As the current debate over undocumented immigration continues to increase, it is important to keep in mind that "everyone in the United States ultimately descends from an immigrant, even Native Americans whose ancestors arrived [t]here thousands of years ago" (1). Ewing points that for centuries, the U.S. economy increasedlargely intertwined with the Mexican economy, and increasingly dependent on Mexican workers (1). This situation is portrayed in *Return to Sender* and demonstrates that this relation still remains.

The United States acquired Florida from Spain in 1819. Walter Ewing describes that "[t]he annexation of Texas in 1845 precipitated a war with Mexico that ended in 1848, when Mexico ceded roughly two-fifths of its territory to the United States" (3).One of the most impacting consequences was the fact that families and communities that lived for generations in the Mexican territory were suddenly found on U.S. territory, and"divided by a newly defined US-Mexico border" (3). This historical division marked the lives of these new border subjects.

According to the same article, World War II also contributed to harsh farm labor shortages, as American men joined the armed forces or went to cities to work in factories that supported the war (5). Thus, the U.S. government in 1942 authorized "the large scale importation of temporary agricultural workers from Mexico" (Ewing 5). These workers constituted the *bracero* program that frequently worked inharsh conditions. Although the U.S. did not restrict the entry of around five million field worker immigrants from Mexico in that period, the legal immigration process was difficult and expensive, mainly for these poor, less-educated field workers. In this way, undocumented immigration from Mexico rose

simultaneously with the *bracero* program, still in operation. Ewing concludes that as a result, “the federal government in 1954 launched Operation Wetback, rounding up and deporting about one million Mexican immigrants, as well as some legal immigrants and US citizens of Mexican descent” (5).

More recently, President Barak Obama announced on January 29, 2013 at Del Sol High School, in Las Vegas, the government’s Four Part Plan for comprehensive Immigration Reform. He recalled that what defines America as a nation of immigrants is who they are in their “bones”, in a deeper sense of their constitution, and asserts:“people used to forget that most of ‘us’ used to be ‘them’...It’s really important for us to remember our history. Unless you’re one of the first Americans, a Native American, you came from someplace else. Somebody brought you,”(President, *The White House.gov*) referring to the multi-ethnic background of the American population. The topics presented above are largely discussed in many episodes of *Return to Sender*.

In the interview to Vermont Public Radio, referred to above, Alvarez quotes the writer Anna Quindlen, for whom “Immigration is never about today, always about tomorrow” and completes Quindlen statement by saying that

> [t]he immigrant question is not going away … America has become a nation dependent on the presence of these newcomers … The economy in this country is in such rocky condition. We best think twice if we’re going to deport the people who are helping in many ways to keep this [the US] infra-structure viable.

In this sense, Alvarez points out the need to establish immigration and social policies that benefit the economic relations between the subjects involved in the process. In short, the United States is still wrestling with its own historical identity as a nation of immigrants. The contemporary world is orchestrated not only by multi-dependent relations among people, but

also by a construction of a web of multi-solidarity.

The contemporary world may be imagined as a great web in which subjects from all around the globe are connected, sharing information and cultures. The eyes of the world invade the intimacy of people and the eyes of contemporary subjects become broader in a perspective that goes much further than the space of home and cultural roots. Bhabha argues, in *The Location of Culture*, that "the borders between home and world become confused; and uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting" (9). With Bhabha's perspective, it is not hard to perceive that the contemporary subject does not know where these reconfigured spaces begin and end. The contemporary subject develops adjustments, articulations, and negotiations in order to adapt and fit this new, intertwined, fluid, and speedy world configuration. However, these maneuvers do not mean necessarily a totally peaceful coexistence.

Contradictorily, contemporary times seem to lead to severe discrimination against ethnic groups, which may be one of its bitter ironies. Although technological advances seem to theoretically enlarge the bordersbetween cultures, it would be naïve to believe that these open spaces are free of conflicts and movements of resistance. Conflicts exist since they are part of the nature of society and borders will always exist in some way and at some level. Good examples, but with different goals, are the neo-Nazi Skinheads, the movements of supporting minorities, and the most recent controversial anti-immigration law adopted by the state of Arizona and copied by other American states. The law's main aim, among others, is to ensure that local law enforcement officers may check the legal status of anyone they suspect to be illegal in the state, taking into account mainly their physical appearance.

It is clear therefore that, although the world enlarges its borders and facilitates the approximation among cultures, paradoxically this configuration also leads to insulation, confinement, and rejection. Contemporary dynamics and their subjects

invokepublicpoliciesable tofollow these reconfigured and redefined spaces. One of Alvarez's abilities in *Return to Sender* is to create a space surrounded by multiple borders: political, social, economic, and cultural. She presents possibilities of rupture with these borders,or even of trespassing them through writing and imagination. The characters' mobility toward and through these borders is one of the most interesting aspects of Alvarez's novel.

People are migrants by nature. Dionne Brand points out, in *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes of Belonging*, that these movements occur by force, necessity or option but in any case "there is a sense of return that is lodged unconsciously and instinctively in the mind" (24) that can make the host country a place welcome or not. Thus, people' search for a place of belonging and a desire or necessity to move leads them to be wanderers over the earth. Avtar Brah argues in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* that "if the circumstances of leaving are important, so, too, are those of arrival and settling down" (182). In other words, people daily experience a kind of odyssey. The process of dislocation and settlement in a foreign land, of interacting with a multiplicity of different cultures, reproduces, reconfigures, and accommodates different perspectives and concepts. Despite the fact that globalization seems to disrupt theoretically the borders, limits, and boundaries among cultures, expanding areas that were previously restricted, it is clear that the struggle of immigrant subjects for space, recognition, acceptance and legitimization of their rights is still quite arduous.

The circumstances presented above are important in order to introduce Julia Alvarez's *Return to Sender*, the object of my research, which represents a contemporary spatial and cultural configuration as well as suggests that the attitudes, behavior, and position of immigrant subjects have changed in relation to the actual context of a globalized world. Alvarez presents characters in movement, searching for references and cultural identity amid a multiplicity of cultures. These characters become like scrambled puzzle pieces, sharing their

culture and bringing to life hybrid subjects connected to broad multicultural information. In the spaces of cultural encounters, the subjects in constant flow develop strategies, hone abilities, and position themselves critically in relation to others and to the spaces they inhabit. Metaphorically speaking, all these movements tend to pluck cultural roots from the ground,making them more aerial. This new configuration resembles airplane routes that show fluxes from one point to another, here and thither, a constant back and forth movement everywhere.

To analyze the contemporary immigrant's behavior, its mobility and connections in Julia Alvarez's *Return to Sender*, this work has as a starting point the concept proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in the work *A Thousand Plateaus*, especially the chapter called "Rhizomes". These theoreticians use names and structures from biology to explain metaphorically how society works as collective organisms. They analyze the behavior and relations of roots and rhizomes and compare them to human society, arguing that these axes are intrinsically connected and behave similarly.

According to the authors, there are substantial differences between roots and rhizomes: in relation to location, roots are positioned vertically in the ground, while rhizomes are displayed as a weft or a kind of network. Roots fix the individual to the ground at one point of intersection, while rhizomes unite and sustain multiple individuals at the same time, occupying a broader space in the darkness of the underground. Another important aspect is that rhizomes are not roots, but stems. Unlike the roots, stems are structures that generate leaves, flowers, and fruits. Roots soak up nutrients and sap from the ground to nourish one pivotal individual, but rhizomes drive the nutrients to more than one individual. In sum, rhizomes have two functions: to sustain multiple individuals and to nourish them as well.

Plant morphology teaches us that rhizomes are tightly bound structures with the function of sustaining individuals connected to them, as well as to serve as a strategy of

survival in a particular area. They are heterogeneous and not dichotomous, that is to say, they consist of multiple lines that extend and move in all directions; they rupture under pressure of opposing forces, but regenerate at the point at which the rupture occurs, reconstructing and reestablishing new connections with other individuals at other points. Rhizomes are not as deep as roots; they resemble a kind of map with multiple inputs and outputs. If we imagine the ground as a border between the external environment and the internal environment of the underground, we can infer that rhizomes live always on the edge; they are border individuals.

Another interesting aspect of rhizomes is the difficulty of finding out where they begin and end. There is no hierarchy within their structure as often seen in a vertical root, where there is a deep pivotal base and other dichotomous, i.e. minor bifurcated roots, from the main one. There is, however, a particular type of rhizomes known as *stolons*[2] that grow above the ground. They are more visible, more exposed to external factors, such as the weather and threats from humans and animals.

It is in the light of these concepts that I analyze Alvarez's novel *Return to Sender*, focusing on the emergence of a new model of contemporary immigrant that I call *Stolon Immigrant.* This immigrant was not presented, discussed or even analyzed by any other scientist or writer in Alvarez's novel or in any other place. From the concepts developed by the scientists mentioned above I coined the term Stolon Immigrant.The fictional place of encounter between Mexicans and Americans is the prolific environment to the Stolon immigrant. Unlike the rhizomatic immigrant, term already known in literature, the Stolon immigrant does not want to be hidden in the darkness of the underground. S/he projects her/himself defiantly onto public spaces, moving in all directions, connecting to multiple cultural roots that inhabit the same area. The Stolon immigrant is something new, as Gloria

[2]. The difference of spelling for stolon(s) with small "s" and with capital "S" is due to the fact that there are two situations in which the word stolon appear in the text: one is used to explain the term from biology to which I used the small "s", because I consider it an ordinary word, such as rhizomes, roots, plateaus, and so on. The word Stolon with a capital "S" is used to designate the Stolon Immigrant, which is a special subject.

Anzaldúa described, “something more than mere duality or a synthesis of duality” (*Borderlands,*46). It searches for oxygenation, a ventilated space, fluidity, and visibility, refusing the U.S.-UStedes [Us,The United States - Ustedes, Mexicans inhabiting our space] dichotomy. This new “being” arises without a fixed and unique cultural root. It has origin, history, and memory but these cultural roots also move in all directions like an intertwined web, dialoguing with, and being part of other cultures. Thus, the main claim of my research is to present this new contemporary immigrant subject: the Stolon Immigrant.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I analyze the genesis of the Stolon immigrant, presenting an overview ofthe scientific thought and theoretical framework that will be useful for the comprehension of the Stolon immigrant’s behavior, as well as the development of concepts and theories applicable to human interrelations and contemporary social behavior.Again, I call the reader’s attention to the fact that these concepts will be used as metaphors to analyze *Return to Sender*. The second sub-chapter is destined to present examples of how dialogues between science and literature take place. These dialogues are not recent, and for this reason, it is a topic that arouses interest in both areas where the imagination finds fertile terrain. The third sub-chapter focuses on Deleuze’s and Guattari’s theory related to roots and rhizomes (the biology of plants) as well as on some contemporary critics and theoreticians who also present important concepts that might be useful for a better understanding of the construction of the Stolon immigrant subject. Finally, in the fourth sub-chapter I apply all theories and concepts discussed in the previous sub-chapters to Alvarez’s novel *Return to Sender,* focusing mainly on the behavior of the Mexican immigrant character, Mari Cruz, who could be considered a prototype of the Stolonimmigrant.

The construction of my argument related to the Stolon immigrant is based on the concepts and ideas raised by the scientists already mentioned. I construct my thesis on the stolon immigrant concept through the appropriation of those concepts, rearranging,

reconfiguring, and rereading them metaphorically in the novel.

In the second chapter, I analyze the character Mari Cruz's writing in the format of letters and a diary to show that her writing follows the same pattern as her Stolon subjectivity. Her subjectivity is composed of many selves represented by the letters addressees that interact and make new connections with many others characters represented and aggregated in her final diary.I begin with an overview of Julia Alvarez's narrative style, focusing on how she constructs her narrative structure, and how she deals with concepts such as bilingualism and multiculturalism in contemporary American society. In some points there are similitudes between the author's writing and the character Mari's writing. However, the novel cannot be considered an autobiographical or a nonfiction production because there are many other points that refute these approaches. Alvarez wrote some autobiographical and nonfiction pieces such as *Something to Declare, Once Upon a Quinceañera: Coming of Age in the USA*, and *A Wedding in Haiti*. Some of her works also portray her family experience during dictatorship in the Dominican Republic such as *In the Time of Butterflies and In The Name of Salomé* for examples.

The second and third sub-chapters are intended to analyze each textual genre presented by Mari - letters and diary - separately, to better understand how the Stolon immigrant character establishesconnections through her writing and how she usesletters and diary as strategies of physical, cultural, and psychological survival.

CHAPTER ONE

THE STOLON IMMIGRANT'S GENESIS

1.1 - The Origin: an Overview of the Scientific Thought

> Darwin's great novelty, perhaps, was that of inaugurating the thought of individual difference. The leitmotiv of *The Origin of Species* is: we do not know what individualdifference is capable of !We do not know how far it can go... (Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*248)

For a long time, scholars and scientists have associated natural events and elements of nature with human behavior and society. The French philosopher August Comte, claimed as the founder of sociology, was inspired by biology to formulate what was known as the Organicist Model to explain society as a collective organism. According to Comte, society may be understood as an organism composed of interdependent parts that are responsible for the proper functioning of the whole system. In other words, the Organicist Model describes society as an autonomous entity analogous to, and following the same development pattern of a living biological organism. Comte's sociological perspective is grounded mainly on four great social roots: family, work, home, and religion. Many other theoreticians, who are Comte's successors, continued his path to explain the systematic function of human interrelations in society with a glance at the natural sciences. In the following paragraphs, I discuss some of the more important concepts proposed by scientists, scholars, and philosophers that will provide the basis for the present research.I want to highlight here that

these concepts will be used to illustrate a different perspective of analyzing a literary piece, in this case, *Return to Sender*.

One of the main contributions to the study of society as a living organism came from Charles Darwin in his work *The Origin of Species,* published in 1859, which proposes that human society works similarly to a living being in nature. According to Darwin, living organisms that are more adapted to the environment are more likely to survive than those that are not able to do so. This is what he considers natural selection. It was the British philosopher Herbert Spencer, however, who applied Darwin's theories to social realms and disseminated the idea that groups and societies evolve by means of conflict, competition, and adaptation. Spencer is best known for coining the phrase the "survival of the fittest" to explain that more adapted individuals have more chances of surviving and evolving. According to him, the process of human evolution is not exclusively entangled with biological structures (genes). There is something else involved in the process; in this case, the individual's ability to adapt to different environments not only in scientific terms, but also in terms of culture.

In 1944, the American historian Richard Hofstadterstudied the concept proposed by Darwin in his work *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, applying it to human relation studies. Hofstadteruses the term Social Darwinism to explain society as an organism in constant evolution, but shows that the application of Darwin's theories to society strengthened imperialism, capitalism, racism, nationalism, militarism, and was largely used to justify power relations and reinforce differences. Social Darwinists claimed that nations and races were engaged in a struggle for survival where the strongest survives, and, in fact, only the strongest deserved to survive. Mankind was, thus, divided into binarisms that encouraged (and still does in some ways) the idea of superior and inferior races. The conflicts that emerge from this idea are considered by Social Darwinists both biological necessities and a means to human evolution. This perspective is grounded on the biological imperatives that are the needs of

living organisms to perpetuate their existence: survival, territorialism, competition, reproduction, quality of life, and group formation. These imperatives constitute the basis of the natural selection proposed by Darwin.

Other authors offered resistance to Social Darwinism, such as Piotr Kropotkin. In his work entitled *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, Kropotkin advocates that solidarity among individuals of the same group or species is as important to their survival as their adaptation to the environment. According to Kropotkin, "The human being is not an exception in nature. It is also subject to the general principle of mutual aid that guarantees the best chances of survival of those who most support each other" (100), contradicting those purely biological aspects proposed by his counterparts.

It is important to notice that studies ofsociology do not dissociate the human element from its relations with nature and the environment in which they are inserted. The encounter between social science and natural science gave rise to what is known as "Sociobiology" - a branch of biology that studies social behavior, addressing concepts such as ethology (behavioral study), evolution, sociology, and genetics. In other words, it is the study of human beings in a macroscopic perspective. This term was disseminated by E. O. Wilson in *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*. In his work, the author seems to reinforce the idea of his predecessors, but also pointing out a recurrent topic, which is "the importance of reciprocal altruism as one of the strongest social traits" (551).

Umberto Maturana's and Francisco Varela's work, *A Árvore do Conhecimento*[The Tree of Knowledge], is another good example that reflects the fascination natural sciences exert on individual thought and social behavior. The authors' approach is grounded on "how the social system operates from the perspective of natural sciences that must be known in both organization and structure" (15). Maturana and Varela explain that the discussion of social learning through culture is the only remaining alternative that is rationally valid to reduce

social tensions and to reverse the process of the disintegration of modern societies, guiding themby contrast to a social construction of mutual collaboration (18). According to them, contemporary societies have a universal cognitive nature, and for this reasonsocieties should produce a level of consensus whichcan be explained as ageneral agreement that allows collaborative problem solving, prevents the tyranny of the majority, and allows the building of trust and the sharing of information, particularly during conflicts.

There is no possibilityof discussing a hierarchy between cultures / knowledge, or whether one culture / type of knowledge can be better than another. It is precisely the uniqueness of each through which individuals can realize what is universal among them. People from different cultures generally try to solve differences by first focusing on what is common among them, such as language, art, knowledge, religious beliefs, and social, economic, and political organization.It is noted that the particularities of each culture should not be used to justify social inequalities orto be a cause for disqualification for communication among them.Thus, consensus seeksa certain unity in diversity that allows understanding among the complex and interdependent modern societies, which, according to Maturana and Varela, is achieved only by mutual collaboration.

Maturana and Varela point out two important features for reaching this consensus: the natural biological altruism that is a common biological force for all those who live in a group, and a conscious reflection about social interrelation (23). The authors also argue that “No altruism, no social phenomenon” (19), advising that biological altruism (natural and intrinsic altruism, or solidarity in Kropotkin’s terms) is a pre-condition for living in society. The authors warn that individuals in contemporary societies are committing suicide by employing the strength of social cohesion(the strongest power in a Darwinian perspective) against other humans (23).

Therefore, in relation to conscious reflection, the authors point to the need to think

about the value and significance of other cultures. According to them, if one is not willing to review any mismatch or cultural divergence, one will never achieve a creative coexistence and will always generalize the bitterness that turns into aggressive control or hypocritical submission (24). Thus, the authors state that, only through thought and conscious reflections that aim to understand social interrelation, can people open mutual spaces for coexistence. In this sense, Maturana and Varela advise that the most urgent and difficult challenge faced by contemporary society is the creation of knowledge and understanding that enable social acquaintanceship (26). Thus, Maturana and Varela' scientific contribution is important to analyze the evolution of human beings, and also human relations, based not on terms of biological criteria or individualistic and essentialized perspectives, but on reflection on modern society as an organism of mutual aid.

In a contemporary approach, the ethnologist and evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins presents in his book *The Selfish Gene* an analogy between the transmission of genetic information and the transmission of information by culture, grounded on the Darwinian Theory of the Evolution of Species. According to him, "[B]iology ought to be seen as exciting as a mystery story, for a mystery story is exactly what biology is" (21). I understand that everything in nature and the universe is intrinsically connected in some way, influencing people, creating, and changing events around the world. The relations between nature, human beings, and the spaces they inhabit and share, however, do not always function in complete harmony. Conflicts may arise.

Contradicting his predecessors, Dawkins, who is considered one of the most prominent contemporary thinkers, asserts that "Philosophy and the subjects known as 'Humanities' are still taught almost as if Darwin had never lived" (24) and prophesies that "No doubt this will change in time" (24). Dawkins defends the idea that cultural transmission is similar to genetic transmission in the sense that both may lead to a certain kind of

“evolution” of the human species. He also asserts that all living beings are machines built by genes that have survived for millions of years in a highly competitive world because of a predominant quality: selfishness. Nevertheless, he attributes one’s individual’s superiority in relation to another to the fact that selfishness is a natural criterion of selection, protection, preservation, and a possibility for evolution and continuity.

However, Dawkins also asserts that there are some special circumstances in which a gene (the way Dawkins refers to an individual, a person or the human being in biological terms) may maintain its goals by cultivating a limited form of altruism (Maturana’s and Kropotkin’s perspective). In simple words, some genes(individuals, people, etc) help one another in order to maintain the smooth functioning of the whole organism (society)like the cogs of a machine. Also, the way one thinks or behaves demonstrating that she/he cares about others more than about her/himself helps the preservation of the whole group. For instance, a bird that cries outto call the group’s attention to a predator’s presence puts its own life at risk to save the others, because it focuses the predator’s attention on itself. Dawkins’s perspective relates only to the fact that an act like this “decreases or increases the expectations of survival of the supposed altruist as well as the expectations of survival of the supposed beneficiary” (8). This is only possible if one altruistically moves a step forward toward the other.

In general, then, it seems that the common idea, the point of intersection shared by the thinkers mentioned above is that solidarity, mutual aid, the capacity foradaptation in a hostile environment, associated with a conscious reflection on individual roles as transforming agents may ensure the evolutionary process of human beings in biological and, consequently, in social organization scales. This is definitely not an easy and simple process, mainly because when people and cultural diversities interact, some differences may arise, and the selfish aspect highlighted by Dawkins may prevail, encouraging differences, competition, and individualism.

At this point, I want to call attention to the behavior adopted mainlyby two of Alvarez's characters: the little Mexican girl, Mari Cruz, and her American boy friend, Tyler Paquette. I question whether the characters' behavior encompasses characteristics of mutual survival in the space of cultural encounter. Are they selfish, enclosed within their own world and culture, or are they altruists, calling attention to themselves to save the others? How do they position themselves in relation to others? Is there mutual aid and solidarity among people from different cultures in Alvarez's novel? Do they adapt to each other? How do they deal with differences? These questions will be addressed further on.

Taking a step forward in Dawkins's theory, another striking point calls my attention. He asserts that "Almost everything that is uncommon in human beings can be summarized in one word: 'culture'" (111), which is personal and self-constructed by each person who is immersed in a culture. Dawkins seems to reinforce Maturana's and Varela's perspective of a universal cognitive nature that seeks to highlight the singularities among cultures (language, art, etc.) finding what they have in common to construct a consensus.

Dawkins's perspective indicates that culture can be disseminated from one individual to another without losing its roots along generations. Unlike culture, a gene progressively loses its primary roots along generations (111). In other words, a gene that one inherits from parents (genetic information) is progressively lost through succeeding generations, mainly because of miscegenation among people from different origins and cultures. Broadly speaking, one can carry and propagate cultural information through generations, but s/he will not carry and propagate the same genetic burden inherited from the first generation. In a process of miscegenation (mixture), we have to keep in mind that it can occur both in biological and cultural terms, and that we are both biological and social beings. Genetic (physical traits) and cultural information move in opposite directions: while cultural information is added by generations, genetic information is reduced by generations.

The system of information storage isproportionally inverted when we consider genetic and cultural information. For instance, Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*. This masterpiece has lasted for generations and it is still performed today by many people around the world, with different languages, readings, and adaptations, but the first version of the story remains intact. If we think about Shakespeare's genetic information, his offspring probably underwent so many genetic blendings that they do not conserve any trace of their famous forefather. One can say that what remains of Shakespeare is more related to what he left in terms of his literary works, papers, and documents than to his genes. In Dawkins's words, "if you contribute to the world's culture, if you have a good idea, compose a tune, invent a sparking plug, write a poem, it may live on, intact, long after your genes have dissolved" (199). One may say that it is quite obvious, but this is the point I want to reach to prove that Alvarez's character, Mari Cruz, acts in the grounds of arts and ideas through both her writing (letters and diary) and her attitude in relation to the other in the host country. Her ability to establish connections and disseminate ideas through her writing and behavior are exactly what characterize her as a Stolon Immigrant. There is an effort from Mari to tell that questions of origin, genes, or physical traits would not prevail in human relations, rather arts and ideas (memes). Thus, I perceive that Mari's behavior reflected in Dawkins's concept seems to point that human evolution and the evolution of human relations in the contemporary society are more related to what people produce in terms of arts and ideas than genetic changes properly or changes in the body's constitution, differently from what occurred with our more distant ancestors. It is science watching human beings in a non-scientific or biological perspective.

Dawkins points out that "Language seems to 'evolve' by non-genetic means and at a rate which is orders of magnitude faster than genetic evolution" (212). In other words, language seems to self-reprogram, reconstruct, reorganize, and propagate faster than any other genetic data. In this sense, language, including its forms of expression (literature, for

example) may guarantee the human being's preservation, history, and memory. Language creates a record that can be accessed anytime, indicating the evolutionary process of human thought and consequently ofhuman beings in relation to the events they experience. Thus, cultural transmission and the records of this knowledge such as literature, diaries, letters, memoirs, biographies, history, music, plays, and other forms of recording are disseminated to others at a much greater speed than genetic information, in Dawkins's perspective. Every time cultural information is transmitted and received by another individual, it is converted through in added and incorporated values.

To demonstrate pedagogically that language, culture, and arts evolve faster than genetic evolution and how they contribute to perpetuate human existence, Dawkins coined a word that conveys an idea of a unit of cultural transmission or a unit of reproduction or imitation (replicates): the "mimeme". The word derives from Greek and is related to "memory" and also from the French word "même" that means "same, proper". He shortened "mimeme" to "meme" in order to maintain a resemblance to the word gene and to facilitate the interrelation and comprehension of how these words relate. Therefore, memes may be ideas, catch-phrases, arts in general, language, concepts, and so on, that "jump" (are propagated) from one brain to another exactly like an aerial map that shows fluxes from one point to another. Memes are structures in constant movement. Thus, memes contain cultural information just as genes contain genetic information, and both are related to the process of the evolution of human beings, but in different realms. Memes and genes are related to the process of reproduction, evolution, survival, and the guarantee of perpetuation of human beings:genes are related to biological traits while memes are related to cultural aspects.

In this sense, Dawkins affirms that if someone plants a fertile meme in another's mind, s/he literally seeds or "parasitizes" the second mind, turning it into a vehicle or a tool to spread memes to others (192). Dawkins also explains: "[…] you literally parasitize [a] brain,

turning it into a vehicle for the meme's propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell" (215). He ends up by citing what N. K. Humphrey previously states in the preface to *TheSelfish Gene:*"memes should be regarded as living structures, not just metaphorically but technically" (192).One might ask about how memes are propagated. Dawkins gives this answer: "it propagates through the written and spoken word, music, and arts" (193). Written memes can be propagated continually for thousands of years, usually due to the potential durability of written records. At first sight, however, it seems that oral memes do not propagate with high fidelity or may have an opposed final objective, because every time one hears an idea and communicates it to another person, s/he probably may reshape and change the emphasis, blending her/his own ideas with the ideas of other people. Nonetheless, Dawkins also asserts that antagonistic or binary memes (as good/evil, love/hate, rich/poor, I/the other, and so on) tend to mutually help one other in order to survive, and changes of meanings are accepted as a form of adjustment.

If we imagine genes as active agents working intentionally for their own survival, it may be possible to think that memes function the same way. Thus, would memes be important to construct a contemporary society wherein information is exchanged faster? Would they be a guarantee of human being's perpetuation and evolution in modern society? Would memes become the most important technological tool of culture's survival in the contemporary world and, by extension, the survival ofhumankind? These questions must be analyzed by taking into consideration Dawkins's advice: "when we look at the evolution of cultural traits and at their survival value, we must be clear whose survival we are talking about" (117), because biologists and scientists in general are accustomed to seek for advantages at the genetic level. They focus their observation on the natural selection that privileges the strongest, smartest, fittest, and more evolved species. These characteristics do not fit at the cultural level: how can one consider survival value in relation to culture? Based on which aspects does one's culture

prevail over the other? Can I affirm that one's culture is stronger, smarter, and fitter than others? It is of paramount importance to highlight here that I am not considering the ideological and political aspects of dominant and dominated cultures related to colonization processes because it would deviate the focus of my analysis.

Geoffrey Fox, in his work *Hispanic Nation: Culture, Politics and the Construction of* Identity, also discusses meme. According to him, "memes can parasitize equally a left-or right-thinking brain" (11) referring to tactical differences that a meme may perform in brains that respond differently to external events, which can generate a more or less effective action. Fox claims that "the Right tactics of cooperation and negotiation may be associated with a vision of social transformation that is ultimately more radical than of the Left tactic of confrontation" (11), which may lead to a reaction of resistance. Based on this assumption, I may affirm that the character, Mari Cruz, chooses the right tactics of negotiation and cooperation that permit what Fox calls of "coassimilation" in which Mexicans and Americans learn from the other: "together they create a new cultural synthesis" (236) that does not mean a common culture.

In this sense, it should be taken into consideration the fact that cultural traits, knowledge, and the perception of the other, favored by cultural interaction, evolve in the way they do simply because it can be an advantage for "both sides" in Dawkins's perspective. Thus, cultural traits (language and arts) may be objects of deconstruction of old social, economic, and political paradigms constructed by differences.The cultural traits, thus, "provide the possibility for new social and political coalitions *del estelado, del otrolado*, and everywhere in between" (Ramlow 185). In regard to this, the contemporary research mentioned above seem to share the same perspective in which binary constructions do not tend to thrive in contemporary society, and people from different cultures that come together for mutual benefit have more chances of survival or to maintain themselves in a different

culture. In this sense, I argue that, in contemporary society, cultural connections may evolve instinctively in order to be more advantageous for the cultures involved, conserving the group's survival and/or maintenance, while questions of origin, genes (physical traits), and race become issues of secondary focus.

It is important to mention here that I am not advocating the one-tribe nation. I understand that each culture has its own specificities and speaking of a one-tribe nation is hazardous, but I consider the possibility of a positive mutual coexistence that may benefit the group as a whole. In this thesis, I consider the importance of memes as a tool of cultural transmission, of dissemination of ideas, and as a possibility of progress in the evolution of human relations in contemporary society.

Another important contribution, and the main basis of this research, comes from the approach proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their work, *In A Thousand Plateaus*, specially the chapter "Rhizomes". The authors compare the behavior, development, and functions of roots and rhizomes with human society, and discuss how biological and social structures are intrinsically connected and act in a similar way. As presented in the introductory chapter of this research, Deleuze and Guattari metaphorically compare the structure and function of roots and rhizomes with social phenomena. First of all, it is important to detail the main characteristics of roots and rhizomes that will be used further to analyze Alvarez's novel *Return to Sender*. These characteristics can be summarized in four main topics: location, structure, function, and capacity for reconstruction.

In relation to location and structure, roots are positioned vertically in the ground with some ramifications attached to the pivotal structure, while rhizomes are displayed as a juxtaposed and underground web. Rhizomes are not deep structures (as most roots are) and they resemble a map with multiple inputs and outputs. For this reason, it is difficult to know where rhizomes begin or end. According to Deleuze and Guattari,

> [Rhizome] is not a multiple derived from the One, or to which One is added (*n* + 1). It is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overspills. It constitutes linear multiplicities with *n* dimensions. (21).

Thus, if we imagine the ground as a border between the underground and above ground, rhizomes are always on the edge; they are border individuals. In biology, the term individual is used for any species under scrutiny. This is the reason I use the term individuals here in a biological perspective. The functions of both structures are mainly to fix, sustain, and nurture individuals (plants). However, roots fix, sustain, and nurture only one individual, while rhizomes do that for multiple individuals at the same time in a broader area.

The capacity of regeneration of both structures is also an interesting aspect to be observed. If they are plucked from the ground, roots have less capacity for reconstruction. On contrary, rhizomes may self- reconstruct at the point in which the rupture occurs, reestablishing new connections with other individuals at other points. It is of paramount importance to mention here that rhizomes are not properly roots, but stems. Unlike roots, stems generate leaves, flowers, and fruits. Also, stems do not present a hierarchical level. Hierarchy is often observed in a vertical root structure, where there is a deep pivotal base and other bifurcated roots connected to the principal. As already mentioned in the Introduction, there is a particular type of rhizome known as stolon located above the ground which is more visible and exposed to external factors and influences.

Although a stolon is not considered a structure that evolves from a rhizome in a biological perspective (because they have the same structure and functions, but are located in different places), in literary terms, I would say that it is possible, and I will explain why in the following sections. The application of this concept to the analysis of *Return to Sender*suggests

the appearance of a new kind of immigrant character that has the characteristics of a stolon that is nurturing, sustaining, and connecting individuals, differing, however, from a rhizome in one aspect: a stolon does not remain suffocated, hidden in the darkness of the underground like a rhizome. It needs oxygenation and ventilated spaces. Under the light of those concepts presented above, this work aims to analyze Julia Alvarez's novel *Return to Sender* presenting to readers the genesis of a new kind of contemporary immigrant subject that I termed Stolon Immigrant.

In this sense, the focus of my thesis is not to be a general defense of the theory of species evolution or Social Darwinism or a rescue of any theory here applied to justify or reinforce differences in Alvarez's novel; rather, it takes some concepts discussed by natural sciences, especially biology, and applies them to the analysis of the immigrant character's behavior and her cultural interrelation and interaction with nature in *Return to Sender*. I wish to prove that, regardless of genetic heritage and its traits, solidarity, mutual aid, and strategies of adaptation(connections) in the space of intersection of different cultural formations constitute social imperatives that guarantee the evolution and survival of human beings in contemporary society. Finally, this thesis explores the consequences of the dialogues between science and literature in the fruitful terrain presented in Alvarez's novel.

1.2 - Literature and the Natural Sciences

The paths of literature and the natural sciences have crossed in many ways over time. Since they are parts of human nature, they are connected in some way. The fascinating world of science (including biology) has been received by contemporary literature as one of the possibilities for imagining and understanding nature and human relations in a context where scientific and technological advances lead writers, philosophers, scientists, poets, and scholars to cross boundaries. What primarily have writers, poets, and scientists in common? I would

say: imagination, the pivotal element that stirs their curiosity, instigates them to try to figure out what remains hidden, the desire to uncover and explore the mysteries of life, even though the strategies used by them are different. Scientists focus their analysis on systematic observation of events, precise investigation, and a proposal of results. On the other hand, writers and poets do not rely on a unique result, fact or event; rather they open up a range of possibilities for observation and interpretation. The communication and liaison between these two areas create countless opportunities for dialogue. There are many scientists who realize the importance of having an eye on literature, and writers who search through dialogues with the sciences to grasp human nature and the universe around them. Literature and science are not enclosed in their own understanding of the world, but they extend the field of perception toward one another as a form of counter-weight, a way to leave the door ajar for the unknown and imagination.

The first American woman astronomer, Maria Mitchel, for instance, had already claimed the importance of imagination to science, affirming that "We especially need imagination in science. It is not all mathematics, nor all logic, but it is somewhat beauty and poetry" (*nwhm.org*). The physicist Carl Sagan states in his work *Cosmos* that "Imaginationwill often carry us to worlds that never were. But without it we go nowhere" (4).The American theoretical physicist, Richard Feynman, wrote a poem entitled "Atom in the Universe", expressing his passion for science in poetic language. In literature, the American poet, essayist, and journalist Walt Whitman, declares his passion for nature and human nature through his well-known verses of *Leaves of Grass.* In Brazil, Augusto dos Anjos's verses "Psicologia de um Vencido" [Psycology of a Loser] among others is a good example of how the poet was able to transmute science into poetic expression. Thus, it seems that there is no way to experience, feel, and represent life and everything that involves the human universe without speaking of imagination as an important constituent of human nature, and also

without mentioning the environment in which they develop. The two are somehow connected.

Throughout centuries, literature as well as the sciences in general havehad anxiety, curiosity, desire, and imagination with relation to nature and the unknown. Peter Morton states in his work *The Vital Science: Biology and the Literary Imagination 1860-1900*that

> Writers capitalized on prevailing uncertainties and used them to their own artistic or polemic ends. Many ideas were thus used by many writers to warn, encourage or inspire people, and the discussion ranges wildly from minor fiction to major novels. There is a tracing of obscure connections that places great pressure on the assumption that there is an unavoidable pool of scientific notions into which a novelist is plunged (4).

In this way, literature has found in science a material peculiarly susceptible to imaginative transformation. Hamlet, for instance, speaks to Horatio: “There are more things in heaven and earth … than are dreamt of in your philosophy” (Shakespeare, *Hamlet* scene V) reminding us the numberless possibilities of human encounter, the perception over the self and the other, and over the visible and imagined worlds.

Peter Morton also cites in the same work many examples that demonstrate how literary writers perceive and understand natural events, trying to explain how shifts in the technique of characterization in a novel may, to some extent, be accounted by the emergence of new problems in biology - and certainly, not only in evolutionary biology. Morton asserts that surprisingly the interrelations between biology and literature “have not yet attracted the detailed attention they deserve” (2) and states that Darwin's work is generally placed with philosophy, religion, ecology, and genetics, but its effect on the literary imagination has received the sparsest treatment.

As a good example, Morton citesDwight Culler who states: “comedy [is] the literary form which most vividly reflects the reversals in evolutionary thought, since randomness is as

vital a constituent of comedy as determinism is of tragedy" (qtd in Morton 3). Morton also affirms that the literary critic Stanley Hyman goes further than Culler's perspective by studying Darwin's own writings as imaginative organizations, as though they were poems. According to Morton, Hyman understands that "the *Origin*'s deep structure is itself a dramatic tragedy" (Morton 4). In this sense, it is largely perceived that the sciences are, indeed, philosophy and literature to those who can read and understand their symbols beyond what is materially perceived and verified. Imagination is thus on a much larger scale that goes beyond what can be detectable scientifically.

Following the same path, the English writer Herbet Wells summarizes in his work *Text Book of Biology, Part 1: Vertebrata* the connections between science (especially biology) and literature. Wells claims: "In the book of nature there are written [...] the triumphs of survival, the tragedy of death and extinction, the tragi-comedy of degradation and inheritance, the gruesome lesson of parasitism, and the political satire of colonial organisms" (42). In this sense, literature finds in the sciences, and vice versa, the necessary and essential substrate for its own existence. Thus, in the sciences as well as in literature, scientists, scholars, writers, and poets seem to be enchanted by the possibilities of finding in the observation of nature the elements that will nurture and direct their work.

Albert Einstein states, for instance, in his essay "The World as I See It" that "mystery is the most beautiful and exciting emotion one can experience". Taking a similar path, the scientist and physicist Carl Sagan affirms in the episode 11 of "Cosmos: a Personal Voyage" that "A book is the proof that humans are capable of working magic". In 1988, the Nobel Prize winning American Physicist Richard Feynman presented an interesting report entitled "The Value of Science" in which he constructs a poem about the stateliness of evolution to celebrate union and dialogue between science and literature, lamenting that poets do not write about science, and that artists do not try to portray "this remarkable thing [science]". He

questions: “Is no one inspired by our present picture of the universe?” Thus, the mysteries that involve the universe of living beings, their process of evolution, codes of survival, and their relations with other species inhabit the minds of scientists, philosophers, writers, and poets. The dialogue between science and literature is interesting in the sense that it can promote the interaction between the two areas of human knowledge that, together, may lead to a better comprehension of the eternal pursuit of human beings by “know-yourself”. I aim to celebrate this dialogue and union in Alvarez’s novel *Return to Sender* by presenting a character that search, through the observation and connection with these two areas of knowledge, a way to understand herself.

1.3- Roots, Rhizomes, and Plateaus

> I am … Leaves of Grass
> One of the Nation of many nations, the smallest the same and the largest the same …
> This is the grass that grows wherever the land is and the water is,
> This the common air that bathes the globe. (Whitman *Leaves of Grass* 16, 17)

A good example of rhizomes is grass. This excerpt from Whitman’s poem translates the multiplicities that may constitute the human body and soul. In terms of the body (genes), rhizomes can be represented by connections and miscegenation due to the migrations that have occurred since the beginning of human history.In terms of the multiplicity of “soul”, it can be represented by the dimensions of one’s subjectivity, as in, for instance, cultural formation, memory, communication processes, psychological issues, history, language, and so on. Multiplicities are rhizomatic and have neither subject nor object, only dimensions that cannot increase in number without multiple changes in nature (Deleuze & Guattari, *In A Thousand* 8).

Deleuze and Guattari’s work, *In A Thousand Plateaus*, states that a rhizome or

multiplicity never allows itself to be over-coded (9).All multiplicities are flat, in the sense that they fill or occupy different spaces and formats, adapting to different shapes. Multiplicities are, thus, defined by the outside, according to which they change in nature and connect with other multiplicities. Alvarez portrays in *Return to Sender*a place of multiplicities where cultures interact, and where new “becomings” arise.According to Deleuze & Guattari, “Each of these becomings bring about the deterritorialization of one term and the reterritorialization of the other” (*InA Thousand* 4).In this sense, native and migrant are led to reconfigure space, culture, language, and home, as well as economic, social, and political issues. This reconfigured landscape has undergone a metamorphosis.

The topics mentioned above rely on Deleuze and Guattari’s most important principle of rhizomes: the Principle of Cartography that regulates the spatial organization of individuals in contemporary society. The authors use a metaphor to compare roots and rhizomes with social organizations and spatial configurations.According to them, roots are displayed as a tracing and rhizomes look like a map, and the authors warn: “Make a map, not a tracing” (12), suggesting that contemporary society’s shape is similar to a map where it is possible to perceive many connections. The map is open and connectable to all of its dimensions. They conclude that a map “is detachable, reversible, and susceptible to constant modification.It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formations” (12). The authors’ perspective demonstrates the flexibility of a rhizome in making connections. Rhizomes are malleable and have multiple entries, different from the traces left by roots, which always return to the same point of intersection in a hierarchical perspective.Those important rhizomatic characteristics are performed by the Stolonimmigrant in Alvarez’s novel, mainly by making connections with other individuals and cultures.

Another interesting point of Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts is the way they compare a structural organization of a tree (root) witha rhizome (map): “The tree is filiation, but the

rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb 'to be' but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, 'and ... and ...and...' This conjunction carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb 'to be'" (25). Based on this concept, I can infer that a tree is ordered in a hierarchical structure, in which there are superior and inferior individuals in binary and dialogical connections (I am superior, you are inferior; I am strong, you are weak; this is my function, that is your function– the verb "to be"). A rhizome, however, makes alliances and connections. Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualization of a tree and a rhizome provides a good illustration of how the Stolon immigrant character behaves in Alvarez's novel. This same representation can be imagined in Alvarez's literary context in relation to questions of mobility, rooting, uprooting, and belonging experienced by the Stolon immigrant character she portrays in her novel, which will be explained in the next section.

In an interview given to Bridget Kevane and Juanita Herendia, Alvarez affirms: "I've never been interested in hierarchies" (26), demonstrating her tendency to portray a multiple, connected, and flat space and characters. Thus, the contrary of a root system that benefits hierarchy a rhizome displays itself as a fabric, such a map that always adds one line to another, and so on in numberless connections. If I connect this concept to the social organization portrayed in *Return to Sender*,it is possible to visualize a rhizomatic structure wherein natives and immigrants establish connections, and where the citizens become as much outsiders as outsiders become citizens. They, however, do not change position, but they undergo similar situations that approximate them to the experience of the other such as, for example, the episode that describes how Mexican and American families lost their farms and had to leave them behind. The causes are different, but the fact is the same (299).

Another important concept discussed by Deleuze and Guattari is about "Plateaus". I apply this concept to the analysis of the Stolonimmigrant mainly to observe the position this particular immigrant occupies in the space of the cultural encounter. In Geology, a plateau is a

flat area of land higher than theland around it; it originates from multiple layers of land deriving from movements of the earth that provoke the lifting of the land above the ground. This ground formation stands amid monotonous landscapes and calls attention to itself. The image of a stolon that grows above the ground, connecting with other segments (layers), forming intertwined stems, can be compared to plateaus. The Stolon immigrant portrayed by Alvarez arises in the middle of the American and Mexican terrains (cultures), moving the land, and positioning itself as a kind of plateau that rises above the ground.

Nevertheless, Deleuze and Guattari argue: “It's not easy to see things in the middle, rather than looking down on them from above or up at them from below, or from left to right or right to left: try it, you'll see that everything changes” (23).Thus, when Alvarez portrays animmigrant character positioned in the middle of two cultures, she gives to this character the chance to see things from different angles and to deal with the changes that this position allows.Being in the middle and above is not bad at all because that is where things pick up speed, like a river that flows between two hills. The Stolon immigrant is positioned in the middle of two cultures: American and Mexican and is like a stream without beginning or end that tears down its banks and picks up speed in the middle. The speed is related to the way the Stolon immigrant makes connections with others, articulates strategies, and solves problems. In short, I aim to show how a rhizomatic approach to Alvarez’s novel interweaves with diverse theoretical inputs, including biological science, providing an effective and reflexive way of engaging with the complex issues that surround Alvarez’s characters as social, cultural, and biological entities.

1.4- The Stolon Immigrant in *Return to Sender*

> Sometimes, even if I had been born in Mexico, I felt a huge desert stretching between my parents and who I was

becoming. (Alvarez, *Return* 102)

Julia Alvarez brings to *Return to Sender* a whiff of refreshing air to the Mexican immigrants suffocating in the darkness of anonymity, living a life of confinement, insulation, and fear. She claims that her first loyalty is to present, as honestly as she can with as much skill as she has, her vision of the world (*Something* 127). This loyalty also seems to prevail in *Return to Sender*. The writing proceeds from a new attitude towards family structure (genetic and cultural heritage), not an unquestioning worship, but a desire to see and celebrate human beings in their full complexity rather than as icons. She describes a contemporary rhizomatic configuration particularly related to space, time, dimensions, and language, which affects the organization of characters' lives.

Return to Sender portrays the experiences lived by a Mexican immigrant familyin the U.S and their relations with the American agricultural and rural community where the novel is set. Two families live together on a countryside farm in the state of Vermont. The Cruz family is composed of the three Maria sisters: María Dolores, María Ofelia and María Lubyneida who are renamed in English:Mari, Offie and Luby, respectively. The family also has the girls' father, Mr. Cruz (Papá); two uncles, *Tío* Felipe and *Tío* Armando; a (dead)grandmother, Abuelita, and a missing mother (Mamá). The American family is The Paquettes, composed of the eleven-year-old-boy, Tyler, called "the Science guy" (15) because he is always talking about the universe and stars; an older brother, Ben; a sister, Sara; Mr. and Mrs. Paquette, grandma, uncles, aunts, and finally, the dead grandfather, from whom Tyler inherited a telescope and learned to observe the movements of the planets and the stars. These families represent two sides of the same coin, as in a mirroring perspective. Together, they will find in each other the necessary support for their livelihoods.

Mari and Tyler are also surrounded by other important characters that are used as tools to guide the youths in their journey of self-discovery, as well as to construct connections

between the American and Mexican cultures: Mr. Bicknell, the human and natural sciences teacher, helps Mari, Tyler, and the community to think about issues related to the immigrant formation of the U.S. people (190). Through his classes, creative assignments, and dialogues, Mr. Bicknell supplies a time line. He connects different periods that go from the historical past: Native American history and the movement to relocation areas during the time of colonization and the Trail of Tears (already mentioned, above) to the make-up of the American nation nowadays.

Ms. Ramirez, the Spanish teacher, helps with language connections, translation, reinforcing the notion that bilingualism is useful (142) to negotiate meanings between the American and Mexican cultures. Mr. Rossetti, an elder Italian descendent attached to traditions, laws, and rules, helps the characters to think about how internalized and sedimented cultural traditions prevent people from realizing that the world is fluid and in constant change (190). The unconventional lawyer, who, according to Mari, looks like a pirate with his red hair, jeans, and earrings, helps characters to think about stereotypes and that laws have to adapt, to follow rapid social change(160). He alsorepresents a social segment that understands that legislative and political actions are crucial to thinking about the contemporary world and its multicultural make-up. Finally, Alyssa, *Tío* Felipe's American girlfriend, represents the possibility of movement inthe opposite direction, since she goes to Mexico to work, reinforcing the idea that a contrary movement also exists.

Mari is the only one of the three girls who was born in Mexico. She was brought to the U.S. by her parents when she was four years old. Mari is the focushere because I can identify in her behavior some of those aspects and concepts discussed by the scientists and theoreticians already mentioned that lead me to think of her as a Stolon immigrant. It is important to mention here that I will apply the concepts presented by those scientists metaphorically in the analysis of Alvarez novel *Return to Sender* due to the fact that the

fictional place of encounter between Mexicans and Americans in the novel, the community of Vermont, and the protagonist profile have rhizomatic configurations. They share the same space, experiences, fears, losses, doubts, and hopes. These are the elements of connection. However, they will be experienced in different ways as I will present further.

The hierarchical and dichotomous social configuration, represented by a tree, and also discussed by Deleuze and Guattari (for instance, superior- inferior, legal- illegal, native - immigrant, I-the other) is questioned by Mari, and it progressively reflects on the changes in her behavior, as well as on that of the other characters. Mari is the pivot of a cultural metamorphosis, but in what sense does she bring about the metamorphosis? Alvarez seems to propose that only through observation, reflection, and dialogue with nature and human nature itself can one question and change pre-established systems and received truths. Mari becomes an active immigrant subject who questions, proposes, and defends ideas, suggesting that she is neither like her parents nor her American sisters, but a wholly new individual. This is not a simple task for her, because she is only a child. Alvarez possibly personifies humankind in a child character to indicate that both are learning to walk in a newly shaped world. Both are seeking self-discovery and trying to follow these changes.

Like most of those who experience the conflicting situations of being in between cultures, Mari initially feels the uncertainties by not knowing which side to belong to. The question of identity permeates her thoughts, and she starts comparing herself to her sisters. At the beginning of chapter one, She thinks about her physical (genetic) traits:

> I understand why I am not very tall, because I resemble you[Mamá] and Papá. But where did my sisters get their height?In school, we learned about genes, how we become what our parents put in us … When I was in your belly [Mamá] in Las Margaritas you were not eating as well as when Ofie and Luby came along in this country. (20)

Here, Mari makes a conscious reflection on her physical constitution by attributing to her sisters' superior height a better quality of life in the U.S. She perceives the differences between the Mexican origin she carries in her physical traits, and what she is becoming as a bicultural individual. She realizes throughout her journey of self-discovery that she is not only physically different from her American sisters, but culturally and psychologically different as well. For example, divided between two cultures, Mari curiously carries in her own name all the burdens of meanings of a split individual. Since name is a personal identity, her full name is Maria Dolores Santos Cruz which means many things, such as Mary Suffering because "[she cries] so much" (62). It makes a reference to the Mexican myth of The Weeping Woman (*La Llorona*) who is a woman both faceless and ageless, a condemned woman and at the same time, a goddess bearing a hidden message.The Weeping Woman wails and laments: "My dearly beloved children; your departure is near; we're about to become estranged! Oh, my children! Where shall I take you?"(Galícia, *La Llorona*). The representation of the Weeping Woman and her lament echoed in Mari's name and plunges the reader not only in the meaning of names, but in Mexican culture, the history of Mexican emigrants and theirdisplacement. Also, Santos is a name given to people who were born on All Saints' Day, a part of Mexican culture that remembers people from the sacrifices of the saints. In the same way, the name Cruz (Cross) is full of meanings. It is a symbol of death and rebirth, and to pass, move, or extend from one side to another, to trespass.

Another characteristic of Mari's name is that it incarnates all the burden of a triple inheritance of meaning by being identical with her mother's name, her grandmother's name, and the name of the mother of Jesus, with an extra addition of suffering (Cruz). Mari's mother represents these traditional labels and stigmas- woman, Latina, colored, immigrant, and voiceless - against which Mari struggles to break away, reclaiming her tongue using her penas a tool. From her grandmother, she inherited the burden of ancient traditions and origins. From

The Virgin Mary of Guadalupe, the patron saint and national/nationalistic symbol of Mexico, Mari has the attributes of the one who intercedes, negotiates, and advocates in favor of immigrants, a voice of hope for her people. Thus, the reader becomes aware that Mari's "Way of Sorrows" will be thorny, but also hopeful, in the sense that it may symbolically represent a rebirth of consciousness,a recognition and legitimation of her identityat the end of her journey, as well as a possibility of changing the future, both her own and the future of those who come after her.

Mari's name also bears other meanings linked to it that correspond to the different forms in which she is perceived by other characters, for example: Indian (4), trespasser (13), angel (14), Martian (15), alien (16), dreamer (280), a secret (16), and Mexican (16). These words reinforce what Philippe Lejeune calls the "generalized system of displacement" (21) grounded on the many meanings and positioning each name represents to an individual's self-formation. By this, I understand that Alvarez's proposal in creating a representative protagonist who that can be read and understood in her multiplicities (names, dimensions, and places) indicates that the subjectivity of the protagonist, Mari, follows the same rhizomatic configuration of the multicultural society in which she lives.

Furthermore, Mari feels the pain of being pointed out as different from others. She suffers from bullying at school, saying that "It is difficult to be the one different from my sisters. Some boys at my old school made fun of me, calling me an 'illegal alien'" (Alvarez, *Return*20). Mari has, in her way, another conscious reflection upon her place, her political position in the U.S. culture.She seems to be irritated by this issue and defiantly asks: "What is illegal about me? Only that I was born on the wrong side of a border?" (20).This is not the usual behavior for an illegal immigrant, who commonly puts her/himself in a subjugated and inferior position in relation to the host culture.Definitely, Mari organizes and constructs her arguments empirically, through the observation of nature, events, and the experiences she

lives.

Haya Cohena and Svenja Kratzb cite the American professor of neuroscience, Robert Sapolsky, who points out, in his work *Biology and Human Behavior: The Neurological Origins of Individuality* (2005), that learning and thinking are not a mere abstract processes but have a biological basis. According to him, when people learn something, their bodies change (Cohena and Kratzb 98).In this sense, cultural and social interactions have the ability to affect the capabilities of human beings, who are not stable, separate entities, but an embedded system in a process of continual transformation.

This process of learning and thinking is experienced and stimulated throughout Alvarez's narrative in the way thatMari changes her attitude in relation to herself and the world around her, becoming stronger, more argumentative, and defiant, as when she says: "Honestly, I don't know why it has to be such a big secret that I was born in Mexico" (277). Thus, her attitude in thinking, learning, and arguing about herself and the other is not merely an abstract process, but has a biological basis that can be understood as a form of adaptation and survival. The changes observed in the body argued by Sapolsky can be understood not as physical changes, but changes in the character's attitude and behavior, and in the way she situates herself in the American community.

Gloria Anzaldúa presents in her work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* the emergence of a *mestiza* consciousness. Although Mari is not a mestiza in a biological sense, she is in a cultural sense. The consciousness proposed by Anzaldúa may reflect inSapolsky's thought. One can identify in Mari's behavior a progressive change in her consciousness about herself. Throughout the narrative, she learns about herself from the understanding of the other and she realizes that being different from the other may be an advantage for her. This consciousness implies a change in her behavior in relation to herself, the other, and the social context. The process of learning, self - discovery, and the understanding of the other are not

easy because they involve negotiations, articulations, and strategies. Feeling sometimes like a puzzle piece, Mari suffers from constant inner struggles, seeking a recognizable “identity”, which generates anxiety. Anzaldúa claims: “One day the inner struggle will cease and a true integration take place” (*Speaking* 63). The integration Anzaldúa mentions may be related to the connection of multiple spaces and the many selves of Mari’s subjectivity, joining all the scrambled pieces of the puzzle.

Understanding Mari’s maturation process and the development of her subjectivity in multiple spaces requires grasping how they are constructed throughout the novel, sometimes tending toward one side, and sometimes the other. Mari seems to share the same difficulty of Anzaldúa’s *mestiza*: the difficulty for both “ofdifferentiating between what is inherited, acquired and imposed” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 82). As Mari is bicultural, she positions herself in an intermediate space, a third space, developing an ability to dialogue and negotiate meanings with both cultures, in English and Spanish simultaneously, like the *mestiza*. She turns ambivalence into something else, becoming a third subject that is neither one (Mexican) nor the other (American), but a conjunction of both (and...and…and in Deleuze & Guattari’s terms). This conjunction is formed by the consciousness of herself from the interaction with the other. As Anzaldúa states:the “third element is a new consciousness - a *mestiza* consciousness” (*Borderlands* 79-80), that is, a formative element that comes from continual creative movement. Dialogues, articulations,and negotiations are thus creatively, consciously, and strategically employed by Mari. Throughout her trajectory, she “jumps” from one culture to another in several directions, seekinga third space, which will be discussed further in the chapter destined to her letters and diary.

Mari searches for information and answers to situate herself in the context of thesemultiple spaces. For example, she questions her teacher’s assistant about what being an alien means, and she receives the literal answer: “an alien is a creature from outer space who

does not even belong on this earth!" (*Return* 21). From this moment on, Mari begins her journey of self-discovery by perceiving herself as a dislocated, displaced, and divided person. Where is Mari's place on Earth? The essential questions of humankind, such as who we are, where we belong, where we are going,occur in Mari's thoughts and are provisional and negotiable.She asks herself: "So, where am I supposed to go?" (21). The uncertainty of not knowing where her place in the world haunts her soul. She feels alone, disconnected, and lost, asserting: "I am not like my sisters, who are little American girls as they were born here [in the U.S.] and don't know anything else. I was born in Mexico, but I don't feel Mexican, not like Papá and my uncles with all their memories and stories and missing it all the time" (21).

It is clear in this passage that Mari is a displaced character. She does not miss her homeland because she does not have memories of it; she has no direct connections to her Mexican roots, as her father and uncles do, but she does not feel like her American sisters, who are "like American girls, preferring to speak in English and not thinking about the cost of things, [drinking] Coca-Colas and thinking nothing of leaving some in the glass" (94). The sisters, Luby and Ofie, do not have any substantial connection with Mexican culture except for what is experienced in the private space of the home. Thus, if displacement is experienced by Mari, she will search for a place to fit, a search that will lead to movements and connections she makes throughout the narrative.

Todd Ramlow states that within dominant structures of power (this case, Mexican and American historical relations) mobility represents at the same time a form of resistance, a "freedom from binarism, and access to transformations and multiplicity" (174). Mari's movements also work as a tactic tofree her from paradigms and stereotypes. These movements produce fluxes from one point to another, like an aerial map, suggesting a multiple rhizomatic configuration. Her Mexican cultural root is plucked from the ground as she begins to interact with the multicultural community in which she lives. These movements

are strategies of adaptation developed by the Stolon immigrant, strategies that are not merely a desire to become pluralistic (Wong 178) but a necessity of adaptation to guarantee her own survival in the community. Her consciousness about the need to expose herself , as a rhizomorph beingmaking connections, creating ventilated, multiple spaces are what differ the Stolon immigrant from the ordinary one. These characteristics are Mari's"something else" in the construction of her subjectivity, as Anzaldúa states in *Borderlands* (101).

In his article, Ramlow also cites Mitchel's and Snynder's work *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourses* and uses these authors' study on prosthetic subjectivity (181) to consider that Anzaldúa's "something else" might be understood as a prosthetic subjectivity, explaining that a prosthesis is a device, either external or implanted, that substitutes for or supplements a missing or defective part of the body. It is something constructed to fill an empty space, an absence, and seeks not only to "cover up/erase the fact of physical difference and disability or give the illusion of normative able-bodiedness" (Ramlow181) rather than "to create more connected and inclusive communities" (Ramlow 182). Analyzing this concept, I understand that at the same time the Stolon immigrant, Mari, asa border individual, develops a bodily and a cultural consciousness, she does not seem to develop a prosthetic subjectivity to cover an apparent "disability" to deal with the differences between Mexican and American cultures in a bizarre mimicry. On contrary, she faces her disabilities as well as her abilities, openly, defiantly, and gradually revealing them to the community. She does not create an illusionary or prosthetic subjectivity to fit into the American community; rather, through disclosure she brings herself into a luminous and broad space. Mari comes out to be an active subject in the public spaces of the American community (school, church, city meeting night, and also in the American family). She is no longer a subject confined within the restricted space of the farm (such as rhizomes underground), trying to fit in a culturally pre-established pattern. She understands the restrictions imposed by

the American laws of immigration, but she assumes the risks of her public exposure. Her behavior does not work as prosthesis because there is nothing to be covered up or erased.

And yet, the characteristics of inclusion and connection of a supposedly “disabled” subject highlighted by Ramlow are observed in her behavior. Mari progressively constructs her subjectivity by noting that isolating herself as a shadow or underground immigrant may compromise her inclusion and survival. It is important for her to come into the light and make connections with the community in which she lives. She does not create a prosthetic subjectivity to disguise her hybridism and become part of a supposedly common American culture. Rather, she assumes her hybridity, highlighting the interdependency between Americans and Mexicans, proposing dialogues and new alliances within the cultural diversity.

Kwame A. Appiah states in his article “Identity Against Culture: Understandings of Multiculturalism” that the diversity of American societies“should not blind us to their interdependence” (2), since the presence of people of different origins shapes and are shaped by experiences in the common space or the cultural space of intersection. In this sense, Appiah asserts that

> America’s cultures have mostly been shaped by interaction with each other. America’s many cultures, its various societies, have grown up together, belong in a single system of cultures: they are not the mere logical sum of a series of unrelated historically-independent elements. (2)

In other words, the coexistence of multiple cultures in the U.S. may constitute ethnic blocks like African- Americans, Asian-Americans, Indian-Americans, and Hispanic-Americans, but they are shaped out of the experiences of, and interrelations among, each other.

For this reason, Appiah argues that a common culture in the U.S. is not “sociologically plausible” because of the existent multiculturalism. According to him, “there is not now and there has never been a common culture in the United States” (*Identity* 7). There is a common

political system that regulates the lives of people from different cultures living together in a common space. This political system squares people within a common parameter of behavior, but it still has differences. For example, there are Republican and Democratic parties; the official language is English, but Spanish is largely spoken; the principal religion is Protestantism, but there are many other religions that make up a plurality.

Appiahcalls these practices established by the state political system a collective identity or social identity which is transmitted by, for instance, public education and the media (17). The use, practice or social application of what is learned through the common political system is individual and particular for each person. This is what Appiah calls individual or personal identity (17), which, in simple terms, is what you do with what you learn. He also differentiates identity from culture, arguing that identity is constructed and can be molded, while culture is the product of human work and thought, and is to a large extent the product acquired through schools and the media (9).

Appiah sustains that the political system functions as a powerful tool to regulate collective experience, such that it may homogenize some differences through, for example, the language spoken (English), the same TV programs watched, the same music listened to by a majority, all of which give the sense of collectivity of a mass culture (9). It seems that one has to give up or lose her/his own cultural characteristics and influences to be part of this collectivity, so that the question of “authenticity” comes to the discussion, which “proposes not only that [one has] a way of being that is all [her/his] own, but in developing it [one] must fight against the family, organized religion, society, the school, the state - all the forces of convention” (19). Appiah suggests that it is through dialogue with the other and practices available by those social sections can one understand and shape one’s own identity (19).

If one considers Dawkins’s statement from the beginning of this chapter that what is uncommon in a human being is culture along with Appiah’s perspectives, one understands

that the person's identity is not properly related only to genetic information, physical traits or her/his origin, but the product of cultural experiences. If culture is, according to Appiah, a product of human work and thought, and this activity is strictly particular, culture is therefore the "recessive" and decisive factor that constitutes an identity. If one lives in a multicultural community, this person may, by extension, aggregate multiple identities, constructing multiple "selves". This multiplicity is what forms the character's subjectivity in Alvarez's novel.

In the case of Mari and all of Alvarez's characters in *Return to Sender,* origin and physical traits count only in a first contact. For example, the American boy, Tyler Paquette, "classifies" Mari and her family in the first pages of the novel within a collective identity he learned in his history textbook. He classifies her as being part of a group taking into consideration her appearance and characteristics (American Indians), similarly to what occurs in biology when biologist begins to study species. Tyler fears what is different, the stranger, whether this unknown people were a threat. After the estrangement of first contact, the "strangers" begin to study one another, seeking to understand differences, but mainly sharing similitudes. These behaviors are also observed in biological studies. Thus, when I recall those concepts discussed by scientists to analyze Alvarez's novel, I am using them in a metaphorical sense to understand the behavior of the Stolon immigrant in the space of cultural encounter. The cultural factor and the experiences shared by them in public spaces govern the interrelations. In other words, multicultural interweaving and the practices shared by these subjects construct the particular individuals.

The character Mari Cruz may therefore be analyzed in the light of the concepts addressed by the scientists and researchers pointed out earlier in this chapter: evolution, adaptation, the power of the fittest, solidarity and mutual aid, conscious reflection, rhizomatic structure, and its spatial configuration, as well as the establishment of new connections through language, and the disseminations of new ideas that compose the Stolon

immigrant'ssubjectivity. The use of language has an essential role in this analysis. Mari is bilingual and for this reason is able to translatethe dialogues between her Mexican family and the American community, connecting both groups. In this way, she seems to reach a higher level of adaptation, which reinforces Darwin's idea that the individual who is more adapted to the environment has more chances to survive. More adapted to both cultures, Mari becomes fittest in the multicultural environment and so may be considered a more "evolved" character in this perspective.

The idea that only the strongest individual survives corroborates Mari's performance in relation to critical events in the novel. With a missing mother kidnapped by smugglers, Mari replaces the mother figure and assumes the responsibility of taking care of home, sisters, and father. In one of many letters written to her missing mother, Mari states: "Now that you are gone [Mamá], Papá says I am to be the mother to my little sisters. But who will be my mother?" (*Return*21). It is known that in many literary works home is represented by a mother figure. In Alvarez's novel, the absence of her mother contributes to Mari going her own way without anexplicit reference to origin. From this absence, Mari creates a personal world where language and writing play important roles in the recognition of new spaces and subjects. She creates a certain individuality of being apart from the mother, the mother tongue, and the motherland, and these absences are redeemed by writing. Through writing, Mari becomes empowered to sustain psychologically the whole family during her mother's absence,as she writes: "I had to stay strong for them [her sisters] and for Papá" (29).

FátimaMujcinovic states in her work *Postmodern Cross-Culturalism andPolitization in US. Latina Literature: from Ana Castilho to Julia Alvarez* that some characters "learn to transform exilic conditions of absence and loss into creative tools of emancipation and self-affirmation" (13). Although Mari feels initially lost by her mother's absence, she progressively finds ways to face the difficulties. One of the strategies used by her to

relievethis absence is writing letters to her mother and telling stories to her sisters. A good example is in the scene where Mari reminds the episode she asks her mother why she has to write letters, and her mother answers: "When you write down your thoughts to anyone, you do not feel so alone" (29), foreshadowing Mari's time of loneliness. Through writing and storytelling, she creates a bridge to connect her missing mother to her sisters, and assures the survival of the family's memory and ties. The ability of dealing with language becomes a strategy of adaptation and empowerment. This empowerment or capacity of being the strongest (Darwin's perspective), in addition to the multiple rhizomatic connections (Deleuze's and Guattari's rhizomatic perspective), constitute Mari's strategies of survival.

In relation to the perspectives presented by Kropotkin, Maturana and Varela considering solidarity, mutual aid, and altruism among species' fundamental actions to guarantee the groups' survival, one can identify in Mari's behavior acts of solidarity that reinforce these points of view. Having basically a rhizomatic structure, the Stolon immigrant, Mari Cruz, has the function of sustaining, nourishing, and strengthening many other characters. To this analysis, it is of paramount importance to consider Mari's relation with Tyler, the American boy, and some of other characters to explain how the Stolon immigrant acts instressful events, absences, losses, and pressures.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, one of the main characteristics of a rhizome, and by definition a stolon, is the way they behave when two opposed forces pull them apart to divergent sides. The authors explain that a rhizome tends to tear apart, but at the same time it can reestablish new connections with other individuals from the point of rupture. Contrarily, a tree's root does not regenerate if it is plucked from the ground. This root-rhizome/stolon dichotomy seems to be experienced by Mari. Although she was plucked from her homeland and family, she establishes new connections in the host country.

Alvarez seems to drive to *Return to Sender* this conflictive experience of being linked

to a Latin- American root and cultureand being part of an American rhizomatic-culture. These two cultural forces pull Mari toward divergent sides, but she restructures herself to each connection she establishes, consideringthe aspects of solidarity, mutual aid, and altruism proposed by Kropotkin, Maturana and Varela.For example, Tyler has initially a prejudice against Mari and her family for being undocumented workers on his parent's farm.He also fears being unfaithful to his country, demonstrating a certain nationalist sentiment. He calls the Mexican family "Indian trespassers" for physically resembling the Native Americans studied in his history textbook at school. One may ask what kind of story was told to him to make him think that way, and I dare say that the always-well-told-well-constructed-and-reinforced story on stereotypes.

Tyler's family decides to hire these undocumented Mexican rural workers to help them with the farm work. Thus, necessity is what initially moves the encounter. On the one hand, Tyler's family needs the Cruz family to save its farm from bankruptcybecause there is nobody to do the work. On the other hand, the Cruz family needs the work to help their family in Mexico to have a better life. At this point,Tyler understands that what historically determined this relationship was basically economic and political interest. With the approximation between Tyler and Mari, a tie of friendship is established. Tyler progressively begins to reflect on political, economic, and social issues, perceiving that some of his notions of the other, the stranger, the trespasser, and the illegal alien are based on old paradigms, which show contradictions, since a double economic dependency between the two families is a fact.One cannot survive without the help of the other. Thus, links of friendship, solidarity, mutual aid, and negotiation are established and shared by the various members. More than just economic motivation, Mari establishes important and useful liaisonsthat will move the relationship among the characters, as presented in the following examples.

Tyler has a dream of participating in a Scout meeting in Washington D.C., for which

he needs five hundred dollars to cover the costs of travel and accommodation, although he and his parents do not have money enough to pay. At a community meeting to decide the best direction for the city to take, Tyler finds “[e]ight crisp one-hundred-dollar bills and sixty some dollars in smaller bills” (185) in the boy’s bathroom, which somebody had lost. He becomes divided between his strong sense of justice and loyalty to look for the money’s owner to return it and to keep it secret to pay for the trip. A few hours later, he discovers who lost the money. Struggling with his conscience, he decides to return it to its owner, Mr. Rossetti, an older man with Italian roots, conservative, and resistant to American citizens hiring undocumented Mexican immigrants. Grateful, Mr. Rossetti wants to reward Tyler, who refuses, believing that he did the right thing. As a result, Mr. Rossetti invites Tyler to help him do some work. Tyler accepts and saves money enough to pay for his trip to Washington.

In the meantime, Mari discovers that her mother was kidnapped by smugglers during her return from Mexico.She needs three thousand dollars to buy her mother back, but her family also does not have the money. In an act of altruism, and touched by how Mari suffers from her mother’s absence, Tyler decides to give her the money he saved for his own dream. If one takes into consideration that Tyler has no responsibility of what happened to Mari’s mother and how he was initially resistant to illegal immigrants, his act can be understood as a genuine gesture of altruism. “Tyler is surprised that he’s not more disappointed about not getting to go to Washington” (221) because he realizes that “[f]riendship has no borders” (283).

At this point, one may identify a solidarity catena, as discussed by Kropotkin, Maturana, and Varela, since the whole community becomes united in the same goal: to ransom Mari’s mother. Mari realizes that they are all connected like an “intricate spiderweb” (59), just like a stolon configuration. Why do the Americans and Mexicans behave like that? Perhaps because of what these thinkers call “the universal nature” or the “natural altruism”

intrinsic in human nature, and they work as a form of preservation.

Another episode that can represent well these same conceptsis when Tyler's grandmother is prevented from driving her car because of an accident in which she was involved. The American family, except for Tyler, decides "democratically" to send Grandma to a nursing home for her safety, depriving her of home and freedom, but she runs away and goes to the trailer to ask for help from the Mexican family: "Ever since the Cruzes took [Grandma] in when she ran away from home, [she] has felt a special closeness to them" (217). The Cruzes welcomed and embraced Grandma when she decided to leave, and this event has its particular importance, in an allusion to what happens to Mexican immigrants when they leave their homeland and are not welcomed in the U.S., as Mari states: "What a long journey to make to a place that does not welcome us but instead sends us away!" (26).

An event involving *Tío* Felipe also confirms the idea of the importance of reciprocal altruism as one of the strongest social traits proposed by Wilson. Most undocumented immigrants are known as "Shadow Labors" because they live a life of confinement and insulation. In Alvarez's novel these immigrants are represented by the Mexican farm workers that are not allowed to cross the fences of the farm for fear of being caught by the immigration police (*La Migra*). At the invitation of Ben, the oldest son of the American family, *Tío* Felipe goes to a party downtown. Ben is stopped by the police for speeding. Acting altruistically, *Tío* Felipe runs away to protect his family, attracting the police far away from the farm. Reflecting on her uncle's attitude, Mari realizes that everything may have two sides, depending on the perspective, and concludes that although the U.S treats her uncle as a criminal, he is their [Mexican family] hero (157).

Other events occur throughout the novel that corroborate with the idea of the reciprocal altruism proposed by Wilson. For example, at the end of the novel, Mari rescues her mother with help of Tyler, his uncle and aunt. The interesting point to be observed here is

that the smugglers are Mexicans who live illegally in the U.S. contradicting the expectations that they could be Americans exploring, taking advantage and subjugating the weak and poor Mexican immigrants. Finally, the episode in which Mari's parents and uncle are captured by the Immigration and Customer Enforcement - ICE - is the apex of the demonstration of how the whole community becomes involved and united to help reunite Mari's family, reinforcing once more Wilson's, Kropotkin's, Maturana's and Varela's concepts about solidarity and mutual aid as being elements of connection, of maintenance of ties, and group's preservation.

Thus, solidarity and mutual aid are a step forward in the social and economic relations between Americans and Mexicans in Alvarez's novel, and the way the Stolon immigrant, Mari, constructs connections. Human nature and conscious reflection onthe values andsignificance of the culture of the other are also conditions *sine qua non* to keep the group united and strong to find a better quality of life for the group. Mr. Bicknell, Mari and Tyler's teacher, summarizes it best when he says: "We're all born human beings. But we have to earn that *e* at the end of *human* with our actions so we can truly call ourselves humane beings" (192).

In a recent interview with Jane Lindholm on the program "Tell Me More" promoted by the online site VPR - Vermont Public Radio, Alvarez seems to reinforce Mr. Bicknell's statement, claiming that people that move forward into the future of solidarity may promote understanding among nations and reduce distances between cultures. She also says that the immigrants'lives of uncertainty can also "create a sense of compassion for those on the margins" (*Something to Declare* 185), reinforcing the concepts discussed by Wilson, Kropotkin, Maturana, and Varela.

In another perspective, Richard Dawkins asserts that selfishness is what orients human relations and is imbued in our genes. According to him, "[We] teach generosity and altruism because we are born selfish" (*Selfish* ix) and through generosity and altruism, we can frustrate

our selfish nature. However, he also suggests a counterpoint to the selfish gene that he calls the cooperative gene. According to the author, it "does not mean that groups of genes [human beings] prosper at the expense of their members, or at the expense of other groups. Rather, each gene is seen as pursuing its own self-interested agenda" (*Selfish* ix) which aims at the benefit of the group.

Metaphorically, the "cooperative gene" seems to act in the behavior of Alvarez's characters. A good example can be given by the character Mr. Rossetti, the Italian-American, who shows selfish xenophobic behavior in relation to the Mexican immigrants. In the name of tradition and preservation of American culture, he exposes on his weedy lawn a sign that reads "TAKE BACK VERMONT" (191). He seems unaware of his own immigrant origin and the multicultural formation of the U.S. His behavior is partly understood because of the fact that from the second generation on, immigrants are native-born and reject the word immigrant usually boundto their names. This resistance portrayed by Alvarez also exists in the non-fictional world, as, for example, in the group Save Our State - SOS, which radicalizes immigrants and advocates for strict laws against immigrants in the U.S. Furthermore, Mr. Rossetti's mind will be "infected" by the ideas and behavior of Tyler, grandma, Mari and her sisters, and the children's professor, Mr. Bicknell, who have a rhizomatic way of thinking on cultural connections. These characters understand that culture and origin should not be a matter of fact. Gloria Anzaldúa calls this a shift in perception (*Borderlands* 39). Thus, Mr. Rossetti learns that hecannot hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries, such as those Anzaldúa discusses in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, because rigidity, according to her, means death (79).

Thus, retaking the concept of meme proposed by Dawkins, in which ideas are propagated by culture, language, arts, and its many forms of expression can be considered a powerful tool to break rigid boundaries and "contaminate" other's minds, resulting in a

shifting of perception toward everyday events. A shift in perception leads to a shift in behavior, and consequently to a shift in political, economic, and social structures. In *Return to Sender*, many episodes show Dawkins' concept about the meme, as in the following examples.

One of the most striking passages is undoubtedly the letter Mari writes to the U.S. President. In this letter, she begins by apologizing for being in the U.S. "without permission" (58), and then argues questions of biculturalism and borders, writing that "It is not as simple as going back to our homeland, because there is a division right down the center of our family. My parents and I are Mexicans and my two little sisters,Ofie and Luby, are Americans." (59). She gives historical and scientific facts she learned at school ("contaminated" by Mr. Bicknell's ideas), arguing with the president about immigrants situation, as well as some of important events in the contemporary society which is, according to her, like an intricate spider web. She points to the need for coordinating actions that may lead to the benefit of all, explaining that "We earthlings have to get our act together" (60).

Another source of thedisseminationof new ideas in the novel comes from the teacher, Mr. Bicknell. Through his classes and assessments, he constructs a possibility for conscious reflection and discussion of themes related to the immigrant origin of the U.S., to social, political, and economic issues, as well as confronting these new ideas with old ones. Mr. Bicknell proposes a shift in the mind-set, offering other perspectives that generate a shift in the character's behavior as well.These shifts in behavior may open a window of possibilities that will reflect in many changes in the future.

Another striking episode in the novel that exemplify Mr. Bicknell's influence on people's thought is his discussion with Mr. Rossetti at the town meeting. Here, the anti-immigrant discourse and a critically alternative discourse confront one another. Mr. Rossetti represents the most sedimented traditions and "every time [he] writes in [the meeting night]

it's to criticize one thing or another young people are doing to America" (188). He proposes a law for voting that everyone hiring illegals ought to be put in jail. In this episode, Mr. Bicknell, stands up and asserts: "I have a word for Mr. Rossetti and a reminder to all of us [the audience]" (189). First, the teacher calls Mr. Rossetti's attention to his Italian surname,reminding him and the audience that their antecessors came from elsewhere to help build the American Nation; they have uncommon roots that come all around the world. He concludes by saying that "this country, and particularly this state [Vermont], were built by people who gave up everything in search of a better life, not just for themselves, but for their children. Their blood, sweat, and tears formed this great nation" (191). Mr. Bicknell here calls attention to America's rhizomatic and multicultural formation affecting Mari and the other character's way of thinking. The law suggested by Mr. Rossetti is unanimously rejected by the audience. The American boy, Tyler Paquette, who can be seeing like the future of the American Nation, was affected by Mr. Bicknell's speech. The narrator describes Tyler's confusion from the impact of these ideas

> [He] feels confused.It's as if he's lost in some dark wood inside his own head. Seems like a lot of his treasured ideas and beliefs have gone into a tailspin recently. It used to be he knew exactly what was right, what was wrong, what it meant to be a patriot or a hero or a good person. Now he's not sure (187).

Mr. Bicknell thus spreads memes in other people's minds, inviting them to reflect on the perspective of the other, the need to be connected with the other in order to establish unity from diversity (the rhizomatic perspective of integration and connection). Influenced by Mr. Bicknell, Mari also begins to be contaminated with new ideas. She understands that insulating or confining herself will repeat the same fate of her Mexican family. She realizes that coming out to visibility, participating actively of the community life, establishing ties of mutual cooperation and cultural connections may guarantee her survival in the host country. She sews

these ties through the writing of letters and diary, and storytelling.

I have already discussed Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic perspective in relation to the Stolon immigrant, but their perspective on plateaus is also useful to represent this new individual who arises in the midst of two grounds:the American and Mexican cultures. As mentioned above, a plateau is a flat area of land higher than the land around it. Flat means horizontal, on the same level, suggesting that the hierarchical perspective that regulated power relations between Americans and Mexicans in Alvarez's novel is reconstructed, indicating a possible leveling or a different way of relating to each other.

This imagery represents a movement of visibility for Mexicans immigrants and Latino culture, anda possibility of integration withthe American culture. Alvarez's definition of identity seems to resonate in Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of rhizomes and plateaus. She says to Kelli Lyon Johnson, in her work *Writing a New Place on the Map*: "I think identity is an arrangement or series of clusters, a kind of stacking or layering of selves, horizontal and vertical layers, the geography of selves made up of the different communities you inhabit" (238). One can infer that a rhizomatic and plateaunistic configuration are new forms of portraying a new place, space, and existence in contemporary society, mainly in relation to the Stolon immigrant, who is made up of cultural multiplicity.

This same rhizomatic and plateaunistic make-up depicted by Alvarez in her novel has a representation in a non-fictional setting. A group known as Undocumented and Unafraid has been trying to call the world's attention to its cause. The online periodical *Salon* published an article by Adan Goodman entitled "Undocumented and Unafraid" which discussed the action of two young undocumented women immigrants who were brought to the U.S. by their parents at the age of five and twelve. Walking into the Immigration and Customs Enforcement office (ICE) in downtown Philadelphia, the two women protested against the detention of another undocumented immigrant. According to the article, after making their demand, they

sat down in the middle of the street, and began shouting “Undocumented! Unafraid!” putting themselves at the risk of being deported.These two young women struggle for the recognition and respect of undocumented immigrants’ civil and human rights.

The basis of the two women’s action relies on the initial proposals of the DREAM Act, which would have given some young undocumented immigrants a path to securing legal status. The article argues that the young are not “just arguing that DREAMers like themselves - college students with clean records whose parents brought them to the U.S. when they were children - should be given a path to citizenship”. They are actually helping to break down the artificial divisions between a “model” of immigrants (DREAMers) and others, putting them in a position of equal rights. Their behavior reflects on the fictional realm portrayed by Alvarez in *Return to Sender*, mainly in the representation of the character Mari Cruz, who also shares the two women’s feeling described above. But Mari uses a different strategy from the girls above. Her scream comes from her writing.

According to the same article, The National Immigrant Youth Alliance has published an online “Coming Out Guide” and sponsored a “Coming Out of the Shadows” week. These movements can be dangerous to undocumented immigrants in the sense that although they can be a step forward to the recognition of undocumented immigrant rights, they also can put these immigrants at risk by exposure. Direct confrontations and exposure reveal to American society the undocumented status of these immigrants. With this act, the activists hope to pave the way for broader changes beyond those that the DREAM Act would have achieved. The article states, however, that “increasingly, young undocumented immigrants are doing just that and insisting that they will no longer remain silent”. They seem to do what Dawkins proposed with his study on memes; they are using their actions to “parasitize other’s brains” to find support for their cause.

I have brought in these two real examples to reinforce my argument that a new

immigrant has emerged in contemporary society and are represented in Alvarez’s novel, one who conserves all the characteristics presented previously related to its rhizomatic and plateaunistic configuration, the multiple connections with other spaces, cultures, and individuals, the question of bilingualism, mutual aid, and solidarity, as well as the ability to disseminate ideas. I have called this type of immigrant a stolon,who is well represented in Alvarez’s novel by the character Mari Cruz.

Focusing on the characteristics of this particular immigrant, Alvarez’s novel reaffirms what has taken place in the non-fiction world. In a scene of the novel, the American grandma says to Mari: “Mari, you are a dreamer, aren’t you? (280) suggesting that, similarly to the two non-fictional women described in the previous paragraphs, Mari is also a dreamer in both meanings: as a part of a generation of immigrants that does not fear exposure, one who struggles for her rights; and as a dreamer who dreams of a different future for immigrants. As stated above, however, Mari’s strategy differs from that of these real women. Mari’s scream isheard through her writing.Alvarez portrays this contemporary immigrant by constructing a narrative with multiple perspectives, spaces, and voices, but all connected through language, writing, and storytelling. All of usneed stories: it is how we make our lives meaningful, telling ourselves in our heads, hearts, and souls the story of who we are (Kevane and Herendia 26). This story is not constructed by only one, or between two, but among many connections with individuals from everywhere.

CHAPTER TWO

A SOUL OF PAPER

> *El papel lo aguanta todo*. Paper can hold anything. Sorrows that might break your heart.Joys with wings that lift you above the sad things in your life. (Alvarez, *Return* 22)

2.1 - Julia Alvarez's Narrative

In the previous chapter, I introduced a new fictional contemporary immigrant that I called the Stolon immigrant. This particular immigrant is represented in Julia Alvarez's novel *Return to Sender* by the eleven-year-old Mexican, Mari Cruz, whose main characteristics are movability and the ability to make connections, always searching for ways out of problems and ways to enter new spaces, more open and ventilated spaces, to grow up in. In this chapter, I want to show that these characteristics are found also in Mari's writing, which is not static or enclosed. I aim to analyze her writing structure, focusing mainly on the letters and the diary she writes throughout the novel, since they confer a particular dynamic on the narrative.

It is important to mention here that Alvarez's novel is not an autobiographical piece, although both author and protagonist share similar life's experiences as well as strategies of writing. For example, they are Latina immigrants that experience cultural clash; they face similar difficulties with language and adaptation in a different culture; they seem to share the same fears and doubts about felling "different"; both seem to find in writing a form of self-discovery and a way to express the experiences they live. Also, they write simultaneously in Spanish and English and have close connection with nature. Alvarez, however, does not tell her story, but the story lived by others – the Mexican children she teaches in a Vermont school.

In the second sub-chapter, I discuss the way Mari's letters and diary are compelling forms

of registering her everyday life and story, as well as her deepest feelings and existential queries. I want to argue that the nature of her letters and diary can elucidate the understandings of Mari's subjectivity along with broader topics like social, political, and economic issues. I begin this analysis with an overview of the structure of the narrative in *Return to Sender*, which features multiple narrative spaces and voices. This narrative structure enables writer and reader to engage in heterogeneous dialogues where different perspectives are not a means of distance and exclusion, but rather approximation and inclusion.

Alvarez's novel is a polyphonic narrative in which an omniscient narrator and the characters, Mari and Tyler, tell the story from different points of view. The creation of multiple narrative voices can be considered an integral part of the author's performance that reflects both her external and internal bicultural dialogues, suggesting that "utilizing the multiple voices is a manifestation of the subject of consciousness-shifting among multiple positions" (Stefanko 52). The narrative is a layering of voices (like the plateaus discussed in chapter one), the construction of which does not aim at a single vision and version; rather, it describes the same situation from many angles and also contributes to a broader analysis of facts and interactions with different ideas and utterances.

Very often, Alvarez portrays characters that undergo similar situations and experiences that she faced as an immigrant divided between two cultures. *Return to Sender* portrays a multicultural contemporary society where individuals are increasingly connected to people from many other cultures, "negotiating between coherence and fragmentation, as well as between autonomy and interactivity" (Kelley 44). In this sense, although Alvarez portrays an immigrant character split between the American and Mexican cultures, she highlights the multicultural formation of the United States as well. She seems to believe that being in the multicultural space of the U.S. does not mean a rejection of one's origins, but a complete participation in the cultural life of the country. In other words, those immigrants are not only

divided between two cultures, but live among many.

Alvarez also reflects on the conflictive situations of being divided between family roots and rhizomatic configurations in *Something to Declare*. In this autobiographical work, she states: “how could we survive outside our family? We had been raised as members of a family, not just individuals. It’s as if our faces, hands, feet would disappear if we cut ourselves off from their originals” (121). According to her, dependency on family (roots) was considered a form of pathology and it was not seen the same way by American society.

Thus, how to be connected to a culture-society that valorizes individuality, encouraging children to be independent of their families, and at the same time to experience a different perspective at home? The perspective of root and rhizome is contradictory. To most Latin people, family-root is at the heart of their lives and Alvarez explains that it was this conflictive mixture of her parents’ powerlessness and their power over her that made the whole situation so confusing and painful (*Something* 122), but, at the same time, she realizes that her family, which had always seemed an amalgamated monolithic block, was really quite diverse in its opinions. There were camps among her own people. Similarly, the Stolon immigrant, Mari Cruz, faces the same situation.

Alvarez values writing and storytelling. As she explained to the online site Times Reporter that “Writing is [her] calling; not just a job, career or profession; storytelling is in [her] bloodstream”, confirming the idea that writing, in her words, seems to be related to cultural traits inherited from her family that metaphorically is passed from one to another mainly through the women of her family to whom this task is addressed. Thus, writing and storytelling are in the bloodstream of the women of Alvarez’s family. It works like a genetic trait that the women carry on their skin, for example a kind of a signal or mark. In *Something to Declare*, she affirms that coming to a new culture as an immigrant, she “had to find new ways to be, new ways to see, and - with the change in language - new ways to speak” (156).

These new ways of perceiving the world and dealing with it were the opportunities to recreate herself as a writer, and the new ways of seeing and speaking are constituents of her work.

Her novel has dialogues full of metaphors, symbols, and motifs, such as swallows, the telescope, the trailer, windows, stars, and nature, among others. This set of elements facilitates dialogues and connections among characters since they are recurrent elements that have symbolic significance in the novel. For example, swallows represent Mexican immigrant characters that cross borders from south to north and the possibility of freedom that the birds represent. The stars represent a form of how one can find one's way by observing their position in the sky (76). Good textual evidence can be found in the following passages: "Best of all is how, like my own family, swallows have two homes, one in North America and one in South America" (267) and "So we've got to stay connected - through the stars above and swallows and letters back and forth" (307). The author states that her writing was not constituted by an individual gene, but a family skill, a cultural habit of storytelling that is propagated from one to another by generations, and her experience in a family with its "large cast of colorful characters, its elaborate branchings hither and yon to connect everyone together" (*Something* 126). Thus, her narrative naturally approximates the reader to her world of writing in a rhizomatic perspective, giving many different characters and connections, like the examples presented above.

In the same way, the novel's character, Mari Cruz, uses her family skill and cultural habit of writing and storytelling to construct a narrative that connects places (Mexico and the U.S.), spaces (private and public), time (present, past, and future), dimensions (material, abstract, imaginary), and people (from different nationalities living in the same community). Mari observes everyday events and natural phenomena, such as the seasons of the year, planting and harvesting, animal behavior, the movement back and forth of swallows, the weather, and the movement of planets, realizing that they are all interconnected on some level, and that she

is part, an extension of this huge, multiple universe. Mari establishes connections in a material realm through observation and contact with these multiplicities of people and events and in an abstract realm by interpreting, translating, and negotiating meanings from these observations in her writing and storytelling. This form of observing and interpreting material and abstract realms facilitate the understanding of differences, of other points of view, ideologies, political contexts, and the understanding that nothing is static and unchangeable. A subject who is not positioned, but involved in multiplicity, Alvarez writes dialogues that lead to personal reading about facts and events around her, a perspective is also shared by her character, Mari Cruz.

In an interview with Marta Caminero-Santangelo, Alvarez explains that this multiplicity of perspectives comes from her culture: "You're never just one person … The minute your own name is mentioned, you somehow become a dozen other people" (20). She assures her audience that her interest is exactly in this kind of "multiplicity and multiculturalness of each person, not just in a singular self" (20). The mixture of points of view allows Alvarez to show the instability and uncertainty of her characters' lives.

David Mitchell argues that Alvarez's multi-perspective works as a narrative strategy to illustrate this notion of multiple identities and shifts, both in fictional and non-fictional terrains. According to him, "[s]uch a strategy allows Alvarez to write across the boundaries of dueling nationalities in order to present immigrant or border subjectivities as a dynamic hybrid prototype of the postcolonial novel" (Mitchell, *Immigration* 39), making new rhizomatic combinations through language and writing which Alvarez considers a "space of her own" (Johnson 59). Her rhizomatic writing is a powerful tool and strategy to unite people, and also to reunite all the multiplicities that form one's self, putting them together to become that "bigger version of [one's] selves" (*Something* 129). In addition, Alvarez's writing is rhizomatic since it seems to search for new oxygenated, ventilated, and multiple spaces to establish connections, similarly to what occurs to the Stolon immigrant character in *Return to*

Sender, already mentioned in chapter one.

In the novel, Alvarez moves beyond traditional paradigms in fictional writing by bringing in two different textual genres to her fiction: letters and a diary. Alvarez's ability to portray multiplicities, including the structure of her narrative, is highlighted by Kelli Lyon Johnson as being a feature of Alvarez's *oeuvre*. Johnson explains that "[t]his approach to her writing emerges out of her desire to create her own world in literature" (Johnson, *Writing* 107), a world in which differences among people and the way they perceive the other aggregate values and approximate individuals. Alvarez's experience and her fictional work are thus dynamic and multiple. The differences and apparent contradictions between languages and the spaces of those multiplicities can be reduced through the construction of a new space through writing, so that the multiplicity of experiences can be interpreted, negotiated, reconstructed, and nurtured by Alvarez's imagination.

Language, with its many forms of expression, is the path to knowing and understanding the rhizomatic contemporary world in its multiplicity of meanings and forms. Bakhtin explains that language is not neutral and always carries the speaker's intention:

> It is populated - overpopulated - with the intentions of others. Language lies on the borderline between oneself and the other ... The word in language is half someone else's [word]. It becomes one's own only when the speaker populates it with his own intentions. (*The Dialogic* 294)

According to Bakhtin, the utterance of each individual is shaped and developed in continuous interaction with the utterances of other individuals, and is also filled with their words. He adds, "[t]hese words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate" (Bakhtin, *Speech* 89). Linda Parker-Fuller explains that Bakhtin's heteroglossia refers to the ideologies inherent in languages or language behavior, and strategies of discourse to which we all lay claim as social beings and

by which we are constituted as individuals, for example, the language acquired from family, friends, work, social groups, and others, which constitute one's subjective experience (8).

Polyphony refers not exactly to the number of voices, but to the multiple quality of an individual utterance that is the capacity of one's utterance to incorporate someone else's, which creates a dialogical relationship between these voices (9). For example, if I make a reference to someone's writing or speech, I thereby establish a dialogue with her/his opinion, adding my own. Bakhtin states that polyphony is inbred in all words and forms of expressions; it can be useful for understanding Alvarez's work. Being polyphonic and heterogeneous, Alvarez's utterance not only incorporates, but also echoes the voices of minorities she portrays in her work.

Another observation is that Bakhtin's perspective seems to reverberate with Richard Dawkins's concept of meme discussed in chapter one. According to Dawkins, meme is the way language, culture, and art interact and are propagated from one brain to another. Alvarez explains, in the chapter entitled "Of Maids and Other Muses", in *Something to Declare*, that she inherited the habit of storytelling from women that populate her imagination, like Scheherazade of *One Thousand and One Nights*, as well as in her own life by her maids and women of her family, especially her aunts: "her world was run by woman" (149) she says. Alvarez thus associates the figure of woman to a propagator of culture and language to future generation. In general, society seems to entrust women with the role of transmitting language and culture (memes), particularly through oral language. Alvarez and most Latina writers evidently endorse this notion, as they portray women characters that have such roles and power.

Undoubtedly, words and memes carry meanings and intentions, and are disseminated with specific purposes. The way Julia Alvarez uses language in *Return to Sender* encompasses Bakhtin's perspective; her language is heteroglot because it incorporates widely dissimilar

constituents of different languages and their multiplicity of meanings and forms. It is also polyphonic, if one takes into consideration that Alvarez's narrative has the perspective of three main narrative voices and minor characters that incorporate the voice(s) and behavior of someone else, creating dialogical but prolific and rhizomatic relationships between those voices. Yet, the language is charged with social-political-ideological traits in its way of addressing the problem of Mexican immigration in the United States. The language in Bakhtin's perspective shows a rhizomatic contemporary society with its diversity of individuals and their multiple voices coexisting in the same space, propagating ideas and intentions.

Julia Alvarez uses language along the lines of Bakhtin and Dawkins to construct a narrative that embodies and connects different voices, cultures, languages, thoughts, and perspectives that affect the characters' behavior from the moment they interact. Kelli Johnson states that Alvarez's language is "what connects [her] to that series of spaces that define her life: New York, Vermont, the Dominican Republic" (55), and more recently Haiti. In this sense, Alvarez seems to propose that the interaction between language, voices, spaces, and perspectives may lead to a positive change for people that participate in this process of interaction. In *Return to Sender*, this positive perspective affects the life and behavior of Alvarez's immigrant characters as well, creating fruitful conditions that allow them to recognize language as a powerful tool to negotiate meanings and deal with changes.

Alvarez very often uses literature to explore events that either bother her or of which she would like to have a better understanding. Johnson had already drawn attention to the postscript of her historical novel *In the Time of Butterflies* and the possibility of only being able to explore some events through literature (106). In this postscript, Alvarez writes that she "want[ed] to immerse [her] readers in an epoch in the life of Dominican Republic that [she] believe[s] can only finally be understood by fiction, only finally be redeemed by the

imagination" (*In the Time* 324).

In the postscript of *Return to Sender,* Alvarez explains the situation of Mexican immigrants in the U.S., confirming that the situation that she portrays in her fiction is true. She provides current data about the dragnet known as Operation Return to Sender undertaken by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in 2006, in which many Mexican rural workers were arrested and deported. The author relates the difficulties both Americans and Mexicans have been through because of political questions and the absence of laws that regulate the migratory flow between these countries. *In Return to Sender*, for instance, she problematizes the situation of undocumented Mexican immigrants in the U.S., making a reference to a golden cage, a metaphor commonly used by undocumented immigrants to represent the U.S. as a paradoxical country, where these immigrants work, make, and save money, but are unable to enjoy it freely.

In the non-fictional context, the website The Vermont Folklife Center developed an interesting project, also called The Golden Cage, which dealt with the same situation described by Alvarez. This project depicted a revealing portrait of dairy farmers and their Mexican employees, and offered a glimpse into their interdependent lives, exploring who they were and what they hoped for. The project gathered photographs and excerpts from interviews made with Vermont dairy farmers and undocumented Mexican immigrants farm workers. The characters portrayed *In Return to Sender* belong to this world. In all the project's interviews available in the project's website mentioned above, one does not hear a single voice of an immigrant woman. The project seems to reinforce Alvarez's perspective that writing still represents an important role in proclaiming and setting free the Latina's voice in the contemporary world.

If the project does not privilege women's voices, Alvarez, on contrary, gives them voices through her writing. In those interviews, as well as in Alvarez's novel, the listener/reader can

perceive the anguish and suffering of these Mexican immigrants (men similar to those portrayed in Alvarez's novel) confined (symbolically) in a golden cage. One of the interviews expresses their feelings:

> The way you live here, the level of life ... how I tell you ... is one thing, and the quality of life that you have is another because we're trapped. And ... yes, there is nothing lacking for you ... yes that's for sure! Nothing lacking for you, nothing, nothing, nothing, but only something very important: freedom. This is what is lacking (Interview #10 translation mine).

I understand that the need for freedom and a socially and politically recognizable voice is transported and translated into writing by the project, as well as in Alvarez's work. Another interesting observation is that the project's name - Golden Cage - is a reference to the Mexican folk song, *La Jaula de Oro*, the verses of which reflect exactly the feeling and voice of that immigrant described above:

De mi trabajo a mi casa
yo no se lo que me pasa
aunquesoyhombre de hogar
casi no salgo a lacalle
puestengomiedo que me hallen
y me puedan deportar.
De que me sirveeldinero
si estoy como prisionero
dentro de esta granprisión
cuando me acuerdo hasta lloro
y aunquela jaula sea de oro
no deja de ser prisión.

(La Jaula de Oro/The Golden Cage – Los Tigres del Norte)

The verses above and the interview transcribed indicate that life and art, non-fictional and fictional worlds, are connected at some level, as Alvarez depicts in *Return to Sender* the contradictions and tensions that involve Mexican immigration in the U.S. The fictional Mexican immigrant represented by the character, Mari Cruz, also experiences those contradictions shown in the interview and in the verses of the song. Anzaldúa seems to share the same perspective when she states:

The danger in writing is not fusing our personal experience and world view with the social reality we live in, with our inner life, our history, our economics, and our vision. What validates us as human beings validates us as writers. What matters to us is the relationships that are important to us whether with our self or others. We must use what is important to us to get to the writing.(Anzaldúa, *Speaking* 170).

This statement suits Alvarez's approach in *Return to Sender* since she portrays the lives of those undocumented Mexican immigrants in the U.S. Thus, the relationships with ourselves and with others are the nutrients that nurture the fictional writer's imagination as well.

Another interesting point to be observed in Alvarez's narrative, in *Return to Sender*, is the description of many passages where windows are a recurrent leitmotiv, as for example in the first line of the novel "Tyler looks out the window" (3); when Mari's family crosses the U.S. border, "Your face was pressed to the window" (26); when Mari is moving with her family from North Carolina to Vermont, "Soon we were piled in the lady's van with the window tinted so you cannot see inside" (32); when her uncle was in jail, "On the other side are small high windows with bars" (152); when Mari rescued her mother, "When the driver lowered the window…" (233), "before the window closed" (234), Mamá started looking out the windows" (237), "I gazed out the car window" (246). Windows can be Alvarez's strategy to represent a way through which the characters get into another culture, in another perspective: the

perspective of the "other side". In *Critical Multicultural Analysis of Children's Literature: Mirror, Windows, and Doors*, Maria José Botelho and Masha Kabakow Rudman argue that

> The metaphors of mirrors, windows, and doors permeates the scholarly dialogue of "multicultural children literature" as using a literature to provide ways to affirm and gain entry into one's own culture and the culture of others. These are powerful metaphors because they presuppose that literature can authentically mirror or reflect one's life; look through a window to view someone else's world … The window permits a view of other people's lives. (xiii)

One may identify in Alvarez's narrative the presence of so many windows as a metaphorical way to represent internal and external spaces of the universe of the self and the other. One only can manage to open these windows by taking a step forward and reaching out one's hands to the others to make connections. This perspective can imply that hyphenated subjects are those who inhabit and move between two cultures, to make connections and dislocate among many cultures in the contemporary world. The concept of the hyphen is replaced by a rhizomatic configuration where the stolon pattern begins to dominate e intercultural relations, extending also to Alvarez's writing, and the way her characters perform in the novel.

Tara DaPra also discusses the use of writing as a form of therapy for nonfictional writers in her article "Writing Memoir and Writing for Therapy: An Inquiry on the Functions of Reflection". According to her, "[w]riting is just another form of problem solving. Like psychology or medicine, it's a drive to understand the human condition experientially, one that's led by emotion and instinct". Reflecting on DaPra's statement, one may suppose that it works similarly in relation to fictional writers, since Alvarez's works and characters exercise the craft of writing as a way of pursuing new ways of seeing and solving problems, and also

of dealing with traumas, contradictions, and conflictive situations.It is a catharsis, an act or process of releasing a strong emotion or traumatic event by expressing it in an artful form.

Rottenberg-Rosler explains that catharsis "has been used in many different fields of knowledge, expressing a process of inner change … and causes emotional, cognitive and moral purification" (2). Alvarez's writing seems to have this function. Similarly, Alvarez's character, Mari Cruz, begins to write in a daily process of catharsis in the sense that by putting her heart and soul on paper she alleviates her emotional burden and undergoes an inner transformation. Dominick LaCapra, in his article "Trauma, Absence, Lost", has argued that characters haunted by traumas, absences, and losses can find in a return to their origins a possibility for reconciliation with themselves or a recovery of their history and roots. Alvarez seems perceives that those possibilities of reconciliation and recovery can be achieved through writing. In the same way, her character, Mari Cruz, takes the path of returning to her origins, connecting with people that are part of her subjectivity through letters and diary in order to achieve a reconciliation and recovery her own self.

Alvarez thus offers in *Return to Sender* an immigrant character that experiences losses and absences throughout her journey from Mexico to the U.S., coming to perceive the alien within her. Writing then becomes, in Anzaldúa's terms, a "tool for piercing that mystery [to see the alien within] but it also shields us, gives a margin of distance, helps us survive. And those who don't survive? The waste of ourselves: so much meat thrown at the feet of madness or fate or the state" (*Borderlands* 169). Anzaldúa's assertion explains the way writing can be an escape from madness caused by traumatic events. It also fits in Alvarez's characters behavior of escaping from absences, lost, and traumatic events through writing.

The narrative constructed in *Return to Sender* portrays a character that tells a story at the same time that she writes letters and in a diary to express her feelings, doubts, and fears as well as important events that influence her life. What do the letters and a diary have in

common? Why does the author choose these devices? Comparing textual genres such as letters and a diary, one might say that they are plain-spoken, lively, and full of details. Both letters and diaries seem to emerge directly from the writer's heart and soul, fresh and intimate, bringing the reader closer to whoever that person may be. The personal writings reveal how people both embrace and resist the time and place they live in. Letters and diary are inspired by the writers' desire to map out important changes in their lives.

It is interesting to observe that Mari Cruz tries to come to terms with her biculturalism also in written format, writing in a double- perspective, which gives her a sense of wholeness. This double-perspective may remind one of Salman Rushdie's stereoscopic vision, in the sense that having Mari immigrated into the U.S. from Mexico, she is "at one and the same time insider and outsider in this society" (Rushdie, *Imaginary* 19). Thus, Mari develops the stereoscopic vision described by Rushdie, which helps her in mapping and understanding the events and changes in her life. Her writing accompanies her maturation process and the sequence of events, and it can be summarized as following:

The letters are addressed to eight different characters: her missing mother (17); the U.S. President (58); her dead Mexican grandmother (92); the Virgin Mary of Guadalupe (121); her uncle, Tío Felipe, who is in jail (156); her family in Mexico (195); her family in the U.S. (227); and a letter in response to a letter written by her American friend Tyler Paquette (308). Entries that are written directly in her diary (264);

Based on the previous arguments, I would say that both the structure of the noveland the way the character Mari writes have a rhizomatic stolon configuration. In the following sections, I will analyze Mari's style of writing and its formats. I intend to show that her writing is an extension of her subjectivity and life as a Stolon immigrant and, consequently, her writing also becomes rhizomatic stolon writing.

2.2- Mari's Writings

Mari's universe is a little ballpoint pen. She is in-between two cultures and in-between two forms of writing. This way, her letters and diary become a space of connection and refuge, where past, present, and future times converge. This situation is explained by Bhabha when he states: "the 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living" (Bhabha, *The Location* 10). Mari does not revisit the past in the sense of nostalgia or to fulfill gaps, but to complete the cycle of meanings of her present life. The basis of a letter and a diary seems to ignore the future because they are immediate productions. However, Mari's letters and diary do not ignore the future, because it is in the future that possibly she will see the results of her actions in the present, and the present becomes a past in a wink. Her personal writings hold the dialogue with the past and memory which are never stable and finalized; they contest, dialogue, and negotiate with the present as a tentative to project and reflect on the future the changes she expects for her and her people as well. Thus, Mari's letters and diary seem to incorporate past, present, and future times. Also, they seem to be borderless in the sense that the character can move freely through time, space, and dimensions, working as a time machine through writing.

When Mari carries on a dialogue with the past, she perceives that "there are immense, boundless masses of forgotten contextual meanings [that] are recalled and invigorated in renewed form (in a new context)" (Bakhtin, *Speech* 170, original parenthesis of the author). This invigorated and renewed space is the space of her writing. Her focus is on the actions and attitudes that can be performed in the present that will affect her future in a positive way without leaving her past behind. This is only possible through writing. The narrative space transits from the fictional text itself to the space of her letters and diary, from present to past and future, from Mexico to the U.S, in a constant back and forth movement that enables connections and combinations of these times and spaces. It seems to be chaotic and rhizomatic, almost schizophrenic, but it is constructed exactly over the dynamic social

relations of the multicultural contemporary world she lives in.

Doreen Massey argues that space is not an "absolute independent dimension, but is constructed out of social relations" (2). The multiple spaces of the novel permit the protagonist to choose, create, and recreate her own space in the narrative, which I consider an extension of the conflictive space she inhabits, which is neither Mexican nor American, but a mixture of both. The dimension of Mari's writing embraces all the interconnected spaces of her social relations. Her letters and diary are parallel spaces, extensions of her life, and always dynamic counter-spaces of resistance and struggle that dismantle historical and ideological binaries constructions of gender, nation, culture, language, race, and power, inventing new ways of telling, translating, and improving herself.

Mari's writing does not have the borders she has to face and trespass in her life, like the cultural, social, economic, and political borders. In her writing, Mari begins a journey of self-discovery by which she can cross freely from one site to another, discovering the possibilities of dialogue among them. Although a journey indicates a point of departure and arrival with a beginning, middle, and end, Mari breaks this supposed linearity, constructing a trajectory that proceeds by zigzag movements, a flux from one point to another like a web, leading to a number of inputs and outputs. She imposes a dynamic narrative that requires the reader to realize the speed of events.

Also, in Mari's writing, issues related to memory, imagination, and inner conflicts, as well as questionings and criticisms are materialized. Her writing shelters the character's abstract psychological dimension, turning it into concrete and palpable material. If her letters and diary host Mari's perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and conflicts, that is, a consciousness of her self, of the other, and of the world, this consciousness becomes palpable and materialized in the pages of her writing, since she translates into and transfers all these perceptions to writing. Possibly, it will become her personal file: a memoir, a document, and a record for the future

and for those who come after her.

As just discussed in the first chapter, Mari is a Mexican Stolon immigrant who comes out from the darkness of anonymity to cast herself defiantly in the American community in which she lives. Divided between two cultures, she inhabits an intermediate space, a third space, where she dialogues with both cultures, revisiting her memories, returning to her cultural roots in Mexico to understand herself. Mari is a first generation immigrant because she was born in Mexico and came to live in the U.S. She is also called the one-and-a-half generation. Yauling Hsieh affirms that constantly "first-generation immigrants choose to set aside their past, which is part of their identities, by keeping silent; thus they suffer from a kind of disease, or dis-ease, resulting from this conscious choice of amnesia" (3). Hsieh's assumption does not fit to Mari's case, however. Although Mari is the first generation of Mexican immigrants and the U.S. border crossing was a traumatic event, she does not reject her past or memory, protecting herself behind a curtain of amnesia; on the contrary, she opens the curtain of her past to understand the present and construct a different future for herself and for those silenced immigrants like her parents. The most challenging part of her life - to leave her homeland - becomes the optimal time for self-creation. Her re-creation and re-birth as a new immigrant subject (Stolon immigrant) occur mainly through language: oral and written.

For example, at the beginning of the novel, Mari is forced by her father and the American *patróns* (employers) to keep silent about her origin for fear of being caught by the immigration police and being deported. But she gradually realizes that her position in the American community is not like her father's and uncles', who live a life of confinement on the farm, speaking very little English. She goes out to school and other public buildings, speaking English without an accent. Her physical traits are what position her as an outsider before the community. She says: "this state is full of white people, so Mexicans stand out and that makes it easy for *la migra* to catch us" (201). Unlike her Mexican family that has to be

silent and confined due to the lack of English, Mari speaks good English and so can afford living a public life, but she has to keep silent because of her status as an undocumented immigrant.

So Mari gradually realizes that languagebecomes a much bigger problem for her Mexican family than legal papers are for her. Although she does not have the papers, the fact that she is bilingual sets her free from confinement and introduces her to public life. She realizes for example her uncle's difficulty with the language: "Tío Felipe could not defend himself because he does not know enough English" (24). Being bilingual is an advantage, as she moves from Spanish to English and vice versa, becoming a translator of both languages and of cultures and experiences.

In this way, Mari develops control over many conflicted situations and cultural clashes throughout the novel. Some examples are the times she acts as her father (217) and sisters' translator: "Sometimes I even have to translate between Papá and them [her sisters], imagine!" (201). She becomes dis-closed with all the richness of that word because the minute she switches to another language she is transported and transformed; she is another person (Caminero-Santangelo 15). In short, language becomes a tool for releasing herself from confinement and silence, a tool of self-translation and recreation, and at some level a valid credential that allows Mari to be part of the American community even though she does not have the legal documents.

In the beginning of the novel, the only way she can express herself freely invoice, culture, language, and as a political subject, is through writing and storytelling. She omits names, places, and references, even when she writes a letter to the U.S. President for a class assessment: "My name is María Dolores, but I can't give you my last name or anybody's last name or where we live because I am not supposed to be in your wonderful country. I apologize that I am here without permission" (58). Papers become her hell (lack of legal

documents) and her heaven (letters and diary). The letters and diary become places of transgression by breaking all the labels imposed on her. Paper then has a double meaning, both entrapment and release. It makes her to cry, but also shelters her tears.

Women's writing can be understood as a transgression in terms of literary, gender, and physical boundaries by breaking the silence and confinement imposed on women, mainly Latinas. Being "silenced for centuries by a patriarchal Latino culture, as well as by the historically male-dominated literary world Latinas have much to say" (Sirias 13). But in *Return to Sender*, this silence and confinement are also experienced by the undocumented Mexican male characters who do not speak English well and are not allowed to cross the boundaries of the farm. They "can't risk going off the farm to shop" (147) or to have fun for fear of being caught by *la migra* (the immigration police). This shows how Mari finds exits through language and writing, but her Mexican family remains hidden, afraid of being caught by the police.

Mari initially maintains a certain care over language, using it with caution and in a more introspective way because of her illegality and the taboo that involves Latin American women who, by tradition, have to keep their mouths shut. Along the narrative, however, she progressively becomes more self-confident in her use of language and way of expressing herself. As long as Mari matures in self-knowledge, the language's domain increases as well. Besides, Mari's voice is still suffocated by her father and uncle's fears of *la migra* and by paradigms involving women's exploitation. Also, Mari's American sisters sometimes have to defend her against the prejudice of being undocumented. Writing becomes a need to speak what cannot be told openly. By opening her mouth, she disobeyed her father and those who try to suppress her voice, including the State. By putting words on paper, she has done even worse: she has broadcast her double disobedience.

Mari is neither like her silenced father nor uncles who do not manage the language well

nor like her American sisters, Ofie and Luby, who do not need to keep silent about their origins and legality. Mari's American middle sister, Ofie, for example "always wants to be the one to tell stories as long as she doesn't have to write them down" (197) proving that as long as Mari is not allowed to speak out about her origin, writing becomes her voice. In fact, it is through writing that she gives herself to a much larger familythan that of her own blood, and through writing she can take care of the human family in a broad sense. In this way, being part of a much greater cultural family, Mari can question herself about where her space is in the middle of this multiplicity, whether she belongs neither to Mexico nor to the U.S. It seems that she is not in the borders of the two cultures, but inhabits a middle space, in a cultural and spatial constant cross-pollination. She inhabits a third, intermediate and conflictive space, but a creative one that also extends to her writing.

Although Mari's space is sometimes of silence and reflection, she progressively constructs a dynamic space through oral language (storyteller) and written language (letters and diary) in which existential queries may be, at some level, answered and perhaps harmonized. Mari is empowered through language and storytelling, gifts inherited from her mother, but she has to embark first on a journey of growth, initiated in silence and fear, to find her own voice. Bakhtin reminds us that "[We] live in a world of others' words" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 143) in the sense that what we speak and the way we do this both come from the outside and from the interaction with other individuals and cultures. Being a silenced individual makes us isolated and insulated before the world, which can be a prejudice to social relations, fundamental to all individuals' self-formation. Mari's task of finding her own voice is not simple, but if she does not she will remain like her Mexican family: fearful and confined. The journey of self-discovery is also about finding her voice. By setting her voice free, she is representing the voices of those historically silenced Mexican immigrants in the U.S.

Mari therefore strategically creates an extension of her world where she gathers all the

voices and the scrambled pieces of her own existential puzzle. Memory and imagination are the substantial humus to fertilize and nurture Mari's subjectivity as a writer and a storyteller. Caminero-Santangelo states: "Memory is a storyteller" (*The Territory*, 18) because it is always recollecting events from the past to construct a narrative in the present. Mari is unsure whether her memories can be trusted, as they may be either tempered by trauma or constructed from her mother's stories, or possibly a mixture of both. Yet she writes: "I was only four. So I do not know if I truly remember or if it is your stories [Mamá] that have become my memories [and] I'm not sure even this paper can hold such terrifying memories" (25-8). Her confession makes one suspect that her narratives, both writing and storytelling, may not correspond accurately to her experiences, but may be an echo of her childhood memory and her mother's stories with a bit of imagination. Thus, a seed is sown in the fertile soil of Mari's imagination, and will flourish in her writing.

Mari incorporates in her writing the stories told by her mother, the memory from her homeland, and the perceptions of the world she has lived in. It works as a treatment site for traumas, absences, and losses as well as keeping the family's memory alive. She writes to her absent mother: "Since you left Mamá, I have continued to tell them [her sisters] stories. Luby and Ofie do not have as many memories of you as I have. So I'm always adding mine to theirs so you will not be a stranger when you come back" (22). Mari has no choice but to take care of herself by providing her own supportive and nurturing base for her physical and psychic survival. Writing heals the wounds caused by all the difficulties she has to face throughout her sojourn. She is almost transfigured into several identities: mother, daughter, sister, friend, student, household helper, translator, rescuer (of her mother and uncle), and negotiator. In the absence of the mother who was captured by smugglers, Mari learns to overcome difficulties. Mari's mother has indirectly contributed for her daughter's emotional abandonment, which is mitigated by writing.

Before Mari's mother disappears, she gives a command for her daughter's survival: "write me a letter" (28). Thus, Mari's writing becomes a space of survival and a place where identities, memory, and imagination converge. Similarly to what happened to Alvarez, in the words of Kelli Lyon Johnson, Mari's losses compel her to reinvent herself as the "creation of additional selves that constantly interact with the selves not lost to memory" (Johnson, *Writing* 31). Perceiving and dialoguing with her many selves, she starts to see herself, realizing not only her roots but also the multiple branches that sprout from her and extent in all directions.

Mari's writing encompasses two formats: letters that are addressed to people which represent fragments of her subjectivity and inhabit her imaginary, and a final diary where she sums up and concludes all the stories she is told. The structure is initially in the form of letters addressed to eight different recipients, following a sequence similar to a period of pregnancy, through which a premature child is forced by circumstances to come to life. The events are presented with dramatic immediacy. The multiple points of view approached in these letters lead the reader to a historical dimension of facts and events, and a certain verisimilitude, because of confessional tone, direct dialogues, and dates.

And yet, letters may present some disadvantages, depending on the way the writer tells the story; the confession, for example, may be susceptible to suspicion. A narrator who tells her/his story may disguise the facts and confuse the reader with multiple understandings or misunderstandings. Mari constructs a very sophisticated narrative with many ideological, political, and social nuances. Her writing is not merely a deposit of thoughts, but rather an intimate way to bare her thoughts, feelings, and soul. In this sense, Mari's letters and diary are associated with a search for an inner self in a world which no longer offers an external totality due to its multiplicity. Mari seems to seek in the space of her writing the answers she cannot find in her confused, fast, and dynamic world.

Alvarez explains in *Something to Declare* that as a student she had been encouraged by teachers to write down what she remembered about the world she was homesick for - her homeland (139). Curiously, Mari lives the same experience, but in a different perspective. She does not write only about her homeland because she does not have much memory of it. She records memories in the format of letters and diary, portraying memory, current events, and hopes for the future with drops of imagination. But why does Mari choose letters instead of a diary to initiate her writing? And why does the diary appear only in the end of the narrative? A letter is addressed to another person and it requires an answer, calling for a dialogue. The characters to whom Mari addresses her letters lead to reflections on the relevant topics presented and discussed by the character throughout the novel.

2.3 - Rhizomatic Stolon Letters

In *Something to Declare*, Julia Alvarez explains that her contact with letters comes from her father whose second ambition was to become a writer. Because of his work as a doctor, he had to give up this ambition. Instead, he used to write letters to Alvarez and her sisters during the period they were in boarding school. She remembers that these letters were the way her parents tried to parent her in boarding school, far from the family circle (*Something,* 113). Similarly, in *Return to Sender*, Mari Cruz, also constructs an interesting narrative in the form of letters perhaps to parent herself and be parented by the characters she addresses.

Letters, as personal missive addressed to a particular recipient, is a much older form of writing, dating from antiquity, when kings, warriors, and travelers of various kinds reported on their adventures, conquests, and journeys. Letters are visual medium of communication, consisting of a written sheet of paper within a closed envelope, which is sealed and sent to the addressee of the message through the Postal Service. In the early days, the postage of a letter was paid by the addressee, which changed only with the creation of stamps, which are paid

previously by the sender to ensure the delivery of the letter or its return to the sender. Currently, letters have been replaced by the e-mail worldwide. There are people who still prefer letters for the simple pleasure of exchanging physical correspondence or even feeling the touch of a sheet of paper, the presence of the other. Mari portrays this feeling when she writes to her Mexican family in Mexico: "somehow, it feels extra special to send you our greetings in writing and know that this very same piece of paper I've touched will soon be in your hands" (195).

The letters are written throughout the main narrative during a period of one year, following the seasons and coinciding with the process of Mari's psychological maturation. The main titles of the novel's chapters in which the letters appear make reference to the topics or events discussed in the letters' content. For example, in the book's contents the following sequence appears: chapter one. Uno - introduces a bilingual structure, summer 2005 - the period of time and the connection to nature; as long nature changes the character changes as well; Bad-Luck Farm - represents the issues covered by the chapter about losses; and finally *Queridíssima Mamá* is to whom Mari addresses her letter.The same structure is recurrent in all the chapters. The addressees of Mari's letters pointed out at the beginning of this chapter represent the focus, the heart of the matters over which Mari works in the construction of knowledge and in the comprehension of her immigrant subjectivity.

The first and second letters (August 14 and 19,respectively), addressed to Mari's mother, coincide with the beginning of the summer of 2005 and bring new hope to Mari. They mark the beginning of her family's journey to Vermont for a new job and home on the farm. In these letters, Mari compares and confronts the cultural, historical, and physical traits represented by her missing mother with her current condition as an eleven-year-old Mexican immigrant in the U.S. She feels the absence of her two mothers: the mother of her blood and her motherland. Since mother and motherland can be associated with the idea of home and

belonging, the theme of the letters is about this. She writes to her mother "But a home means being all together, so until you are back with us, Mamá, we will never feel at home, not in Carolina del Norte, not in México, not here" (33). In these letters, Mari also remembers the difficulties the whole family has gone through since they crossed the U.S border to their settlement in Vermont, and the fears this journey caused in them.

Also, she writes these letters in order to talk about issues that represent an emptiness and loneliness of her soul. The endless waiting for her mother's return, waiting for the laws to change that will give her permission to come and go freely, waiting for better job, and waiting for a place to call home complete the issue about belonging that appears recurrently in these letters. The feeling of emptiness and loneliness are relieved in the pages of her letters, where she writes: "I have felt less alone as I write them. I think I will keep writing letters every day of my life" (34).

The letters written to her missing mother have four main functions: first, to compensate for the mother's absence: "Whenever you feel sad or lonely or confused, just pick up a pen and write me a letter" (28) says Mari's mother; second, to fulfill the need to expressing herself, in the sense that "[Mari] has nowhere else to put the things that are in her heart" (21); third, to maintain the family's memory alive, recording its story during the mother's absence, thus, when the mother sees her again, "[Mari] will not be an alien to [her]" (22); and, finally, to reconnect and reintroduce the mother (the origin, roots, and blood) back to the family.

Mari's mother also has an important role in the representation of women immigrants. The smugglers who captured, enslaved, and raped her (239) are Mexicans living illegally in the U.S. They hit her in the mouth and dislodge some of her teeth, taking away her smile (240), a real and symbolic way of silencing her voice. The mother's fate can be understood as a representation, a projection, or a possible repetition in Mari's future life of entrapment and oblivion by men, the State, and laws, independent of nationality. Mari struggles against those

violent and subjugated positions that her mother had to live. The letters she addresses to her mother are unconsciously addressed to herself in order to criticize and contest dominant narratives of the Americas, which are about manhood and patriarchy.

There are three main points in the letters that should be detached: first, the moment Mari replaces her mother in taking care of her little sisters and her new home in Vermont is the trigger to Mari's maturation process; second, the moment she starts putting into practice her mother's commandment to write introduces her to writing; and third, the function these letters seem to represent: to make connections between Mari and her mother, to maintain memory alive, and to keep her absent mothers (mother and motherland) connected to the family when she returns. Mari explains to her mother in the letters: "you will know me through these words. So when you see me I will not be an alien to you, too, Mamá. For that would break my heart, even if I also write it down" (22) and concludes "I will not be mailing you these letters. Instead, I am to keep them until you come back" (34).

If she keeps these letters in her possession, she is creating a kind of record that cannot be properly considered a diary. A diary is characterized by a certain frequency of entries and continuity. In this sense, I understand that these letters may have two meanings: Mari will keep the letters until her missed mother returns to the family in Vermont, and Mari will keep them until she (Mari) returns to her missed motherland and not be seen as an alien there as well. Thus, the possible characteristics of these letters work as tools of connection between Mari and her mother: "to light her mother's way back to the family in Vermont" (31); between Mari and her motherland: "you had not known our own country of México was so vast and beautiful" (26); and to keep the family's memory and history alive: "But you will never forget me, ever?" (28).

In one of the final scenes of the novel, Mari's mother returns and promises to tell her daughter the whole story of suffering of being trapped by smugglers, suggesting that perhaps

"someday when [Mari is] a famous writer, [she] can put it into a book" (314), foreshadowing a possible future of Mari as a writer and storyteller. Thus, telling her mother' story is also the way Mari retells the story of all Marías that coexist in herself (her mother, grandma, The Virgin Mary of Guadalupe, and sisters all named María) in a mirroring perspective, aggregating the generational and historical Latina' stigma to break with it on paper.

In the third letter addressed to the president, Mari respectfully introduces herself to the state, personified in the Presidential figure and tells her story in a day before Mexico's Independence Day, September 16. With deep arguments, she tries to convince Mr. President about the hard conditions of Mexican immigrants in the U.S., writing about borders, divisions, territory, prejudice, laws, nationalism, and loyalty, proposing interesting and positive solutions to those issues. In this letter, Mari connects herself to the political aspect of her constitution as a physical person before the state. She tells her story to the President, calling his attention to the difficulties faced by undocumented immigrants, mainly those children brought to the U.S. by their parents, such as herself.

She does not put herself in an inferior and subjugated position like most of undocumented immigrants, but rather argues about her rights, questioning the immigration laws (60). Her rational arguments are an attempt to convince the president how everything in the world is connected in some sense. She demonstrates how politicized and culturally involved she is in American culture and the world's events (59). Her attitude reminds us that Mari is a Stolon immigrant connected to the world. In fact, she reinforces the idea of connection and a possible and harmonic coexistence among people from different cultures, which can bring economic benefits to all (61).

She also discusses about the multicultural formation of U.S. people, the meanings of home to her immigrant family and to herself as a bicultural individual, arguing that she has a right to be there (61). Mari seems to consider Mexico her homeland and the U.S. her home. In these

letters, Mari recalls historical facts, personalities, and striking statements to endorse her argument and to suggest that governments should rethink the old immigration's laws, in the sense that if the world and society are to change progressively, the laws should follow these changes as well. She writes:

> I have seen you on television, Mr. President, saying that you want democracy for this whole world. I sincerely hope you get your wish. But that will means that if everyone in this world gets a vote, the majority will not be Americans. They will be people like me from other countries that are so very crowded and poor. We would be able to vote for what we want and need. So this letter is from a voter from that future when you would want to be treated as fairly as I am asking you to treat me (60).

Being a pre-teen girl, Mari does not have an effective or open agenda to change immigrant laws, but intentions that are gradually acquired and concentrated in little everyday actions, and logged on the pages of her letters and diary. Initially, these changes are perceived in the realm of imagination through her writing. Then, they leave the pages of her letters and diary to become little daily actions that extend to the local community. Thus, big changes start with small daily achievements. These little actions and records are starting points to a changing of consciousness that will reflect on the other spheres in a future imagined by her to all immigrants.

Mari ends the letter by telling the story of the Mexican Independence Day. She tells the reader about her dreams of a future where people could enjoy full freedom. There is an echo of Martin Luther King's speech about having a dream in her final words. Mr. King says: "I hear the bell of liberty" while Mari says: "A priest rang the bell to wake up all the citizens to freedom …All over the Mexico, people are waiting for the sound of liberty" (71). The striking point of this letter occurs when Mari stays up until midnight waiting for the Mexican Independence Day: lifting her arms above her shoulders like the two hands of a clock. This

imagery may represent the encounter of her two cultural influences, symbolizing her desire for unity (zero hour and the beginning of a new day, a new time). Then, turning her face in opposite directions - to North and South - she exclaims in the two languages: "!Viva México! … Long live the United States of the World!" (72). This letter thus represents her biculturalism; it calls the attention of the state to the situation of undocumented immigrants, and the desire to have unity in diversity.

The fourth letter (November 14) is written after the celebration of the Day of the Dead, November 2, coinciding with the season of fall when nature retires. It is time of reflection about things, places, and people that have passed away or been left behind. Mari takes this time to speak to her dead Mexican grandma, Abuelita, (who also symbolizes Mari's cultural roots and motherland) about issues related to culture and the way people from different cultures act and react to death, memory, and religion among other things. In other words, Mari makes a parallel between cultures (101), bringing back the memory of her cultural Mexican roots and comparing them to American culture (102). She explains to Abuelita how the encounter between her Mexican family and Americans happened, how the members of both cultures reacted, and how they share the culture of each other.

Mari and her sisters have taken down the altar they made for Abuelita to celebrate the Day of the Dead in Mexican style. They organized an altar in honor to Abuelita, putting her picture on top, and around the picture the girls placed her favorite food (chocolates) and drink (Coca-Cola). Mari writes a letter that will be put behind grandma's picture inside its frame to be buried someday in her graveyard in Mexico. She has learned this Mexican tradition from her Mexican teacher at an American school. It is interesting to observe thus how Mari constructs a cultural web, intertwining and celebrating the two cultures.

Another important theme portrayed by Mari in her letters is religion. The fifth letter (December 12) is addressed to The Virgin Mary of Guadalupe on her feast day. Written in

winter time, this letter works not only as an urgent petition, but also as a reflection on issues related to disobedience, faith, hope, identity, imprisonment, justice, and union among people. Winter brings cold to the earth and to Mari's heart and soul, due the absence of her mother for almost a year and her uncle's imprisonment by the immigration police. Thus, Mari begs the Virgin: "So, *por favor*, Virgencita, return Mamá and our uncle so that we can be a united family in the United States or in México, it does not matter anymore, as long as we are all together" (135). Once more, Mari speaks about connections. Being connected to La Virgen María de Guadalupe by a written petition legitimizes and reinforces her requests. She buries the letter under the saint's robe in a Nativity scene set up outdoors in front of a big catholic church; if her voice is heard from her writing, her written petitions to The Virgin Mary will be truly heard by the saint.

Social, economic, and political issues are intensively argued in the letters written to Tío Felipe, who is in jail. In fact, he is the one who most receive letters, for a total of eight. These letters represent the way Mari deals with political aspects of immigration as well as issues of justice, imprisonment, loneliness, and memory. She tells Tío Felipe's story and reflects on the need for adequate laws to fit into the new world setting. Tío Felipe went off the farm for a party and was caught by the police, and Mari states that "[He] deserve[s] a little fiesta now and then after the hard way [he] had been working to help the whole *familia* since [he was] fourteen and came to this country [the U.S.]" (156 author's original italics).

The first letter Mari writes to her uncle is dated December 24, Christmas Eve (winter), in which she thanks him for running away from the farm to protect the rest of his family from *la migra.* Also, she reflects on binarisms such as right/wrong, justice/injustice, legal/illegal, and imprisonment/freedom, concluding that they are concepts that can hold different meanings depending on the perspective from which they are seen, stating: "even though this country is treating you like a criminal, you are our hero!" (157), highlighting that her uncle's arrest is a

political act as well as a reflection of the situation of Mexican immigrants in the U.S.

One should note that Tío Felipe is prohibited from receiving anything from outside the jail, including Mari's letters. Her strategy is to press the letters against the window of the visiting room, so he could read the letter through the glass window. The sheriff only allows him to receive things and letters when the fourth letter is written on January 14. Thus, the letters to Tío Felipe initially find a barrier to cross. Of course, letters do not have bars like jail. Paper does not arrest and imprison one's words, feelings, and thoughts; rather it holds lines that end in an open margin, an opened space that leads to free and endless traces.

The second letter to Tío Felipe is written on December 31 as good riddance to the last year. She reunites on its pages a hope for a New Year for her uncle: "May the new year bring you safely home!" (159) she says. Reflecting on issue of imprisonment, Mari imagines if shewas the one locked up in jail what she would miss the most, and undoubtedly she concludes: "Besides my family, it would be my letter writing … and then very small things like catching snowflakes with my tongue or looking up at the stars on a clear night" (159). Although Mari has a strong connection with her cultural roots, she is also connected to aspects that give her a possibility to flow (writing and nature). Once more, Mari reinforces her stolon nature.

The third letter to Tío Felipe is written on January 7, a day after the Day of the Three Magi. In this letter, Mari tells her uncle how American and Mexican families are interacting and celebrating the culture of one another, making a reference to the different origins of the Three Magi of Christianity. The topic of this letter does not refer to a process of acculturation, where the culture of the dominant individual/group modifies the culture of the weaker individual/group. Rather, Mari's letter seems to highlight a process of assimilation which is conceptualized as being a process of "interpenetration or fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons or groups; and by sharing

their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life" (Raymond & Nelson 359). This process requires a direct contact among cultures, which is broadly portrayed in the novel.

The fourth brief letter to Tío Felipe is written on January 14, and brings up another topic related to cultural encounters, the possibility of miscegenation. She addresses her remarks to Tío Felipe about his American girlfriend who "spent last summer working in an orphanage in México, so she speaks a whole bunch of Spanish" (172). She reflects on the possibility of her uncle's American girlfriend of moving freely from the U.S. to Mexico and vice versa, without any problems, because even if her uncle is deported to Mexico, his American girlfriend already knows her way to Mexico and can visit him anytime. Once more, this reflection highlights political aspects.

In the sixth and seventh letters dated January 21 and 28, Mari describes the contradictions that the American jail caused in her, looking like a country club with bars on the windows. She puts a finger on the wound of economic contradiction, since many American companies hire a lot of undocumented Mexican workers. She suggests that her uncle call his worried parents in Mexico and "tell them how much [he is] enjoying [his] country club jail with its swimming pool and excellent food and wonderful service provided by Mexicans" (170). This event is portrayed by Mari with a certain irony, one of the more scathing critiques. It seems that she is pinching the controversial economic issue that this event represents.

The eighth and last letter written to Tío Felipe is dated February 4. In this letter, topics of home, language, identity, rupture, negotiation, and return are addressed. Her uncle is deported to Mexico and she experiences contradictory feelings. Although she is happy because her uncle is going home, she feels sorry about it, and the event marks once more the dismantlement of Mari's family, which began with the absence of her mother. From this moment on, she starts to exercise her ability to negotiate and aggregate the other members of

her family. For example, Mari's father makes a new rule for the girls in the house: only Spanish, including TV programs, due to her father's fears of being all deported to Mexico, but the rule causes a domestic rebellion. Mari interferes and her father decides to liberate the cartoons in English, switching to a Spanish channel during commercials (176). Thus, Mari assumes a mother's role of counseling, comforting, and assembling the family: "I guess by now with Papá always telling me I'm the little mother, I have become one" (175).

Tío Felipe introduces another element of connection: music. Playing his guitar, he sings the famous Mexican Immigrant Anthem, *La Golondrina,* approximating history, tradition, and the memory of Mexican people to Mari's life. Through this song, she is transported to México, and according to her "something similar happens when [she] writes" (159). Writing connects Mari to her origin, missing mother, dead Abuelita, and her arrested uncle, Tío Felipe, and while she writes to them, she feels they are back. Writing becomes an element of connection, aggregation, and coming together.

Conflicts of generations and cultural divergences are highlighted in the letter to her Mexican family in Las Margaritas, written on March 18, 2006. Among the many topics discussed in this letter are language, culture, identity, belonging, and tradition, as well as the question of gender. In a very simple way, Mari discusses her father's position in disapproving her friendship with the American boy, Tyler Paquette. Her father and Mexican family do not allow girls and boys to be special friends, but Mari contests this prohibition. She becomes self-confident, finding her own voice, arguing and negotiating with the distant family, knowing "how to move the heart with words" (176), like her American sister Ofie who is always contesting Mexican traditions. In this letter, Mari confronts cultural tradition on two important levels: she rejects the disapproval of her friendship and disobeys her Mexican father and family, writing to them: "I certainly hope that Papá is wrong about how you do not allow girls and boys to be special friends. Because if this is so, I hate to say it, but just like my

sister Ofie, I would not want to live in México" (210). With this reaction, Mari shows controversial behavior from what is expected of a woman from a traditional Latin family.

Geoffrey Fox, in his work *Hispanic Nation*, discusses the gains and losses of Latin people in making adjustments to live in the U.S. From his extensive list, one issue may be a great achievement of the Latinas: freedom from male tyranny and *machismo*, which are "widespread, shared, and reinforced even by many women, especially mothers who insist that their sons do only 'manly' tasks and leave the household drudgery to their sisters" (230). Thus, Latinas are able to "free themselves from such attitudes only when they enter a new culture" (231), Fox claims, and his argument can be positively applied to Mari's behavior portrayed in this letter.

Traumatic events, psychological issues, memory, and maturation arise in the letters addressed to Mari's father, Uncle Armando, and sisters on April 22 (almost spring) on the occasion of her mother ransom from the hands of smugglers. Mari has an uncommon attitude for an undocumented eleven-year-old Mexican immigrant girl in the U.S. Surprisingly, she organizes a plan, and with the help of members of the American family, she begins a journey to North Carolina to rescue her mother. The rescue has another meaning, as well: it is the rescue of her origins represented by the mother figure. Mari goes to the encounter with her mother and to a part of her self that was missing.

Mari reports her feelings when seeing a lot of Mexican people on the street in North Carolina. She admits to feeling a kind of homesickness, thinking of all her family had left behind in Mexico, which stirs her memories and feelings. After the dramatic rescue, the mother tells her story to Mari since "she has become a young lady in [the mother's] absence, so [her mother] can entrust [her] with grown-up information" (238) reconnecting Mari to her root of storytelling. This is the moment when Mari gives her mother the letters she wrote, from the beginning of the novel, which were not mailed for fear of being intercepted by the

immigration police: “She had brought them [the letters] along. [Her mother] has read them half a dozen times already, and each time, she smiles softly, so proud of [Mari’s] stories” (243), closing in this way a cycle in Mari’s life that was the waiting for her mother’s return, and initiating another, which is the waiting for their return to Mexico.

After her mother returns to Vermont, Mari stops writing letters because they have already fulfilled their role of connecting Mari to her missing selves. The whole family is deported to Mexico because of the Operation Return to Sender undertaken by the Immigration Customs Enforcement - ICE. Now in Mexico, Mari starts to communicate with her American friend Tyler Paquette by letter. Letters now have other meanings. She receives a letter from him, giving his perspective on the events of the last year - the gains and losses. In this letter, written on July 28, 2006 (summer), Tyler tells her how positive the meeting with the Mexican family was and how many things he has learned from them, mainly that “… life is about change, change, and more change” (300). Tyler has learned that “the mind is a puppy we have to train” (301), and has developed a habit of “thinking positive” (301) in case bad or sad things happen, a habit he learned by living with Mari. Being not very good at writing, another positive thing Tyler learned with Mari is talking to her through paper, which he knows she likes to do. He says that they have got to stay connected through letters back and forth from Mexico and the U.S, ending his letter writing in Spanish and English: “*Adios, amiga*, and I guess I don’t have to tell you to write back” (307 original author’s italics).

Closing the cycle of a year from the first letter she wrote, Mari writes, on August 19, a response to Tyler’s letter, which also celebrates connections, friendship, and cultural sharing. Although the family's return to Mexico has been traumatic, Mari also makes a retrospective showing that there have been many positive changes in the return to Mexico. First, she has her family reunited; second, her mother and father have become happier by returning to their homeland and softhearted in relation to Mari and Tyler’s friendship (and Americans in

general); third, Mari becomes more mature in relation to those events, glimpsing and envisioning a different future for them, stating: "We can change that … We can make things more fair … We have to do it because there's no one else to do if we don't" (312), and concludes: "I wasn't a little girl anymore" (312). This event of recollecting all the experiences she has lived through writing, telling of the positive changes that have occurred to all, marks the moment of change in Mari's life. Her mother predicts: "…someday when you are a famous writer, you can put it into a book … [smiling] at a future she imagines for her daughter who is always writing letters or writing in her diary" (314).

Mari ends her letter by recalling all the elements of the novel, which metaphorically represents being connected with people around the world: writing, language, and musicas well as swallows, stars, and pictures, and through which a kind of coassimilation may occur. Knowing the culture and the history of the others, Mari can recognize herself. Geoffrey Fox reinforces this argument stating: "What is happening in the United States today is a kind of coassimilation, one more cultural exchange, like the many this country has experienced before, in which each side learns from the other and together they create a new cultural synthesis" (236). Thus, although Tyler and Mari are far away from each other, they celebrate a cultural synthesis. A synthesis, in this case, is perceived as an act of processing, addressing or identifying common ideas and points of connection in the cultures involved, maintaining the singularities of each one. It is the union or reunion of what is known empirically about the culture of the other with the experience lived by the subjects in the process of cultural interaction. They also celebrate meetings, connections, friendship, and hopes for future. The study of Mari's letters shows that they are used to connect people, place, spaces, memory, and current events of her life. They also fulfill her absences and losses, working like treatment for her fears, where each person the letters are addressed sustains, nurtures, and helps Mari's maturation process as a stolon. Mari's letters are also an extension of her stolon subjectivity.

2.4- A Rhizomatic Stolon Diary

Similarly to Mari's letters, her diary is also a rhizomatic stolon production. Before probing into the character's diary, I will give an overview of the characteristics of a diary in order to analyze Mari's diary and explain why it only appears at the end of the novel. The entry diary from *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, organized by John Cuddon, explains that there are some records dating from the 16th century, such as the diary kept by King Eduard VI when he was a boy; the historian and topographer, Sir William Dugdale's (1605-86); John Evelyn's (1620-1706) and Samuel Pepys's (1633-1703), the last two considered by many critics to be the two greatest diarists of the 17th century (199). According to this dictionary, one of the most notable diaries in English literature was James Parson Woodford's, entitled *The Diary of a Country Parson* (1904-31),published in five volumes (199). Towards the end of 18th century and throughout 19th, many diaries written by women appeared. Good examples of those of Dorothy Wordsworth's, Queen Victoria, and Virginia Woolf (200).

Elaine McKay explains in her online article entitled "The Diary Network in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England" that it was not until the late Renaissance that the diary began to have some literary value, as the importance of the individual began to come to the fore. Diaries were largely used by the Puritans of the seventeenth century as a place in which the believer might secretly expiate her/his sins and it had become, by the late nineteenth century, more typically the place in which people could find salvation by unburdening their souls on paper, and where they could have their sins remembered (McKay, "The Diary"). Thus, confession was considered good for the soul and the consciousness. Nowadays, diaries have become publishable material.

In recent years, the diary has been considered a fertile source for historians. It is a relatively recent form in the Western culture, arising in part from Christian Church's desire to map the individual's spiritual progress towards God. The practice was widespread throughout the nineteenth-century to record personal feelings and explore intellectual growth as well. The advance of technology has allowed the recovery of old texts, and handwritten diaries also have acquired online format, which are largely used by internet users, who can share them with whomever they want in the World Wide Web. Diaries bring together a range of current interests in cultural and social history: the emergence of modern ideas of selfhood, the recovery of overlooked or marginalized lives, particularly those of women, who have often been diligent diarists, and the history of everyday, domestic and private life.

In a lecture given at Gresham College, Professor Joe Moran argued that "the diary was a capacious, strange, and uncategorisable sort of text, with no two people's idea of it being quite the same" (Moran, "The Private"). The diary creates a private world for who write it and read it as well. On its pages, one can let loose thoughts and feelings one normally locks up when away from safe and comforting places for fear of public collisions and exposure. But at the same time, by putting fears, shame, pride, anger, conflicts, and doubts on paper, one risks being discovered, although this exposure may be intentional. The diary does not mean that the writer's feeling, doubts, and fears become locked in its pages; rather it is the way the diarist sets them free, putting her/his soul on paper.

In his work dedicated to the study of diaries, Philippe Lejeune compares a diary to astronauts floating in a space capsule, arguing that both are safe places. He argues that "a diary is not only a place of asylum in space, it is also an archive in time" (*On Diary* 334), where it leaves traces for a future writer and reader. Recording one's own history will later help one find a better understanding of the events one experiences through writing. Lejeune adds: "We are helping each other across time" (334). In an interesting perspective, he calls the

diary "deliverance through paper" (334), in the sense that as soon as someone has written something, it is not entirely theirs anymore, and even if no one knows about the paper, the story may be shared by millions of people, or by oneself later, "[a]nd then, there's the joy of feeling described, understood, if only by oneself" (334) and the happiness of having triumphed over life and time, because life has been turned it into something else: a written text.

By registering everyday life, noting down facts and thoughts, and trying to contain the passage of time, the diarist tries to organize what, a priori, is not organized in her/his life, attempting to rationalize the experience of that life. Dates that usually appear in the notes of a diary attempt to organize a possible existence, as well as order the events within the narrative, creating links among events that have no supposed connection. Also, dates confer an air of veracity to the narrative. In *Return to Sender*, the diary is part of Mari's need to narrate her experience and to aggregate the selves already presented in her letters. A diary is never a final product because one has always another page to write and new experiences to be added.

Conventionally, diary entries take epistolary form with the introductory statement: "Dear Diary". Since the subject-matter is so intimate, the authors usually do not intend their contents to be published and many of them have been published only posthumously. Thomas Mallon, in *A Book of One's Own: People and Their Diaries,* points out that if your diary is found in some place after your death, "someone will be reading and you'll be talking. And if you're talking, it means you're alive" (qtd in McCartney 47). McCartney assures that the writing of a diary is a construction meant to display our mastery over the conflictive facts of our existence (47). The diarist seems to shed light and to obscure her/his subjectivity intentionally, and this situation requires a greater sensibility of the reader to perceive the nuances that involve such play.

Rottenberg-Rosler explains in his article "Dear Diary: Catharsis and Narratives of

Aloneness in Adolescents' Diaries" that the diary as a tool of catharsis incorporates basically three stages: distress descriptionwhen the diarist uses "descriptive writing to express an experience of distress she is experiencing" (4);physical-emotional catharsiswhen the diarist "decomposes her experience verbally and physically using expressive writing and inner dialogues. She uses verbs of doing and feeling, asking herself questions or writing to an imaginary audience" (4); and, finally, a cognitive-emotional catharsiswhen the diarist "expresses herself reflectively, conducting a continuous dialogue and seeking insight into her experience" (4). According to him, the diarist experiences a new and wider perspective of herself and frequently uses verbs of thought (I think, thought, imagine, see, and so on), creating an imaginary audience, involving ultimate insights and positive feelings, including relief, control, relaxation, enjoyment, and the will to communicate. Analyzing Mari's diary, it is not be difficult to perceive all the stages proposed by Rottenberg-Rosler. Mari's writing is also a form of catharsis, in the sense that through the diary she finds a way to escape from melancholy, fear, and loneliness, which are inherent in the human condition mainly to those who experience a deep change in their lives.

Shedding an interesting light on the history of women's writing, Carolyn Heilbrun explains that in the old myths and in some former narrative records, women had their voice, language, speech, and story associated with the imagery of weaving women (qtd in Holmes). According to her, weaving were their answer to the enforced silence about their own condition and mutilation in relation to male domination and society (qtd in Holmes). Following Heilbrun's path, Katie Holmes argues that diary writing "is a little like weaving: the warp is the daily happening of our lives, the weft the words chosen to tell the story, the shuttle the pen or voice which brings the pattern, the web, into being" (*This diary*). Over time, the diary writing appears to replace at some level the work of weaving. It has therefore begun to be understood as an important tool of women's expression and a place of resistance or

defiance, of accommodation or rapprochement; a place where women can tell stories that would otherwise not be heard and comprehended, or where they can lay claim to writing (*This diary*).

Graham Greene has asserted: "Writing is a form of therapy; sometimes I wonder how all those, who do not write, compose, or paint can manage to escape the madness, the melancholia, the panic fear, which is inherent in the human condition" (Greene, *Ways* Preface). In this sense, the writing of a diary becomes of singular importance in order to welcome and shelter those women's voices silenced for so long by the sound of the loom. It is a way of keeping track of time and the own writer, keeping her from sickness and madness. The woman author-diarist charts a cartography of her heart and soul, mapping and recording her memory of the past, current events, and future possibilities. The diary seems to be a space of catharsis where she dischargespent-upemotions, resultinginthealleviationofsymptomsorthepermanentreliefofthe harsh or unpleasant condition usually experienced by unauthorized immigrants.

Being an unauthorized bicultural character, Mari uses her writing also to cross the bridge between her two worlds to relieve the condition of being illegal. Thus, the diary links the character's experiences to an imagined and desirable world, becoming an imaginary space where the cultural influences of both countries and the character's mobility converge, and seek a certain balance. Her writing reflects a part of her that she might keep secret even from herself, which will be possibly presented to the world in fictional form. The outside world is a battlefield; her letters and diary are the intimate spaces of transposition, aggregation, restoration, redemption, and overcoming.

From the hands of her mother, Mari receives a diary as a twelfth birthday gift and she comments that "[it] looked so official, with a little strap and lock and teensy key! [She] couldn't seem to come up with anything important enough to write down" (264), because all

the important things had already happened and been recorded in the letters. This moment is particularly important because it marks a transition in Mari's writing from letter format to diary format. As she states in the beginning of the novel, she starts to write letters to compensate for her mother's absence and to record on paper everything she experiences in her everyday life. An important episode marks her switching to the diary format: her Mexican family's arrest by the immigration police, and her fear of being also arrested. From this moment, Mari says to her diary: "Dear Diary… I'm going to write down exactly what happened. If I am finally taken away to jail, I will leave you, dear Diary, to tell the world the whole truth of what we have been through" (265). After her family is arrested, she finds refuge and comfort for her sorrow in the pages of the diary, sighing resignedly that it can hold all her sorrows just as long as she cries in ink there (279).

A diary represents the diarist's subjectivity in process, day after day. Joan Didion claims that "[i]n many ways writing is the act of saying 'I', of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying listen to me, see it my way, change your mind" (1). Mari's writing is the way she negotiates both: helping herself in the comprehension of her bicultural subjectivity and proclaiming her "I" to the world. Mari's daily recording will be important to help her in the comprehension of her subjectivity now reunited in the pages of her diary, and also a way of leaving it for future generations, as she suggests in the scene where her sister Ofie wants to read her diary. Mari says "If I could leave this record behind for the whole world, surely I could let my own sister read it" (295).

Thus, if Lejeune has already stated that a diary is a safe place that holds the diarist's soul, but that it is not an asylum but an archive in time (*On Diary* 334), I would argue that Mari's diary has the same connotation, because although she keeps it in her own hands with "a little strap and lock and teensy key" (264), she also expresses her desire to "to tell the world the whole truth of what [she has] been through" (265), suggesting what was previously proposed

by Mallon: the diary as a form of perpetuating her life story. It also leads to ambiguities, considering that it represents an authentic expression of the character's experiences, feelings, and perceptions, as well as a result of her imagination.

Mari's diary is written in English and Spanish, enabling a dialogue among textual, social, and cultural contexts wherein the borders of memories, absences, losses, imprisonment, and imagination are trespassed. It corroborates Moran's perspective that a diary is a private world, but can also work as a bridge that connects the author with the two cultures between which she transits. It also confirms Lejeune's perspective of a diary as a realm or space of freedom wherein all characters come together to share experiences of life. Thus Mari's diary is also a record of connections among those characters, and a place where Mari's story is told: "[i]t was over. I had said what I came to say" (292). Contrary to the letters, all the diary's greetings are in English, which possibly may represent an internalization of the language of the other. In other words, Mari seems to establish a strong connection with the host country. She always ends the diary by mixing both languages, showing that at the very end, she still continues to transit between languages, which is not at all a problem because she does not need to choose one or the other; her choices depend only on the context.

Although this transit between languages helps Mari become a translator, the translation of her mother's story helps to set her family free from jail. They are, however, deported to Mexico, at which she writes: "I felt my heart folding up like a letter in a sealed envelope stamped *Return to Sender*" (295), but she concludes this last dairy entry with hope for the future and a certainty: "And then, I can leave, yes I can, because the place and the people I've grown to love will all be stored inside me and here on your pages, my dear Diary" (296), suggesting a possible continuity in the process of diary and letter writing.

Lejeune argues that the diary allows for change and growth: a diary is a "realm of freedom, whose practitioners can decide for themselves how to behave, and then change the

rules as they please" (*On Diary* 5). The only restriction on diary writing is time: what characterizes the diary is the presence of dates. Lejeune recognizes this as the flow of time that the diarist confronts, and states that the amplitude of the space of the diary "protects us from the idea of the end… [the diary] gives us the courage, day after day, to live out the rest of our lives" (193), in the sense that the diary has always a next page that indicates continuity, movement, and immortality. Dealing with the multiplicity and cultural diversity in the contemporary world, Mari's writing follows a pattern that allows us to understand it as a rhizomatic stolon diary by connecting herself to the rest of the world in a broader perspective, reaffirming her condition of being a stolon subject also in her writing. It is clear that "redescribing a world is the necessary first step towards changing it (Rushdie 14) and Mari tries to change it through her writing: letters and diary.

Final Considerations

This thesis has aimed at reading Julia Alvarez's protagonist, Mari Cruz, in the novel *Return to Sender* as a rhizomatic Stolon Immigrant, a term that I coined from the concept of rhizome proposed by Deleuze and Guattari in a metaphorical perspective. I investigated and analyzed mainly the character, Mari Cruz, because I have identified in her behavior some characteristics presented and discussed in the theoretical framework that led me to this conclusion. The words rhizome and stolon come from biology. A rhizome is an underground stem that nurtures and sustains different individuals (plants) at the same time and occupies a broader area. Like a rhizome, a stolon has the same characteristics, except for the place it occurs, which is above the ground. Good examples of stolons are grass and strawberries. Alvarez presents a prose fiction novel that contains two other textual genres, letters and a diary. Alvarez does more than just follow the literal topics of voice, space, language, and writing in *Return to Sender.* She makes way for a new perspective of thinking for Latinas everywhere, giving to women of color the inspiration to speak up about their desire for freedom and expression. Alvarez shows us through her characters' raw emotions and confrontations that they do not have to be silenced and ashamed of being heard. Anzaldúa states that "A woman who writes has power. A woman with power is feared. In the eyes of the world this makes us dangerous beasts" (*Speaking* 164). In this sense, Alvarez is defiant because she trespasses the boundaries of exclusion and confinement through the power of writing, presenting to the readers historical facts of Mexican immigration in the US from another perspective that is not grounded on old binarisms, but in new contemporary configuration of society that tends to be more inclusive than exclusive.

In chapter one, I presented the genesis of the Stolon immigrant's concepts. I discussed relevant concepts from science, mainly biology, that offer a basis to analyze the Stolon immigrant behavior in the contemporary world such as Charles Darwin's Natural Selection,

August Conte's Organicist Model, Piotr Kropotkin's Mutual Aid, E. O. Wilson's Sociobiology, Maturana's and Varella's mutual collaboration, Deleuze's and Guattari's Rhizomes, and Richard Dawkins's Selfish Gene and Memes. I established a dialogue between literature and natural sciences to show that "Science and literature are not two things, but two sides of one thing" (Huxley 310), which is the form an individual relates to her/himself, to others, and to the world around her/him, creating in this way an interesting space for the development of new ideas and the appearance of new subjects.

The focus of my analysis is the Stolon immigrant character María Dolores Cruz Santos or simply, Mari, an eleven-year-old Mexican immigrant who came to the United States with her family when she was four years old. Contrary to her Mexican family, Mari becomes an active immigrant who asks questions, proposes and defends ideas. She is neither like her Mexican family nor her American sisters, but a new individual that can transit, make connections, and negotiate between two cultures without necessarily choosing which side she must belong to. She inhabits a third space, which is not marginal but a middle one that facilitates her movements according to the context, shifting language from Spanish to English, and vice versa, in a dynamic way, and sharing culture from the two countries. Mari feels the pain of being pointed to as different from others because of the color of her skin, eyes, and hair. She has in her body the traits of her origin that cannot be hidden, but, at the same time, she realizes that being different from others may be an advantage. She learns to deal with differences from the observation and acceptance of her own condition of being different, developing flexibility and resilience in relation to the others. At this point, I consider sciences, specially biology, an interesting approach to analyze Alvarez's novel in a metaphorical sense because at the same time Mari Cruz tries to understand the external environment and the landscape around her, she seeks to develop strategies of adaptation that influence the constitution of her stolon subjectivity. These strategies are mainly: connections, imagination,

languages, and writing among others.

In chapter two, I provided examples of how her writing is as rhizomatic as her person. As Mari writes letters and a diary alongside the main narrative, like a stolon she connects herself to a multiplicity of people, languages, and culture in the space of encounter between Americans and Mexicans. From this mixture, Mari constructs a peculiar rhizomatic world through her writing, creating an amplified and ventilated space ideal for the development of the Stolon immigrant. In a world where communication means faster, the private space of one's intimacy becomes exposed to the world, and many of the experiences lived only in the private space of home are now experienced in public as well. The Stolon immigrant follows this change in the contemporary setting, perceiving that to follow this dynamic configuration requires a certain flexibility and different behavior as well. This flexibility to adapt and make connections is also experienced in Mari's letters and diary.

As personal texts, letters and diaries have certain differences. A letter is written to a particular other and requires dialogue and an answer. A diary is written for oneself or an imagined other, privileging a monologue. A letter is shaped by the uncertainties of distance and time between writer and addressee; it is usually folded and placed in a sealed and stamped envelope. There is a waiting period until the letter arrives at its destiny. A letter travels across borders to reach the recipient. A diary remains hidden and static in the diarist's hands. A diary is usually shaped between covers and formed by moments of inspiration. These moments are intertwined by a single voice that speaks to itself.

At the same time, a letter and a diary share certain features, such as the tension between what can be concealed and what can be revealed, between telling everything and speaking indirectly or even keeping silent, inscribing the risks and pleasures of personal writing. Most letters are driven by news, and for this reason the events are described in detail. Moreover, a letter deals with the absence of the other, and with the distance between them,

which the letter intends to bridge. Although some writers aim at bridging these gaps, some of them emphasize them (the absence and distance), while others emphasize the bridge (writing itself), in the sense that a letter may hold different meanings and aims depending on the intentions of the writer and to whom it is addressed. A diary can be considered a safer place than a letter. A diary is a more introspective form than a letter, because writing one's innermost thoughts would be a risk if put in a letter, in the sense that a letter can go astray and get lost or fall into other hands. Because a diary permits a writer to go deeper into events, it has a greater potential than a letter to reveal more about the writer's soul and perceptions about the world that surrounds her/him. There is more potential for insights, but also for confusion and ambiguities.

Diaries and letter seem to evoke a certain immediate and intimate truth or verisimilitude. A diary and a letter remind the reader that it is one person's version of the truth, and it can conspire with the author's perceptions, fantasies, misunderstandings, and dreams, becoming the most unreliable and corrupting kind of narrative. Notably, they satisfy one's curiosity and work like an alarm triggered in everyday life by human condition and the meaning of life. A letter makes a trajectory from one point to another, back and forth, hither and thither in a dynamic process; it crosses borders and goes everywhere.

Mari keeps people's names and places secret in the letters she writes. A letter usually contains at least names and places of origin and destination. The content of a letter is also more objective, and is generally motivated by news or information. Mari addresses her letters to eight different characters: her missing mother; the U.S. President; her dead Mexican grandmother; the Virgin Mary of Guadalupe; her uncle, Tío Felipe, in jail; her family in Mexico, her family in the U.S., and her American friend Tyler Paquette, discussing in one of them issues related to culture, economic, political, and social issues and existential queries as well.

A diary, by contrast, is materially static. The diarist talks to him/herself in an interior monologue. It is usually subjective because the person who writes is also the person who receives the message, as in a looping movement. A diary that should be a secret place with locks and keys becomes an open space to Mari. Once she mentions the possibility of leaving her diary to the world (295), openly writing names and places, she changes the characteristics of a diary. The inversions of the characteristics of each form of her writing may be a representation of Mari's own subjectivity, showing that one style of writing can incorporate the characteristics of the other without prejudice to anyone. Thus, Mari's choice to start writing letters addressing people who are part of the formation of her subjectivity in the beginning of the novel coincides with the situation she experiences at that moment: a split individual who goes hither and thither, asking questions and searching for answers to her existential conflicts, exactly like the stolon movement. Thus, her diary which supposedly should be secret becomes available as an open record to the world.

Mari's diary becomes at the same time a space of reflection and self-knowledge. It also becomes a strategy to embrace and preserve places, people, experiences, and memories. In a recent interview given to the site Times Reporter, Alvarez asserts that "people found what they were looking for in books because books don't discriminate", and they are "the greatest and grand democracy". Following the same thought, I understand that Mari transforms her diary into a site where the differences can come together democratically and where all conflicts are seen as a positive experience to life.

Mari's diary is composed of nine entries representing a kind of a gestational period. Throughout these entries, Mari tells the story of how her family had been seized during the national sweep called Operation Return to Sender, and discusses the themes of belonging, justice, freedom, return, friendship, and solidarity. Similar to what happened to her mother's ransom from the smuggler at the beginning of the novel, Mari now tries to free her whole

undocumented family from jail, but instead of money she is offering her mother's story. Telling to the State their story, Mari is not only telling the story of her family, but she is also telling the story of many undocumented immigrants in the U.S.

Mari's consciousness, voice, and writing seem to reverberate in Anzaldúa's words explaining why she writes:

> Because the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me. By writing I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it. I write because life does not appease my appetites and hunger. I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you. To become more intimate with myself and you ... Finally I write because I am scared of writing but I am more scared of not writing (Anzaldúa, *Speaking* 169).

Similarly to Anzaldúa, Mari writes because she has no choice of being heard and no place for her voice. Her narrative structure follows the same dynamic movement of the contemporary world, multiple and fast. The character's pursuit of self-knowledge through the knowledge of the other, looking towards the other, and being sensitive to differences, putting them on paper are the main points in Mari's writing.

Another interesting point observed in the narrative is the presence of windows in many passages that constitute another evidence of her stolon characteristics, because they allow an amplified view of the outside world and the construction of many possibilities for connection to what this world represents. Thus, every time she visualizes the other side of a window, in another perspective, she becomes connected to it in some sense. It is Mari's way to look and to be looked at, and if she catches your eye, she comes smiling toward you to open the door.

NOTES

[1]. The term Subjectivity is used in this work in Lacan's and Focault's perspectives of the self. Lacan conceptualizes subjectivity as meaning nothing other than that each and every one has the chance to tell their own story. Lacan has a concise way of expressing this referring to human beings as 'speaking-beings'. An equally rudimentary definition of subjectivity can be found in Lacan's work referring to subjectivity as the "*sentiment de la vie chez le sujet*", translated by Bruce Fink as "the subject's sense of life." See more in Écrits, 558.and Lacanonline.com

Focault conceptualizes subjectivity regarding to the way people have had experiences that were used in the process of knowing a determinate, objective set of things while at the same time constituting themselves as subjects under fixed and determinate conditions. Foucault's subjectivity means the historical relation of the self to itself. See more in Besley, Tina & Peters, Michael *Subjectivity and Truth: Foucault, Education, and the Culture of Self.* 2007.

The Edinburgh Encyclopedia of Psychoanalysisdefines subjectivity as "The subjective experience of the individual person which can never be reduced to objectivity" (p.442)

[2]. La Golondrina (Narciso Serradell)

¿A donde irá veloz y fatigada

lagolondrina que de aquí se va?

¡Oh, si enelviento se hallara extraviada!

buscando abrigo y no lo encontrará.

Junto a mi pecho hallarásunido

en donde puedalaestaciónpasar

tambiényoestoyenlaregión perdida

¡oh, cielo santo! y sin poder volar.

Dejétambién mi patria adorada,

esamansión que me mirónacer,

mi vida es hoy errante y angustiada

y ya no puedo a mi mansión volver.

Ave querida, amada peregrina,

mi corazón al tuyoestrecharé,

oirétus cantos, bellagolondrina,

recordaré mi patria y lloraré.

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