Penn McNair Research Journal

Volume 2 | Issue 1 Article 4

11-17-2010

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Cover Page Footnote
Suggested Citation:
Martinez, Enmanuel. (2010). "Towards the Articulation of a Latino Identity: An Analysis of Minor Literature and Poetic Form Within Julia Alvarez's *The Woman I Kept to Myself.*" *Penn McNair Research Journal*. Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 4.

This journal article is available in Penn McNair Research Journal: http://repository.upenn.edu/mcnair_scholars/vol2/iss1/4

Towards the Articulation of a Latino Identity: An Analysis of Minor Literature and Poetic Form Within Julia Alvarez's *The Woman I Kept to Myself*

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Penn McNair Research Journal
Fall 2010, Volume 2

Penn McNair Research Journal is produced by the Berkeley Electronic Press.
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In "Doña Aída, with Your Permission," the Dominican American writer Julia Alvarez recounts for readers how, while speaking at a Caribbean Studies Association meeting in Santo Domingo, she was scolded by the Dominican "grand woman of letters," Aida Cartagena Portalatín (821). At the conclusion of Alvarez's presentation, Doña Aída publicly criticized the U.S. Latina writer for her decision to write in English, exclaiming, "It doesn't seem possible that a Dominican should write in English. Come back to your country, to your language" (821). In her response to Doña Aída's words of wisdom Alvarez writes:

> Doña Aída, with your permission. I am *not* a Dominican writer. I have no business writing in a language that I can speak but have not studied deeply enough to craft. . . . Sometimes I hear Spanish in English (and of course, vice versa). . . . I describe myself as a Dominican American writer. That's not just a term. I'm mapping a country that's not on a map, and that's why I'm trying to put it down on paper. (821-822)

—in English, that is. A native Spanish speaker choosing to write in English, Julia Alvarez is a writer whose work represents an example of U.S. Latino literature. There are other ways, however, to categorize Alvarez's work, for her writing also represents the articulation of a minor literature, as defined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their article "What Is A Minor Literature?" I will assert that Alvarez's poetry (in particular her book of poems *The Woman I Kept to Myself*) exemplifies Deleuze and Guattari's definition of a minor literature: "the literature a minority makes in a major language" (Deleuze and Guattari, 16). Nonetheless, Alvarez's poems challenge Deleuze and Guattari's assertion that an ideal minor literature must reject metaphor and instead articulate itself through metamorphosis—as is the case in the writing of Franz Kafka. Here, the presence of metaphor is

characterized by the use of form and structure, whereas metamorphosis signifies the presence of acutely radical narrative and structural experimentation.[1]

However, Alvarez's poetry demonstrates that an author of minor literature who utilizes metaphor, form, and structure does not necessarily compromise his or her writing's effectiveness at deterritorializing a major language.[2] Metamorphosis exempts itself as a prerequisite for the successful execution of a minor literature. Through an analysis of Alvarez's poetry, readers witness the ways in which the Latina author's work challenges Deleuze and Guattari, for her book of poems represents an example of contemporary writers redefining the concept of minor literature. Alvarez's use of poetic form expands Deleuze and Guattari's theory, and in doing so, her work helps to ensure that the underrepresented and arguably marginalized communities that she is advocating on behalf of as a Latina writer are fully and justly represented.

In "What Is A Minor Literature?" Deleuze and Guattari present their theory of minor literature, which they summarize by noting that "The characteristics of minor literature are the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to the political, [and] the collective arrangement of utterance" (Deleuze and Guattari, 18). To Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka's writing represents the ideal example of a minor literature in that it contains all three of the elements which they attribute to the form. Deleuze and Guattari begin their classification of minor literature by clarifying that "A minor literature is not the literature of a minor language but the literature a minority makes in a major language" (16).[3] By "minor" Deleuze and Guattari do not mean to undermine or devalue the status of the writers of minor literature—as they themselves note: "'. . . [no language] matters more than another'" (MacKenzie, 2). In developing the concept of minor literature Deleuze and Guattari aim to undo the forms of linguistic and literary hierarchy that exist between majority and minority writers. In doing so, Deleuze and Guattari

[1] As Robert Brinkley writes in his Editor's Note to "What Is a Minor Literature?": "Experimentation, Deleuze and Guattari suggest, is an alternative to interpretation" (Deleuze and Guattari, 14). Metaphor and metamorphosis function as opposites. Metaphor signals to readers the existence of a definitive interpretation or meaning (each of which is the result of—and thus subject to—the reader's individual analysis); yet metamorphosis challenges the notion of interpretation by insuring the multiplicity of significations. Through metamorphosis, "a reader makes connections as he reads. He need not interpret and say what the text means; he can discover where the passages in the text lead, with what they can be connected" (14). Whereas the reader directs the metaphor, in the presence of literary metamorphosis it is he, the reader, who is directed.

[2] It is in *Anti-Oedipus* that Deleuze and Guattari developed the philosophical concepts of territorialization, deterritorialization, and reterritorialization, all of which are interconnected. In "Minor Literature and the Problem of the Subject" Matthew McKinzie addresses the concept of deterritorialization in particular, describing it as the process by which minor writers "undo the idealist constructions that underlie the majoritarian structures of state, subjectivity, and representation" (3). Within the context of minor literature, deterritorialization represents the various ways in which the minor writer subverts a major language through the use of said language, all for the purpose of granting agency and validity to the marginalized communities that he or she represents.

[3] As Gina Masucci MacKenzie clarifies in "Under-Writing: Forming an American Minority Literature," "Though society feeds [negative] meanings into the word minor Deleuze and Guattari strive to redeem the word [minor] and thus the works qualified as such" (2).

bestow a new sense of validity upon the relationship that exists between minor literature, its authors, and the communities that their work comes to speak on behalf of.

In this effort to grant minor literature a greater sense of authority, Deleuze and Guattari begin their analysis with Franz Kafka. Kafka, a middle-class Jew living in Prague at the turn of the 20th century, falls victim to ethnic as well as a religious marginalization. Despite (possibly even because of) his status as a minority, Kafka does not write in Czech, a minor language and his native tongue, but rather in German, the dominant or major language of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Thus, Kafka writes a minor literature, for he represents a minority writer who chooses to articulate his social reality, as well as the reality of the marginalized communities that he represents, through a major tongue. Kafka purposefully uses the German language, the discourse of the sociopolitical majority, as the medium for discourse and communication. In return, his writing of a minor literature deterritorializes the German language, which is to say that Kafka's work functions to integrate the "Jewish" and the "Czech" within the sociopolitical sphere of German language and culture.

Like Kafka's, Alvarez's writing represents a minor literature in that it too deterritorializes a major language: English. The writer of such novels as *How the García Girls Lost Their Accent* and *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Julia Alvarez is most known not for her poetry but rather for her fiction. In the poem "Uncovered Poet" she confesses, however, that, "Under the cover of novels, I write poems" (*The Woman I Kept to Myself*, 129). Though publicly celebrated as a writer of fiction, Alvarez views herself first and foremost as a poet.[4] For this reason I will limit my analysis to a review of Alvarez's poetry, in particular her most recent collection of poems *The Woman I Kept to Myself*, for a review of the Latina author's poetry will sufficiently divulge the implications of Alvarez's work within the realm of contemporary American literature.

Alvarez's *The Woman I Kept to Myself* addresses the ever-conflicted social reality of the Dominican American immigrant. Owing in large part to his or her immigrant status, the Dominican American is simultaneously interpolated in and yet denied access to the socio-cultural and political spaces of the Dominican Republic and the United States. Alvarez's poems, intentionally written in English, represent an effort to acknowledge or create a space for the "Latino" within the "American," and vice versa. A native Spanish speaker, Alvarez is very much aware of the Dominican as well as American publics' expectations that, as a descendent of the Hispanic Caribbean, she write in Spanish. Even so, Alvarez does not apologize for her decision to write in English. On the contrary, her poems speak for themselves. In the final lines of "Family Tree" Alvarez acknowledges that "I . . . intend to

[4] Julia Alvarez's first major publication in 1984 was a collection of poems titled *Homecoming*.

write / *New Yorker* fiction in the Cheever style, / but all my stories tell where I came from" (4). Here Alvarez emphasizes her belief that choosing to write in English has not compromised her ability to speak to the experience of the Dominican American immigrant. Although she writes in English, Alvarez's work acknowledges her Dominican ancestry, for her poems in *The Woman I Kept to Myself* address the unique circumstances, positive as well as negative, experienced by many, if not most, members of the Dominican diaspora living within the United States. As Alvarez writes in "Passing On," "Such mixtures are my forte after all, / Since I prefer the hyphenated voice, / a little of this, a little of that" (*The Woman I Kept to Myself,* 139). Latina writer that she is, Alvarez is cognizant and proud of her cultural roots.

In choosing to express her *Latinidad* by way of the English language, Alvarez deterritorializes—which is to say destabilizes—the English language. Historians and anthropologists have made the most use of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of deterritorialization. However, in "What Is a Minor Literature?" deterritorialization speaks to a specific literary and linguistic phenomenon. As MacKenzie explains to her readers:

> Deleuze and Guattari employ the term deterritorialization to explain that a minor writer uses the language of the majority, the national language, or the one spoken by the greatest number of people . . . to subvert from within the culture created, supported, and recorded by that [major] language. With this subversive power, the minor writer also surreptitiously assumes control over that [major] language by imprinting it with minor forms and ideas. (2)

A minor writer, Alvarez utilizes a major language as a medium by which to speak of the minor, or marginal, Dominican American experience—a perspective that has historically been largely defined by the Spanish language and Dominican culture. Alvarez's poems speak to the canon of English letters, exposing the "Latino" that exists within "American" English. The Latina writer's poems deconstructs the hegemony of the English language, ultimately then giving voice to the Hispanic Caribbean immigrant living within the North American terrain. When read within a North American context, Alvarez's *The Woman I Kept to Myself* undermines certain discriminative notions of American citizenship that have historically negated the profound influence that U.S. Latinos have had on the formation of a larger, national narrative of the American identity.

Detracting somewhat from the focal point of this essay, it is quite possible that Alvarez's poetry enacts a dual deterritorialization. Alvarez's poetry deterritorializes the English language, in that she uses the English language to speak of the experiences of a subject of the Spanish language: the Dominican American immigrant. However, do her poems not also deterritorialize the Spanish language, which in itself represent another example of a major language? Alvarez's poems are written in English, yet in

them she constantly makes reference to the Spanish language by incorporating fragments of the Spanish language and Dominican culture. Her poems arguably represent a blending—possible merging, even—of English and Spanish. Consequently, the two major languages are simultaneously deterritorialized, for within the space of Alvarez's poetry English and Spanish are jointly stripped of their respective linguistic dominance and authority and, instead, made equally valid—if not interdependent. Alvarez's poems, then, may indeed demonstrate a more successful example of minor literature in that they execute a simultaneous deterritorialization of two major languages, while Kafka's writing presents the deterritorialization of a single major language: German. The possibility of a second or dual deterritorialization, however, depends entirely on the precondition that Dominican Spanish speakers too read Alvarez's work.

Either way, Alvarez's poetry (much like Kafka's fiction) articulates a political critique, something that readers can—and should—expect of minor literature. As noted by Deleuze and Guattari, "The second characteristic of minor literature is that everything is political" (16). Minor literature repositions the minority writer and the marginalized experience that he or she represents away from the peripheries of society and toward the hegemonic space of the major language through which the minor writer chooses to speak. Hence, the execution of a minor literature is an empowering experience, such that the minor writer is now not only "heard" but also "understood" by the majority. For Alvarez that majority consists of an English-speaking audience. As an author living and publishing within the United States, she made a decision to write in English that makes much sense financially as well as politically. Had Alvarez chosen to publish in Spanish, she might have compromised the extent to which her writing could succeed at reaching the majority and representing U.S. Latinos as a whole. Written in Spanish, her poems would more than likely have gone under-recognized—if not altogether ignored—by the general North American audience. One could make the argument, then, that Alvarez is as much (if not more) interested in reaching the North American reader as she is in speaking to a general Latin American audience. Once could also conclude that Alvarez simply views Spanish as a limited medium for mass publishing and so chooses to publish in English. By addressing her poems to an English-speaking audience, Alvarez hails the North American majority, which, in return, is made aware of (possibly even becomes sympathetic to) Dominican Americans and Latinos in general. By way of Alvarez's poems the English-speaking majority is brought into contact with the Spanish-speaking minority, and an active relationship is established between the two. Because Alvarez writes in English, the North American majority can no longer continue to ignore or silence the minority that is the U.S. Latino community.

Either way, a successful minor literature must come to function as a political catalyst, for to cite Deleuze and Guattari once again, "The second characteristic of minor literature is that everything in them is political" (Deleuze and Guattari, 16). According to Deleuze and Guattari, all that is said within the narrow space of a minor literature inadvertently proves itself to be political in nature. By default, then, all that is expressed within Alvarez's poetry comes to harbor a greater meaning or larger significance. There is no question that Alvarez is a political writer. She herself views writing as a means by which to engage in critical social commentary and political activism. In a 1998 publication of *The English Journal* she declares, "I think that storytelling *is* a moral force. So yes, I am a political writer" (36). Furthermore, in her suggestively titled poem "Ars Poetica" she outwardly acknowledges the politics inherent in her work as a writer. To quote directly from the poem, "The inhumanity of our humanity / will not be fixed by metaphor alone. / The plot will fail, the tortured will divulge / our names, our human story end, unless / our art can right what happens in the world" (*The Woman I Kept to Myself*, 70). Alvarez believes that through literature the writer ought to produce more than a mere catalogue of history and events. For this reason, Alvarez embraces a poetics that aims to address the many forms of marginalization and underrepresentation that continue to plague many sectors of society—not just the Dominican American immigrant.

MacKenzie reminds readers that "political literature is that which concentrates on the needs of the whole minority" (2), and this speaks to the third defining factor of all minor literature: the execution of a collective utterance. Kafka and Alvarez are alike in that each author's texts contain "a collective value […] a collective utterance" (Deleuze and Guattari, 17). To summarize Deleuze and Guattari, political writing by a minority that is written in the language or discourse of a majority can only come to represent a minor literature if, and only when, said writing is capable of speaking to and on behalf of a larger community, which the minor writer comes to represent. Moreover, implicit in Deleuze and Guattari's argument is that "the role of the minor artist is to speak for the whole of his community" (MacKenzie, 2). Alvarez achieves a collective utterance in that her descriptions of intimate, personal experiences ultimately address larger themes of contemporary American—as well as Dominican—society. Alvarez's poems speak just as much to general themes such as history (memory and trauma), change, coming of age, love, loss, and language as they do to the particulars of identifying as an English-writing Latina from an upper-middle-class Dominican American immigrant family that left the Dominican Republic for life in New York City in the 1960s.

It is important, however, to distinguish between a collective utterance and a political agenda as they relate to the formulation of Alvarez's minor literature. Though a political writer, Alvarez is not an advocate of any particular agenda. As she herself declares in "Ten of My Writing Commandments,"

> . . . writer that I am . . . I don't have a certain [political] agenda that I want to get across. A message I coat with sweet passages of description and saucy dialogue in order to get my readers to swallow my opinions. In fact, I think such structures can come between a writer and what she sees. (36)

That Alvarez does not advocate for a specific political agenda in her writing is not to imply or suggest that Alvarez's writing is in any way any less political. After all, she executes a critical intervention through her poetry even though she does not gravitate to a specific agenda or political platform. For Alvarez's work, to promote a singular agenda would only contradict and undermine the Latina author's status as a writer of minor literature. As MacKenzie clarifies, "[Deleuze and Guattari] claim that political literature is not just that which addresses the immediate concerns of governmental structures . . . [but that which] concentrates on the needs of the whole minority" (2). In order to speak on behalf of the whole minority, the minor writer must articulate a collective utterance, which is to say that she must represent an array of divergent perspectives and experiences—rather than stand in for a singular, definitive agenda. To engage in the latter option would permit alternative factions or members of the whole minority to be ignored and silenced. This would, in turn, signify the minor writer's inability to articulate a collective utterance. For the minor writer to commit to a specific agenda, she is required to exclude certain factions or members of the whole minority that he or she is intending to represent. It is for this reason, then, that Alvarez issues forth a collective utterance, rather than a specified agenda.[5] She allows for the personal particulars of her life to come together in her work, thus forming a greater, more universal discourse—a collective utterance, if you will—of humanity. In doing so Alvarez simultaneously proves herself as a legitimate author of minor literature and also articulates a collective utterance by promoting an array of issues and circumstances affecting U.S. Latinos in general, amongst an array of other marginalized communities.

Briefly stated, Alvarez's writing fulfills Deleuze and Guattari's definition of minor literature in that: 1) her work represents an example of minority writing written in a major language that has historically been intended for (or forced upon) another nation or populace; 2) her writing is highly political in the nuanced sense of politics, and 3) her book of poems *The Woman I Kept to Myself*

[5] In the case of Alvarez's poetry, the "whole majority" consists of no particular group or organization but a constellation of communities that go underrepresented in Western society, in particular within the North American landscape: women, immigrants, Latinos, diasporic subjects in general, etc.

ultimately represents a broader analysis of contemporary American society via the articulation of a collective utterance of personal events that speak to a larger U.S. Latino immigrant experience, in addition to other marginalized sectors of American society. However, if one considers the great extent to which Alvarez experiments with language and poetic form within her poetry without ever approaching metamorphosis, it becomes evident that Alvarez strays from Deleuze and Guattari's original definition of minor literature. The two philosophers view Kafka's writing as the ideal example of minor literature. However, in contrast to Kafka's writing, Alvarez's poetry is largely—if not exclusively—distinguished by its use of metaphor.[6]

The Woman I Kept to Myself represents a collection of 75 of Alvarez's poems, which the poet organizes into three sections or chapters, beginning with "Seven Trees," followed by "The Woman I Kept to Myself," and ending with "Keeping Watch." All 75 poems hold 30 verses or lines, which Alvarez distributes evenly amongst three stanzas of ten lines each. With very few exceptions each of the 30 lines consists of ten syllables. Furthermore, the vast majority of the lines are written in iambic pentameter. Alvarez's poetry does not lack structure or order. On the contrary, her work comes to represent a cognizant—possibly even extreme—implementation of poetic form, which she executes through metaphor.

Alvarez's *The Woman I Kept to Myself* is marked by the consistent use of metaphor. For example, in the book's first of three parts, "Seven Trees," Alvarez introduces some of her most formative life experiences, coupling descriptions of her upbringing in the Dominican Republic and the United States with images of various species of trees, including, though not limited to, samán, weeping willow, maple, oak, elm, and locust. The poems in "Seven Trees" function as a prologue to the core of Alvarez's book of poems, the second section of the volume titled "The Woman I Kept to Myself" (also the title of the collection as a whole). Nonetheless, Alvarez's use of symbolism in "Seven Trees" makes the first section of *The Woman I Kept to Myself* ideal material for a close reading of the Latina author's use of metaphor.

In "Family Tree," the opening poem to *The Woman I Kept to Myself*, Alvarez uses the image of trees and their wind-transplanted seeds as a symbol for her family's fissured ancestry as a result of their status as Dominican immigrants. She writes:

[6] Metaphor functions as a signal for interpretation. Wishing to evade—though not necessarily against—interpretation, Deleuze and Guattari are critical of the metaphor. For the two, "The desire is rather to affirm an alternative [to metaphor] which is simultaneously uninterpretable. Experimentation . . . " (Deleuze and Guatarri, 14). They discover an "alternative" in Kafka, whose writing is defined by the use of extreme forms of structural and narrative experimentation: metamorphosis. Metamorphosis, in contrast to metaphor, defies the potential of definitive interpretation and, instead, promotes a multiplicity of understandings.

> Branch by branch, blossom by blossom, we grew: / our individual tree lost in the woods / of Alvarez and Tavares ancestors. / Until by emigration, seeds were cast / on foreign lands . . . the family tree / transplanted but not totally transformed. (*The Woman I Kept to Myself,* 4)

Here, Alvarez speaks to the Dominican immigrant experience via the use of metaphor, for she establishes a parallel between the formation of the Dominican American and the constant, though chaotic, pollination process of North American and Caribbean trees. Like a seedling blown away by a gust of wind, the Dominican immigrant finds himself powerless against the displacing forces of emigration. Transplanted onto the North American landscape—"cast on foreign land"—the immigrant finds himself uprooted from his origins, though never fully detached. After all, immigrants carry the essence of their history with and within themselves, above all via their connections to the Dominican culture and through their use of the Spanish language for the means of social expression.

In "Last Trees," the seventh and final poem of "Seven Trees," Alvarez yet again implements the use of metaphor. In the poem, she contemplates the idea of death, presenting her readers with an image of what she expects to encounter upon moving into the afterlife. She writes:

> I'm surrounded by trees / that I don't recognize . . . Better not look back until I've reached / that line of trees I've used to mark my life, / naming them as I pass under their boughs / into the growing shadows: *maple, willow, oak, arborvitae, locust, elm, samán*. (15)

Here, the listings of the trees collectively come to represent the totality of Alvarez's life, both literally and metaphorically. Species of flora found throughout parts of the Caribbean and North American terrain, the trees function as markers, denoting the various spaces physically and emotionally inhabited by the Latina writer. Alvarez's decision to italicize the names of the trees could also be interpreted as a visual cue marking the author's inner thoughts, or speech even, as she travels towards the afterlife. However, the italicization also functions to mark the use of metaphor, for the trees additionally signify or symbolize the concept of memory. In naming and listing the trees she sees while walking by, Alvarez is recalling the many events of her life. Each tree speaks to a particular occasion or emotional experience of the author's existence, memories which are as much defined by the place and time of their occurrence as are the trees by their geographic origins.

Briefly, Alvarez utilizes metaphor as a means by which to give voice to the Dominican American's divided, bilingual-bicultural identity, for it is through metaphor that she manages to link the "American" to the "Latino," and vice versa. The complexities of Latino experience, which Alvarez addresses through her poems, are likely to prove themselves foreign and, as such, incomprehensible to the general non-Latino, North American reader. Thus, Alvarez risks the possibility of not adequately reaching that reader. In hopes of reaching the greater North American audience, Alvarez must instead

express her identity and life experiences by way of comparison and symbolism—which is to say, through the use of metaphor, for metaphor establishes a middle ground of comparison within which the poet and her audience can communicate with and understand one another despite any cultural or linguistic differences. In doing so, Alvarez better insures that her reader comes to sympathize with, if not understand, her experience and the experience of U.S. Latinos in general. From this mutual, metaphor-mediated understanding springs forth the promise of understanding on behalf of the North American reader for the greater Latino community.

Alvarez's commitment to the use of poetic form and metaphor does not diminish her efforts in writing a minor literature. The reality is quite the opposite, for Alvarez's implementation of the two only further enhances her efforts to deterritorialize English. That Alvarez writes about her Dominican American immigrant experience in English deterritorializes the English language in that she uses English—a historically North American and Eurocentric language—to acknowledge and validate the experiences of members of the Hispanic-Caribbean diaspora. One could view this first instance of deterritorialization as a form of geographic-linguistic deterritorialization. Alvarez's second attempt to deterritorialize the English language, however, could best be described as a form of literary-cultural deterritorialization. Her poems represent an obvious play on or experimentation with iambic pentameter, a poetic form most often associated with Shakespeare. Hence, Alvarez has not only appropriated the English language; she has also appropriated forms of Western culture enrooted within the English language (i.e., iambic pentameter). Her methods of deterritorialization subvert traditional, exclusionary notions of what can and cannot exist within the sociopolitical realm of the English language and the American identity. Within Alvarez's poem the "Latino" no longer exist in opposition to the "American" but within the latter and vice versa, for the "American" now too exists within the "Latino."

Alvarez's use of poetic form and metaphor represents an effort to unite her "two Americas" (*The Woman I Kept to Myself*, 156) through language. Her poems bridge the ideological and linguistics gaps that have historically divided the United States and the Dominican Republic. It is important, however, to recognize the United States and the Dominican Republic as autonomous and, as such, divided spaces. However, in no way are the two nations completely isolated from one another. Past U.S. military and economic intervention in the Dominican Republic and the emergence of an extensive Dominican immigrant community in the United States during the second half of the twentieth century have forced the two countries to engage and remain in contact.

Alvarez's work represents an effort to make sense of—which is to say, validate—the Dominican diaspora. Through metaphor and poetic form, the Latina author's poems give shape to the invisible

"nation" that is the Latino immigrant experience. To quote Alvarez once again, "I'm mapping a country that's not on a map, and that's why I'm trying to put it down on paper" ("Doña Aída, with Your Permission," 821-822). Alvarez's use of metaphor and poetic form comes to embody the poetic "roadways" needed to *map* and give shape to this country "not on a map." Consequentially, Alvarez's poems represent a critique of Deleuze and Guattari's belief that minor literature must reject the use of metaphor and, therefore, the need for interpretation. *The Woman I Kept to Myself* reveals to readers how more subtle forms of experimentation (with language as well as poetic form) are sufficient in themselves. As a result, minor writers need not necessarily reject the metaphor and push the reader towards metamorphosis if their intentions are to deterritorialize a major language and, so, represent and validate the marginalized communities with which they sympathize and that are silenced by the politics of that major language. In conclusion, then, extreme literary experimentation in the form of metamorphosis via the elimination of metaphor is not requisite for the articulation of a successful minor literature.

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