

Una mujer de su(s) palabra(s):
Julia Alvarez's Use of Poetic Translation as a Tool for Racial Reconciliation

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Julia Alvarez's epic poem, "The Other Side / *El Otro Lado*," features a first-person, unnamed female speaker who identifies herself as a bicultural Dominican-American writer who returns to the Island in search of recovering her creative *mojo* (*The Other Side / El Otro Lado* 109-150).¹ The lyrical "I" throughout the extensive narrative poem encounters a mystical *doppelgänger*, whom she calls "a woman of her word, not words" ("The Other Side / *El Otro Lado*" XXI.1202). This highly principled muse enjoys various advantages and freedoms and is also afforded a troublesome white privilege for which some critics have denounced Alvarez's ability to serve as an appropriate Latinx spokesperson:

One half-drawn figure I cannot make out,
 unfinished, outlined in white paint, too white,
 a ghost who came and left
 in search of a happier ending
 than what Boca affords,
 a life of choice, a life of words.

 I turn for a Lot's-wife last look—
 and there, on the rocks beside the gringo's villa,
 I can almost make her out, posed like a siren
 on the barnacle-crusting cliffside, a white outline,
una mujer de su palabra,
 a woman of her word, not words,
 calling me to come back come back. . . .
 ("The Other Side / *El Otro Lado*" XXI.1182-87; 1199-1203)

The present reading argues for a revindication of "The Other Side / *El Otro Lado*" or at the very least the quarter-century retrospective this poem deserves. Alvarez strategically employs the translative motif in the titular poem of her 1995 *The Other Side / El Otro Lado* collection to embrace darkness initially on a literal level —albeit whilst simultaneously tackling the controversial nuances of Dominican racial identity— and ultimately arriving at the symbolic level of a writer's own literary subjectivity.² This Odyssean poem functions as a metanarrative not only of contemporary divisive issues such as race and linguistic agency but also of Alvarez's own

¹ The reader should note that bilingual titles published in the United States during the 1990s usually presented the Spanish title in italics, and this is the norm for Alvarez's poem; for the purpose of this essay, the title of the poem appears in quotation marks as "The Other Side / *El Otro Lado*," faithfully reproducing the poem's title as it appears in the collection of the same name. The book's title, however, switches the italicized type and appears without quotation marks. The first reference to the poem indicates the page numbers in which the poem appears in the collection, whereas all consequential citations reference individual cantos and lines.

² The original publication date is 1995; the book had a second printing in 1996, and this has led to some inconsistency even amongst scholars who err in citing 1996 as a first printing. A similar error occurs when readers fail to recognize that 1996 also saw the appearance of Alvarez's *Homecoming: New and Collected Poems*, but this also was a reimagining of her poetry first published in 1984 by Grove Press.

artistic evolution when read in conversation with her personal canon; furthermore, this turn-of-millennial poem—in fitting with successfully translated texts— pushes beyond mere linguistic shuffle to provide a cultural and historic frame for 21st century wokeness. In a time of angry divisiveness and racial reckoning, a fresh exegesis of the text as informed by the practices of transcreation, Black Dominicanidad, and Alvarez’s own progression from leading Latina trendsetter to learned, elderly sage can afford insight, a glimmer of hope, and perhaps healing.

Those who lambast Alvarez for her supposed racial ignorance or privileged insensitivity overlook her ongoing attempts at reconciliation in works like “The Other Side / *El Otro Lado*.” Scholars like Luis William chastise the “racial prejudice” and “characterizations contain[ing] racial overtones” of Alvarez’s best-selling hit, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), deeming the story a “regressive narration” (841). Jennifer Bess follows that lead by adding economic elitism (e.g. “Alvarez’s golden handcuffs”) to the societal favoritism from which the author and her fictional characters benefit (90). These cancel-culture call outs pejoratively erect Alvarez as an entitled “Karen” in need of immediate toppling. Such critics should recognize her efforts to translate not just words but the complicated ontology of race, a process magnified in the case of a celebrated and highly scrutinized author. The aforementioned passage suggests an awareness on behalf of the author that whiteness haunts her dangerously, like the looming siren’s call, though the pale exterior constitutes only one facet of the rich *mestizaje* she champions as key to obtaining the true *sueño americano*:

I hope that as Latinos, coming from so many different countries and continents, we can achieve solidarity in this country as the mix that we are. . . . As we Latinos redefine ourselves in America, making ourselves up and making ourselves over, we have to be careful, in taking up the promises of America, not to adopt its limiting racial paradigms. . . . Maybe as a group that embraces many races and differences, we Latinos can provide a positive multicultural, multiracial model to a divided America. (“A White Woman of Color” 148-49)

Here Alvarez emphasizes the creative impulse undergirding the Latinx subject’s racial expression, while simultaneously asserting her insider/outsider status on the grounds of race; significantly, she qualifies her authority not as a result of biracialism but as a separate-but-equal, both/and paradox, a Caucasian POC. This effectively is a political manifest in that she declares her constructivist stance toward the *Self* and the *Other*, mutable and symbiotic creations whose existential difference necessitates an intermediary, a type of cultural translator for the contemporary culture war, a role into which she inserts herself as agent of change. She stages throughout her works a metaphorical demonstration of what the author of *Black Behind the Ears: Dominican Racial Identity from Museums to Beauty Shops* qualifies as a purposeful “identity display” in order to negotiate the continuum of “ethno-racial” selves encompassing the whole Dominican subject, no matter the color features obvious to the public’s gaze:

Dominicans are negotiating their status as racialized minorities operating in the context of histories and structures beyond their control, but they do so with a degree of agency and self-determination. They bring to the local context, in other words, their own histories and understanding of their identities and they display them accordingly. (Candelario 10)

Alvarez calls attention both to racial disparities and congruencies through populating her fictional worlds and creative nonfiction with a diverse corpus of racialized persons; she tends to appoint her symbolic double typically in the observational storyteller and translator/interpreter role; thus, her job is to relate the truths of others or to leave clues for the reader to fashion a universal truth she carefully constructs in words, plots, scenes, and imagery. “The Other Side / *El Otro Lado*” follows the Homi Bhabha tradition of cultural translation, as noted by Andrea Witzke Slot in her superb analysis entitled “Between Scylla and the Charybdis: Remapping Subjectivity in the Dialogic Waters of Julia Alvarez’s “The Other Side / *El Otro Lado*” (161). Furthermore, Slot rightfully appreciates the powerful stance of Alvarez’s heteroglossia:

[P]oetic dialogism, through its intimacy and subjectivity, can be an even greater force for and example of resistance, capable of inspiring ideological and social change—especially for those with the least-often-heard voices—as well as a force for creating new forms of meaning through multiple positionality. A medium whose power is too often overlooked in multiethnic, postcolonial, cultural, gender, and even literary studies, dialogic poetry may provide the source energy needed to incite change in the thought patterns that unwittingly uphold these systems of subjugation and power. (164-65)

Slot’s examination of the poem’s polyvocal symbolism holds merit, most importantly with her treatment of Alvarez’s ability to stealthily embed translation into the poetic dialogue, but the scholar holds to a somewhat schematic definition of both interlinguistic and intercultural translation. The omission of racial self-transformation as Alvarez’s specific mode of cultural translation serves as an opportunity for a return analysis.

Discussions that deal with racial injustice and rigorous self-examinations into one’s own complicity are by no means easy, and maybe for this reason “The Other Side / *El Otro Lado*” does not stand out as one of Alvarez’s finest. She herself has qualified the entire collection as “a messier book” with the titular poem by far the most scattered of the twenty-eight compositions that form the book (Aldama 163). Three of the other sections draw inspiration from beloved individuals (a domestic caretaker named Gladys, a jilted lover named Joe, and a Deaf child named Estel) and one nostalgically recalls an innocent time of hopeful immigrant girlhood; alongside the initial “Bilingual Sestina,” these sections follow a rigorous structure and an Aristotelian unity, thereby showcasing Alvarez’s intelligently honed poetic craft. “The Other Side / *El Otro Lado*” contrarily invites the reader on a sprawling Odyssey lacking rhyme or reason, but this chaos feels equally decisive, for through that journey Alvarez allows the reader to experience that out-of-sorts feeling of bicultural individuals, neither here nor there, betwixt and between, or as the speaker’s medical report diagnoses, “Panicked Hispanic Female afflicted with magical thinking,” an ailment for which there is no cure (XIX.1004).

The poem remains relatively untouched by the academy. Slot’s interpretation stands alone as the most thorough analysis to date, and even that critique from 2013 came almost twenty years after the poem’s original publication date. Coincidentally, 2013 also sees the appearance of Frederick Luis Aldama’s *Formal Matters in Contemporary Latino Poetry* with an entire chapter dedicated to Alvarez’s poetic production, and while his chapter does isolate the collection *The Other Side / El Otro Lado* as quintessential to appreciating her entire literary aesthetic, Aldama neglects to include in his exhaustive commentary even a cursory examination of the titular poem. Why might this one composition, notably at XXI cantos and 1211 lines the most extensive of any

to date published by Alvarez, elicit so scant a scholarly response? I argue that the lack of critical attention owes to three factors: 1) structural disarray within the text (frankly, this poem strays far from the formal tightness of Alvarez's masterful sestinas and sonnets); 2) the taboo topic of racial inequality becomes even more tricky to negotiate when considered from a privileged white, immigrant perspective; and 3) the incohesive narrative structure of the poem makes it read more as a creative exercise, like rushed pages from the author's preparatory sketchbook, than as a carefully constructed finished product. Yet it is for these same reasons that contemporary readers should return to the poem not in search of what truth lies beyond the other side but to submit to the same societal and individual self-inspection the author herself dares. Radical shadow confrontation—be it of a metaphoric, individual quest or an examination of racial inequities at a societal level—is a messy yet necessary exercise of one's freedom. This is a democratic right and a responsibility Alvarez, whose family fled the Trujillo dictatorship, cherishes. Scholarly attention waxes and wanes. Her commitment is to her ancestry, her dual *patrias*, and her adoring fans.

Upon receiving a National Medal of Arts award from President Barack Obama in 2013, Alvarez remarked, "It's not about me. It's about all the people that have been with me from the beginning" (Hallenbeck). Some of these original supporters can be the diverse inner selves from which the author draws inspiration, the multicultural, polyphonic community with which she engages in her writing. Alvarez explains her appreciation for this "internal diversity" in an interview with fellow Latina writer Jaquira Díaz:

There isn't one kind of Latina to be. There isn't one kind of writer to be. There is complication. . . . We talk about the diversity in our culture, but the internal diversity too, to be all the selves that are in us in whatever combinations they are and to grant each other and ourselves . . . to allow ourselves to be that diversity and be accurate about who we are. (14:14-14:23, 15:00-15:24)

Perhaps one of the more controversial choices Alvarez makes in her self-appointed role as lyrical translator is to confront racism through the expression of multiracial voices. Far from an unintentional white-gaze performance of literary blackface, Alvarez incorporates a technique familiar to bilingual artists, skillfully incorporating multiracial transcreation into her writing process, thus responding to a call to action made by John Keene (among others) in "Translating Poetry. Translating Blackness" for increased representation especially of underrepresented minority voices, especially of those persons who experience oppression through societal silencing and censorship:

#BlackLivesMatter is a phrase many of us have seen and read quite frequently over the last few years. . . . What I'd like to raise today is an adjacent issue, which is #BlackNarrativesMatter, or #NarrativesofBlackLivesMatter, or to put it another way:

#NonAnglophoneNarrativesStoriesPoemsandOtherFormsofExpressionofBlackLivesMatter. . . . [W]e need more translation of literary works by non-Anglophone black diasporic authors into English, particularly by U.S.-based translators, and . . . these translations should then be published by U.S.-based publishing organs, including literary periodicals, as well as by publishing houses large and small.

Asserting oneself into a contentious race debate is by no means a decision without serious consequence for any writer, regardless of one's racial community or origin; the transnational point of view from which Alvarez writes is no exception, and according to subject experts like David Howard and Lorgia García-Peña, the Dominican-American context is especially fraught with potential traps in which a poet, unless mindful of the racial complexity, could become snared. García-Peña explains:

Dominican blackness is an embodied concept that is performed and inscribed on the flesh of national subjects through social processes that are very much linked to the political and economic realities of the nation in its relationship to the history and . . . presence of colonial (Spain) and (US) impositions. Analyzed outside of the complicated historical context that engendered it, blackness in the Dominican Republic can become a slippery concept. The critic of Dominican blackness, therefore, runs the risk of staying on the surface and missing the point. . . . [T]he critic must understand that the task of translating blackness is intrinsically linked to Dominican ethnic identity and to the island's economic and political negotiations with the United States and Europe. ("Translating *Blackness*" 11)

Howard underscores the bold vantage point of diasporic writers like Alvarez who address Dominican racial intricacies from the U.S. mainland:

Dominican writers living outside the Dominican Republic over the last three decades, such as Julia Alvarez, Chiqui Vicioso and Daisy Cocco de Filippis, have more directly addressed the racial prejudice of their compatriots. The external viewpoint and the experience of contemporary race relations in the United States have produced subtle assessments of the Dominican racial complex. (148)

"The Other Side / *El Otro Lado*," a poetic work replete with the racial "conflicts and incongruities . . . that appear in the dictions performed through the multiple repetitions of . . . *The Borders of Dominicanidad* (García-Peña 12). I wish to propose this poem as another example of what García-Peña categorizes as a "contradiction:"

The term "contradiction" frames my [our] analysis of the ways in which narratives produce nations through the violence, exclusion, and the continuous control of racialized bodies. . . . Diction refers to the distinctiveness of speech through which meaning is conveyed and understood. Thus, in its basic implication, "diction" signifies the performance of language and meaning. . . . [These] interrogations of the texts bring attention to the *contradictions* that surge within and between history and literature, showing how literature works, at times to sustain hegemony, while at others, it serves to contest it." (*The Borders of Dominicanidad: Race, Nation, and Archives of Contradiction* 13)

The present argument sustains that Alvarez's mid-1990s poem, depending on the reader's point of view, might reinforce racial prejudice while at the same time questioning the essential interconnectedness of racial identity to Dominicanidad. Considering the work within its appropriate context, however, the poem becomes a protesting bridge text for Dominican writers to

cross into a space of racial reconciliation. Again, as García-Peña, encourages, this poem calls for us as scholars to read in *contradiction*, a deliberative act that is as uncomfortable and paranoid it can be liberating: García-Peña encourages us to balance on *The Borders of Dominicanidad* for it is through dancing along that dangerous double-edge that we encounter truth, however harsh it might be:

Humanity continues to search for ways to make sense of our violent history—slavery, colonization, and the Holocaust—and its legacy on our present world. Yet, as . . . racial violence and anti-immigrant violence grow, it is clear that we do not yet have the answers. . . . [I]n order to truly understand the present we must examine the systems, rhetoric, and stories that sustained the violence of the past. Such reasoning, however, can only succeed if we are open to reading in *contradiction*, against our own “truths.” Reading in *contradiction* brings us closer to our own individual and collective discomforts, traumas, fears, and losses. But the act also brings us closer to justice. (211-12)

As Alvarez opines, “Literature has to pull its weight in the real world or else it’s of no use to us” (*Afterlife* 21). Now more than ever, in the wake of explosive racial tension again shaking up (and many would shout, “Waking up!”) cities across the United States of America, is an opportune moment to glean the agenda of tolerance and respect through the mutual understanding Alvarez pushes.

García-Peña and Howard stand in opposition to the assertion offered by Kelli Lyon Johnson that Alvarez’s exploration of Latinx *mestizaje* is merely an ethnic stance:

The places of Alvarez’s life inform the *mestizaje* of her work, a linguistic and cultural multiplicity. . . . *Mestizaje* has historically had at its foundation a concern with race. The word has been reclaimed and redefined by Latino/a writers and critics to include cultural heritage. Alvarez’s conception of *mestizaje* emerges not out of the word’s racial connotation, but more out of an exploration of contact and connection. (ix-x)

Lyon Johnson focuses primarily on the role of geographic movement, narrative space, and ideological displacement in Alvarez’s prose, and while she correctly concludes that “[t]he question of identity and agency is particularly acute for women, postcolonial peoples, and others upon whom an identity has traditionally been imposed,” she seems to inadvertently avoid or wholly misinterpret the multifaceted racial milieu of the Dominican-American community (vii). Alvarez has commented publicly on the topic and not only in elite academic journals, as evidenced by two op-ed pieces for popular ethnic magazines of the 1990s: “Black Behind the Ears” appeared in *Essence* in 1993 and “Does Color Matter to Us?” followed in 1993 in *Latina*. In both essays, Alvarez clearly discusses race as a key component of her Latinx identity, while also refusing to neatly box in her own racial makeup to one narrow category even if that means sacrificing what some might at first glance perceive as a color privilege. Alvarez thereby exemplifies García-Peña’s notion of the racialized “*vaivén* (coming and going)” that distinguishes American hybridity.

To recapitulate, entering this debate is not without negative repercussions, especially for an ex-patriot, immigrant writer. Alvarez indirectly cites her poetic inspiration, the traditional refrain popularized first in Juan Antonio Alix’s folkloric *décimas*, “El negro tras de la oreja”(201-03) in “The Other Side / *El Otro Lado*” yet chose not to present her homeland’s legacy of

miscegenation in a series of neat and melodious ten-line rhyming octosyllables like her predecessor. The phrase, however, is one to which she clings, as evidenced by the *Essence* interview and as well as a casual reference in her most recent novel, *Afterlife* (Alvarez 203). These actions have led some critics to attack the author's intentions, again focusing on the white guilt that forces Alvarez into the role of the "race savior for benighted Dominican brothers and sisters back home" (Chetty and Rodríguez 4). This rushed condemnation seems unfair when considered through the lens of racial translation. Take, for example, the historical heroine of Alvarez's novel, *In the Name of Salomé* (2000): the nineteenth-century, mixed-race Dominican poetess Salomé Ureña. Lyon Johnson recognizes Alvarez's inclusion of poetic translation to structure the parallel narratives of the novel's dual protagonists:

Alvarez also draws genres together in her novel *In the Name of Salomé*. She titles each chapter after a poem by Salomé Ureña, coupling the title in Spanish for Salomé's chapters with its English translation for Camila's chapters. She thus ties together inversely the stories of Salomé and Camila. The first chapter is titled, "El Ave y el nido," and tells the story of the beginning of Salomé's life; this chapter is coupled with "Bird and Nest," the story of the later years of Camila's life. "Luz," the Spanish counterpart to "Light," appears as the final chapter of Salomé's life, just before her death in 1894. By using these titles to frame the story—"El ave y el nido," "Contestación," "La fe en el porvenir," "Amor y anhelo," "Sombras," "Ruinas," "La llegada del invierno," and "Luz"—Alvarez draws Ureña's actual writings into the novel and the themes of her life become the themes of Alvarez's work as well. (124-25)

Ureña as muse is rife with translative potential, as Juliana De Zavalia further elucidates in her study of "The Impact of Spanish-American Literature in Translation on U.S. Latino Literature:"

Indeed, translation has become a highly significant activity and practice. But, in the case of Latino writers, the notion of translation needs radical redefinition: the rigid dichotomies target language/source language, original text/translated text seem quite inadequate in this hybridized context. . . . The cultural difference between U.S. Latino and Spanish-American writings sometimes needs to be explained. Since culture is read differently by different audiences, and many Latino writers give a translation of the Spanish used in their texts, either weaving it into the fabric of the text or including a glossary. (198-99)

In short, Alvarez buttresses her own self-translation in "The Other Side / *El Otro Lado*" on a Dominican POC (Poetics of Color); on one side stands Alix's lyrical shading of the Island's population and on *el otro lado* she hoists the aspirational persona of Ureña.

The prosaic poem "The Other Side / *El Otro Lado*" operates as anchor and climax for the eponymous collection. As previously established, the text is comprised of twenty-one sections in which the first-person female speaker—autobiographically mirroring Alvarez's reality as an influential Latina spokesperson—returns to her Caribbean homeland only to feel unwelcome. She couples this social anxiety with the professional paranoia of a crippling writer's block. Initially the heroine blames racial prejudice, attributing social exclusion to her whiteness. She speaks the Spanish language and knows the cultural codes but still feels out of place. Moreover, she's saddled

with a deadbeat Alabama redneck lover, Mike, a counterpart by which she asserts her preferred dark Dominicanidad. The nameless subject symbolically embraces a process of browning (increased emphasis on her brown eyes, kinky hair, tanned skin) and thus encounters a shadow muse singing through saintly relics, begging boys, family ghosts, and “the dark side of a love already spent” (“The Other Side / *El Otro Lado*” XVI.18). Through confronting her *otherness* on “El otro lado,” the heroine demonstrates race as an ever-changing continuum comprised of subtle, in-between shades. Alvarez’s reverse migration exposes both geographical and racial borders as fluid *fronteras* yet, paradoxically, also as fixed cornerstones of the complex Latinx identity construct.

A single poem entitled “Bilingual Sestina” comprises the first section of *The Other Side / El otro lado* collection (3-4). The density and musicality that distinguish this poem stand in opposition to the prosaic meanderings of “The Other Side / *El Otro Lado*. When read in conjunction, the tension between the poems epitomizes the tension of Dominican *contradiction*; hence, the reader must pay attention to how deftly Alvarez triangulates race, self, and linguistic translation from the very first stanza of “Bilingual Sestina:”

Some things I have to say aren’t getting said
in this snowy, blond, blue-eyed, gum-chewing English:
dawn’s early light sifting through *persianas* closed
the night before by dark-skinned girls whose words
evoke *cama, aposento, sueños* in *nombres*
from that first world I can’t translate from Spanish. (1-6)

For at least one scholar, Catherine E. Wall, this poem is representative of the author’s aesthetic metapoetical cosmivision:

“Bilingual Sestina” is an *ars poetica* about words: words in Spanish, words in English, and how the bilingual writer comes to terms with choosing those words to name the world. For the poet Julia Alvarez, coming to terms with words has meant coming to terms with her bilingual and bicultural identity, that is, with the world. “Bilingual Sestina” acknowledges the journey from the other side of language and culture and back again. . . . This is the mature voice of the experienced writer who simultaneously embraces Spanish and English, for while her heart still may beat in Spanish, the words emerge *en inglés*. (138).

Wall, though clearly an expert reader, eschews the topic of race, opting instead for a generic color blindness that does not at all correspond to Alvarez’s insistence on a racial divide where White is to US American as Black is to Dominican. This is a pattern that she will flip in “The Other Side / *El Otro Lado*.”

The lengthy narrative poem follows a looser pattern than “Bilingual Sestina,” featuring a blocked writer who has come to the island seeking inspiration. It starts with a scene highlighting her status as a privileged, white tourist:

I drove up in Mami’s Mercedes, the uniformed guard waved me in
before I could explain the car was only on loan for a week,
I didn’t know how to work the alarm or turn on the high beams –

he was trained to admit white women riding in silver chariots.
 As the weeks went by and I darkened, hiking midday in the sun,
 refusing lifts from Tropical Tours or from rummy businessmen
 stopping their canopied golf carts to ask where I was from,
 and hey, was it hot enough for me? As the weeks went by,
 the guards began checking my card to make sure I belonged. (Alvarez, "The Other
 Side / *El Otro Lado*" I.1-9)

Her boyfriend comes across as a Confederate redneck with obvious prejudicial undertones: "a
 skinny white man from Alabama, / Mike—with a joint in his pocket / and a night kit full of
 rubbers—" (Alvarez, "The Other Side / *El otro lado*" II.75-77). She emphasizes the stark difference
 between herself "Me, in my homeland fishbowl, —pedigree Third World—" (Alvarez, "The Other
 Side / *El Otro Lado*" II.66-67) and her partner, Mike, who spends most of the time in a drugged
 haze:

Campeños stop to stare
 at the blond-haired, blue-eyed marvel,
 a *dominicana* in tow—
 "not choosing her own people. . .
 of us and not with us"—
 whispering disapproval. (Alvarez, "The Other Side / *El Otro Lado*" II.84-89)

The back-and-forth arrangement of these lines mimics García-Peña's notion of *contradiction* and
 establish a clear separation between the romantic duo. The unnamed speaker and her companion
 reenact a Colonial conquest:

Down that mountain, Mike and I hike
 calling out to each other,
 'You all right, mate?' —like two Brits
 trekking through darkest Africa—
 a movie scene we make up,
 confused as to how to behave.
 We're not really the sunscreened tourists,
 pleasure colonists with charge cards;
 not quite the Dominican rich
 phoning from our Mercedes
 to alert the dozing watchman
 to get our weekend villa ready, (Alvarez, "The Other Side / *El Otro Lado*"
 II.48-59)

They each perform contrived stereotypical roles even though these parts feel insincere. Their
 romantic union is itself a sham, yet another false performance, and the female speaker constantly
 assumes the role of linguistic and cultural intermediary:

I translate for Mike, who grins, shaking his head at the mayor,
 who studies us a long moment, 'You are married, señora?'

I shake my head, avert my eyes, as if ashamed to be discovered.
 Adolfo's face softens with wiles, 'Let me be the one to do it!'
 He smiles a golden smile, twenty carats of phony friendliness.
 'Just write your names down here without any obligation.'
 The mayor pats his chest, looks up, shrugging apologies:
 he has nothing to write with. But like any would-be writer
 —even a two-year block hasn't cured me of the habit—
 I carry my favorite pen and my address-book-size journal.
 Adolfo opens his book, and Mike signs our names with a flourish,
 then leans over for a kiss as if we'd just gotten married.
 Adolfo claps his congratulations, then pocketing my Bic,
 he stacks up his three books, stops, smacks himself on the cheek.
 We've signed out in his death notebook in unerasable ink! (Alvarez, "The Other
 Side / *El Otro Lado*" VI.318-32)

Confusion abounds with a reluctant interpreter, who understands the words but fails to communicate the bureaucratic absurdity of island procedures. Mike doesn't fare too well on the Island, mostly because of his inability to assimilate, his Caucasian features standing in stark contrast to the speaker's darkening self:

Babies, babies—we lose count—Everywhere babies crying!

 Babies eating dirt—Mike bends down to shake their fists loose,
 head haloed in sandy hair, eyes the turquoise of the ocean:
 a white apparition sent to instruct them on basic hygiene.
 The babies burst into tears and scramble back to their mothers. (Alvarez, "The
 Other Side / *El Otro Lado*" III.135, 143-46)

But the Latina speaker goes on an enlightening journey, recovering first the native look and next her Spanish language: "Coming down from our high, we kiss, tempted to making promises. / 'I love you.' Mike takes my hand, then waits for an echoing answer. / '*Te amo*,' I try in Spanish, since in English it sounds dishonest." (Alvarez, "The Other Side / *El Otro Lado*" III.183-85). She starts to confront the racism that never before seemed to worry her:

So many years of hearing, 'Go back to where you came from!'
 of being *out* and looking *in* created a certain cynicism—
 this was *their* USA, *their* Vietnam, *their* racism,
 their white girls in granny dresses talking about feminism,
 the same white girls who years back in matched Villager outfits
 taunted my sister and me to the tune of "Chiquita Banana"— (Alvarez, "The Other
 Side / *El Otro Lado*" IV.202-07)

Eventually the speaker rejects the institutionalized white supremacy represented by the Island's political authority and distances herself from the Tío Sam beau:

Boca's mayor calls Mike over to his one-room shanty office:

‘You want I build you a house, take care of it while you’re gone?
 We want your kind around.’ He pinches Mike’s pale arm
 as if assessing the grade of merchandise he is buying.
 Mike grins, T-shirted, sneakered, pony tail recently lopped off,
 a concession to his visit to be introduced to my family.
 The mayor dons his baseball cap, sporting a Playboy logo,
 rabbit ears crest the head of this Nazi *dominicano*.
 A little Adolf, Boca’s mayor wants to lighten his constituency:
 whiter skin, lankier hair, more American dollars.
 “What do you say?” he asks Mike.

‘What does he say?’ Adolfo asks me.
 —Adolfo, of course, is not his name, but my revenge of a nickname—
 “Nice house, a little garden, one, two, three, you’re at the beach.
 One, two, three” he looks at me
 “Tell your husband what I’m saying.”
 He nods eagerly concurring as I tell Mike, “He’s trying to con you.” (Alvarez, “The
 Other Side / *El Otro Lado*” VI.273-89)

Her power lies in the ability to twist meaning through subjective translation, to insert socio-political commentary in sarcastic narration, and to shape shift at will. The self-translation coincides with her browning:

Mike and I stand at the gate while I translate the gringa’s story.
 His hand on my shoulder droops an epaulette of long fingers,
 freckled and pink with sun next to my deepening olive.

 That’s one way to think of the story is what I find myself thinking
 as I translate myself inside the shuttered house and imagine
 looking out at a foreign world that doesn’t promise to love us
 but leaves us without just cause alone to our own devices. (Alvarez, “The Other
 Side / *El Otro Lado*” XI.593-95, 600-04)

Through the rest of the poem she ditches Mike, acknowledges her class privilege, and embarks on a social justice campaign:

Surrounded by Boca’s starving I was shamed into action:
 fund raising, office trotting, in a month’s time we were promised
 a schoolhouse, a dispensary, a better road than the channel crossing.
 Now I wanted the reward built into this kind of a narrative:
 a happy ending to close at least one version of my story. (Alvarez, “The Other Side
 / *El Otro Lado*” XIX.1033-37)

Her self-translation complete, she takes ownership of her browner body, her Spanish language, and her recovered writer skills. But she cannot forever stay locked in her new target text, as the final line puts an end to this unrealistic fantasy, returning her “to the shore I’ve made up on the other side” (Alvarez, “The Other Side / *El Otro Lado*” XXI.1211).

Just as Alvarez commenced *The Other Side / El Otro Lado* with a poetic manifesto, she clarifies the purpose of her writing in meta-reflective compositions such as “Ars politica,” and although this poem appears in a later collection, it harmonizes with the epic produced nearly ten years prior:

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.
 (Alvarez, *The Woman I Kept to Myself* 26-30)

Hers is a daily reckoning of constant evaluation in which she assumes the role of perpetual perfectionist always in search of self-revision:

Instead of babies, I’ve raised my students,

 I’ve weathered their stormy rebellions, too,
 the adolescence of their young talent,
 when all they want to do is write free verse
 —with the emphasis on *free*— and only read
 Adrienne Rich, Mark Doty, Sharon Olds
 since everyone else is dead and white and male.
 (But Mark *is* white *and* male, I note).
 Wisely, and while they rage, I read their poems,
 sending them back for one more revision.
 “Aren’t you ever satisfied?” they complain?

 “This *is* the writing life! Get used to it!”
 though I could just as well say, This is life—
 the chance to try a new draft every day, (Alvarez, “Why I Teach” *The Woman I Kept to Myself* 1, 11-20, 23-25)

Alvarez exhibits keen awareness of the trappings of social justice platitudes; she does not value racial introspection simply to purge her white guilt. It is the opportunity to experience herself in the Other that is the ultimate exercise of her privilege, not as a consequence of her skin color but from her vantage as a writer capable of self-translation.

A comparative look at Alvarez’s poetic treatment of racial imagery shows that she is willing to confront racism at a societal level in the contemporary postcolonial American context, in the microcosm of her own family of origin, and within her own self. “The Other Side / *El Otro Lado*” saga ends ambiguously with the nameless speaker staring at the enigmatic Word Woman representative of her *Self* rather than her *Other*, an indecipherable half of the complete whole:

One half-drawn figure I cannot make out,
 unfinished, outlined in white paint, too white,
 a ghost who came and left

in search of a happier ending (Alvarez, *The Other Side/ El Otro Lado* XXI.1181-85)

There is no *fin feliz* here, just a return to the paradoxical shadow of white privilege and a stark white page on which to write a future reconciliation. This unresolved ending contrasts with the *punto final* declarative statement of the final verse in which she steadily bails water out of an unstable vessel that moves “steadily across the watery darkness / to the shore I’ve made up on the other side” (Alvarez, “The Other Side / *El Otro Lado*” XXI.1209-12). Certainly one can interpret that ending darkness as a nod to the writer’s plunge into the depths of her subconscious. Given the racial subtext that permeates this poem, however, a plausible addendum is that the darkness alludes to the hidden *negro tras de la oreja* the speaker fights to suppress; following that premise, the darkness then takes on a sinister edge, as if to suggest that social mobility in the *Estados Unidos* requires more white washing instead of cultural translation.

Afterword:

The politicization and poeticization of race are *dos caras de la misma moneda* for activist writers like Alvarez. Thus it is no surprise that she followed the popular social media outcry denouncing George Floyd’s shocking death, a painful moment that sparked a fervent reigniting of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. She commemorated US Independence Day 2020 by drawing parallels between her first in 1960 as an immigrant admirer of “Nuestra Señora de Libertad:”

[T]he patron saint
of the United Estates,
a guardian angel watching
over the land of the free
and home of the brave. (Alvarez, “Three Liberties: Past, Present, Yet to Come” 2-7)

She proceeded to equate the Covid-19 pandemic with “another [that] rages on, / a virus of violence against / our darker brothers & sisters” (Alvarez, “Three Liberties: Past, Present, Yet to Come” 51-54). Alvarez poignantly includes her Latinx community in the struggle:

the nameless at her borders
with Papi’s brown face & bigotes,
whose América was coopted,
(the accent erased from the “e”)
as ours is the only America? (“Three Liberties: Past, Present, Yet to Come” 68-72)

This cause is not one she intends to abandon, and it is one fought in unity, as her rhetorical question concludes, “If we celebrate next year, / Which Liberty will we sing to?” (Alvarez, “Three Liberties: Past, Present, Yet to Come” 75-76). While the answer to that question looms in dramatic suspension, Alvarez with this poem does reinforce her commitment to staking the poetic space as a site of racial reconciliation. And this time she is neither here nor there, not on “The Other Side” or “*El Otro Lado*,” rather she speaks on behalf of the *vox populi*, united together singing a sad but necessary protest song.

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