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# **Multiple Articulations of Exile in US Latina Literature: Confronting Exilic Absence and Trauma**

**Fatima Mujcinovic**

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The sudden dispossession accompanying a refugee flight is much more than the loss of a permanent home and a traditional occupation or than the parting from close friends and familiar places. It is also the death of the person one has become in a particular context, and every refugee must be his or her own midwife at the painful process of rebirth.

Dervla Murphy

The frequent theme of exile in US Latina literature is framed within the social and geopolitical reality of Latin America. Narratives of displacement and exile discussed in this article specifically focus on the Central American and Caribbean experience determined by the conditions of military regimes and authoritarianism in the second half of the twentieth century. Forced to flee severe political repression and state violence in their homelands, Central American and Caribbean civilians came to the US mainly as political refugees, participating in a massive population uprooting. In only three decades, from 1950-1983, almost two million people were forced to relocate: approximately 900,000 Cubans; 300,000 Dominicans; 200,000 Nicaraguans; 300,000 Salvadorans; and 200,000 Guatemalans came to the US as documented and undocumented refugees (Pastor 300).

The effects of such massive relocations are typically experienced as a psychological rupture that inevitably problematizes the articulation of individual and collective subjectivity. As Edward Said notes, a rift between a human being and a native place often results in an alienation from the self (173). This absence of a strong grounding provokes feelings of uprootedness and non-belonging, endangering one's personal sense of being and propelling one into perpetual solitude and nostalgia. The inability to find a stable and complete meaning provokes a crisis of self, a fragmented subjectivity placed in a continuous state of lack. Denied home and integrity in both the homeland and the immigrant location, exiles become confined to the space of absence and loss, or what Said calls "a perilous territory of not-belonging" (177).

In her analysis of Latin American women's writing in exile, *Reading the Body Politic* (1993), Amy Kaminsky theorizes exile as a particular form of "presence-in-absence." She emphasizes its spatial configuration, pointing out that exile is primarily "from, and not to, a place" (30). As a physical topicality constituted by departure, exile is defined by "what is missing, not by what it contains," and its conditions of loss and emptiness foster "a will to return into presence" (32). Desire to reclaim presence is manifested, Kaminsky states, in perpetual longing, nostalgia, a wish to return, and a fear of return to the place where one can no longer be. Consequently, exile is experienced as dislocation, both physical and psychic.

On the other hand, exile may also offer liberating possibilities. Kaminsky notes that the experience of physical and emotional rupture can lead to personal growth and transformation. Through the discovery of an inner capacity "to survive and grow in the new environment" (37), one may find a greater independence and confidence and thus gain a more fulfilling self-affirmation and realization. Kaminsky compares this act of self-discovery to rebirth, an emergence of new personhood and subjectivity. As the epigraph to this article states, the exilic rebirth is inevitably connected to death, "the death of the person one has become in a particular context." Evidently, this individual liberation—or, in Murphy's words, "the painful process of rebirth"—is attained in

traumatic circumstances, but this is precisely why its meaning is so powerful and valuable.

This article focuses on the depiction of exile in three Latina texts—Helena María Viramontes’ “The Cariboo Café,” Cristina García’s *Dreaming in Cuban*, and Julia Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*—in an attempt to investigate different articulations of the exilic condition. Most of the exiled characters in these narratives are portrayed as experiencing exile in terms of loss and erasure: they perceive the US in terms of their missing home, limited agency, and fragmented identity. However, many of them are depicted as transcending this absence by transforming exile into a site of self-affirmation. They are allowed to gain confidence and affirmation not only through the “capacity to survive and grow in the new environment” but also through the willingness to seize opportunities for self-transformation found in the new location. Finally, some protagonists are shown experiencing exilic absence in yet another way: they embrace it as a comforting distance from the source of pain and trauma. However, their life in exile does not succeed as a process of rebirth because they fail to negotiate their past traumas.

As its complexity and ambiguity become revealed through diverse and distinct personal experiences, exile in the selected texts ceases to be a homogenous and immutable condition: while its state is demonstrated to be debilitating, it is also presented as potentially liberating. By emphasizing this multiple meaning, US Latina literature investigates exile as a complicated and complex condition that evades generalization and consistency.

### **Deterritorialization of Violence**

The threat of erasure experienced in political displacements begets a desire to recuperate the loss, to regain presence and visibility, and to reclaim the originary place. This desire to restore emerges as a vision of an ultimate return, embodying possibility and hope. As Amy Kaminsky points out, exile’s desire to repair and return into presence rests on “a project of transformation” (33). In Helena María Viramontes’s story “The Cariboo Café” (1985), an exiled woman leaves her country in order to construct a return and recuperate the loss. After having lost her five-year-old son in a

Central American civil war, she goes to the US in search of a better future, envisioning it as a reunion with her son. With the loss of her child, her homeland loses its meaning of home and is projected as a land of absence and erasure: "Without Geraldo, this is not my home; the earth beneath it, not my country" (75). The haunting memory and the pain of the loss follow her across multiple borders to the US, where a desperate desire for recuperation leads her to vicariously recreate her son through an unknown Latino boy.

The scene describing the woman's encounter with the Latino boy suggests that their relationship has a cathectic dynamic.<sup>1</sup> Detached from reality, the mother clings to her "newly found child" because he completes her fantasy of the reunion and thus displaces her anxiety and trauma. The depth of her delusion is conveyed in the moment when she plans an immediate return to Central America, her country regaining its meaning of home as the loss appears to be recuperated: "Tomorrow she will make arrangements to go home. María will be the same, the mango stand on the corner next to the church plaza will be the same. It will all be the way it was before" (76). The "way it was before" does not denote here the time before the war; rather, it signifies a condition of the familial unity and grounding that existed even during the political upheavals. However, when the destructiveness of the outer, sociopolitical reality invades the domestic space, this condition becomes ruptured. The wholeness of motherhood and family is violated by the separation and dehumanization enforced from the outside, the sphere of the repressive military apparatus of a Central American government.

Loss and erasure, or in Kaminsky's terms "departure into exilic absence" (32), occur in this story even before the exilic border crossing. This is illustrated in the first part, where the author describes a denial of individual identity in the public space sanctioned by government authorities. After the child "disappears," the mother is not allowed to search for him in the detention centers; a government officer simply ignores her presence and dismisses her pleas. Later on, when she finds out that he has been murdered like many other detained children, she represses the unbearable knowledge of his death and resorts to believing that he is still a "disappeared." The mother's acceptance of the regime's official defini-

tion of the civilian victims as “disappeared,” rather than as “kidnapped” or “assassinated,” reflects her delusional denial of Gerardo’s murder and her desperate need to believe that he is, according to the definition, neither officially dead nor alive. Since she feels too paralyzed to fight for presence in the public space,<sup>2</sup> her family becomes invisible and her home disintegrated. “These four walls are no longer my house; the earth beneath it, no longer my home” (75), she repeats and leaves for the US in hope of finding the “disappeared” Gerardo beyond the borders of a military state.

Dramatizing the conditions of political violence and terror in Central America, the story attempts to explain why many Central Americans were forced to flee from their home countries. It also calls attention to the fact that exile begins with an escape from violence that may never end. The Central American woman leaves her homeland fleeing annihilation and destruction, but her exile in the US does not offer her more visibility or presence. She is confined to her nephew’s crowded studio apartment and the filthy locations of her cleaning jobs. On the streets of Los Angeles she is anonymous, knowing no English and having no friends. Debilitated linguistically and socially in the American urban space, she also becomes labeled as an intruder: “[I] hear the lady saying something in Spanish. Right off I know she’s illegal, which explains why she looks like a weirdo” (70), comments the owner of the Cariboo Café the first time that he sees her in his diner. This narrative section points out that having been already stripped of integrity and identity in Central America, the exiled is enmeshed in a similar technology of dehumanization in the US. Marked by her linguistic difference and class marginality, the mother faces another protocol of authoritative oppression: the denial of acceptance in the new social space. As Sonia Saldivar-Hull points out, the woman’s “Brownness signifies alterity” and exposes how “the dominant marginalize on the basis of color and language” (148).

The Cariboo Café, a gathering place of workers in an industrial part of Los Angeles, is established as a symbolic representation of exile. The remaining *o*’s in its faded name ( “oo Café”) become read as zeros—the characters in the story dub it as “the zero-zero place” or “the double zero café” (68)—signifying a place of absence and a double exile, from home and from the newly adopted location. Desperately sought as a refuge from the immigration police (“la migra”), the café turns into a site of

gration police (“la migra”), the café turns into a site of betrayal and violence. As Debra Castillo states, the café functions as “an empty signifier, a parody of no-man’s land, an illusory crossroads where characters mistakenly believe the shadows that haunt them can be held at bay” (81). Referring to US immigration policy, the story incorporates an episode where illegal factory workers are targeted in a police raid in order to be deported. The author calls attention to the poignancy of this experience: after having fled the violence and hardships in their native countries, Central American refugees face the same oppression in the US. The reader is made to realize the fallacy of the “land of freedom”: the protection offered in exile is shattered in the same way as was the protection of home. Furthermore, the author warns that the possibility of safety is relativized in any location, for violence turns out to be an omnipresent and polymorphous force, easily deterritorialized and turned against the innocent.

Merging different narrative voices and loci, the story continues to emphasize the persistence and invasiveness of political violence in different sociopolitical locations. The unknown mother from Central America is shown experiencing exile in the same way she experienced the violent repression in her homeland. When the police come to take the boy she “kidnapped,”<sup>3</sup> the boundaries between the realities of Central America and Los Angeles merge in her psyche. As Saldívar-Hull remarks, the woman’s confrontation with the US police becomes a continuation of her struggle with the police from Central America (151). However, while in Central America the mother is paralyzed before the indifference of the government authorities, in the US she regains agency as she refuses to give up the Latino boy to *la migra*. Believing that she is fighting to keep her son, Geraldo, she relives the return of the repressed in all its immediacy and intensity:

But her legs are heavy and she crushes Geraldo against her, so tight, as if she wants to conceal him in her body again, return him to her belly so that they will not castrate him and hang his small blue penis on her door, not crush his face so that he is unrecognizable, not bury him among the heaps of bones, and ears, and teeth, and jaws, because no one but she cared to know that he cried. (78)

The universality of violence and oppression is portrayed in this scene through a parallelism of the same protocols of force and dehumanization in Central America and the US. The American police attack an unarmed woman, with no concern for her true role in the situation. They automatically profile her as a criminal, the one undoubtedly guilty of posing a threat to their system. She, on the other hand, perceives their aggressive force as a violent system of no specific national identification: it is just the impersonal "they" who are "swift and cunning and can take your life with a snap of a finger" (76), threatening with their phallic power, with "their guns taught [sic] and cold like steel erections" (78).

Recognizing the same technology of force and destruction, the Central American woman believes that she is back in the land of the corrupt political regime and violent oppression. This slippage in reality conveys the idea that the repressive state is not limited to military regimes, affirming Louis Althusser's argument that the state apparatus is fundamentally repressive. Represented by the government, the police, the army, the court, etc., the state apparatus functions predominantly as a force of repressive intervention in order to ensure its own cohesion and authority.<sup>4</sup> Thus, as dramatized in Viramontes' story, the repressive state asserts its presence in any geopolitical space, demonstrating that forceful state repression is a global phenomenon, unrestricted by national insignias.

In addition, the dynamics of state repression and authoritarianism are revealed as grounded on the patriarchal exercise of power, another cross-national phenomenon. The military system in Central America is represented, as Carl Gutiérrez-Jones notices, through "clichéd manipulations of patriarchal rhetoric" (121), while the oppressive US government is presented as taking on a phallic appearance with its aggressive police apparatus. Throughout the story, the images of patriarchal authority and sociopolitical totalitarian power merge with each other to reveal a reciprocal and contiguous relationship, thus providing criticism of both structures of power. Giving a very disturbing, tragic ending to the story, the author adamantly concludes that the inhumane treatment of Central American refugees in the US reveals the cruelty and indifference of the US immigration policy before the plight of innocent victims of political regimes.



The story resonates with the crucial problematics of the exilic experience: the distinction between home and exile, as well as between danger and safety, becomes complicated and problematized. Home represents both danger and safety, violence loses national identification, and the desire to return becomes an obsession. However, the narrative suggests that home in “The Cariboo Café” is not associated with destruction and violence; rather, it is displaced and disassociated from any violation. It symbolizes the familial unity between the mother and son, and it remains manifested as such in the desire to reclaim this unity. This process of displacement is facilitated by the continuation of violence and dehumanization as traumatic experiences in the new location, and for this reason the Central American mother projects the former location as a desired place. Because it precedes the latest violation, the dangerous site of home paradoxically acquires the meaning of recuperation.

The author does not seem to suggest that the woman perceives the violence in Central America as less destructive than the one in the US; rather, the suggestion is that the displaced woman ceases to perceive violence in her home country as she represses it in the act of psychological defense. Moreover, the narrative depiction of the woman’s confrontation with US police is intertextually tied to the historical fact that the US was supporting the military dictatorships in Central America at the time and was thus implicated in the murder of Central American civilians. This is why the story utilizes the narrative twist in the end: the violent conflict in Central America is superimposed onto a US terrain and the violence against an innocent woman is executed by the US police. The author presents the violence in the US as a “return of the repressed,” an inevitable effect of the US political/military hegemony in Central America.

### **Exilic Winter Redefined**

*Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) by Cristina García explores displacements and dislocations effected by the Cuban revolution in the 1960s. Caught in the sociopolitical upheavals, the del Pino family experiences geographical and political fragmentation: one

part immigrates to the US, shunning the revolution, while the other stays on the island, supporting the new social order. As Lourdes Puente and her family settle down in New York City, their reactions to exilic conditions are governed by different epistemological realities and personal experiences of trauma. In this analysis, I will focus on the character of Lourdes Puente in order to illustrate an experience of exile that contrasts the exilic condition described in "The Cariboo Cafe."

Cristina García develops the character of Lourdes Puente by carefully depicting the protagonist's post-traumatic stress disorder. Lourdes is introduced as suffering from compulsive eating and insatiable sexual needs, and these character traits are developed as symptoms of the sexual abuse that Lourdes experienced during Cuba's revolutionary days. Her anti-Communist sentiments represent her psychological reaction to this violation: superimposing her pain and anguish on the Cuban sociopolitical reality, she alienates herself from her homeland in order to elude the troubling past. Like the unnamed Central American woman in "The Cariboo Café," Lourdes is forced to experience a destruction of "home" and enter the space of exile in search of physical safety and psychic restoration. However, Lourdes' departure does not provoke a desire to return. The novel maintains that the space of home represents a betrayal that she cannot forgive. Its professed security and impregnability turned out to be illusory: she was violated in the space where violation was not supposed to exist. With this unconventional rendering of home, the author conveys that the intensity of the trauma and betrayal drives this character to alienate herself completely from the space of home(land) and embrace exile as a space where she can recuperate her obliterated self.

While in "The Cariboo Café" home becomes displaced and re-signified as the memory of the condition before the violation, in *Dreaming in Cuban* it is situated in memory as a condition of violence. Hence, a desire to return never resurfaces, and its absence develops into a defense mechanism. The author affirms this claim by emphasizing Lourdes' refusal to visit Cuba and the moments when she relives the violation: any mention of a possible return induces in Lourdes fear and anguish, and "she smells the brilliantined hair, feels the scraping blade, the web of scars it left on her stomach" (196). The association of the rape with her

homeland, rather than with political patriarchy, drives Lourdes into an exilic absence; however, she experiences this absence not as a continuation of victimization but as a desired affirmation.

The narrative suggests that the space of exile offers Lourdes some ease and comfort because it removes her physically from the "site of danger." This removal does not succeed in "The Cariboo Café" because the victim in this story encounters a continuation of the "danger." Suffering socioeconomic marginalization in the space of exile, the Central American mother experiences an intensification of victimization and consequently becomes even more delusional and psychotic. Lourdes, however, is able to integrate in the new location as her better economic status and her anti-Communist posture find a compatible environment. This is why she projects the home as a place of destruction and the exile as a source of renewal, distancing herself from the former and embracing the latter. However, even though social class is a significant determinant of one's exilic experience, specifically in the process of acculturation and resettlement, it must be recognized that the psychological effects of trauma are similar in different social strata. In spite of class differences, both of these characters exhibit delusional approaches to reality since their experience of violation in the space of home has inflicted them with acute pain and suffering.

The narrative section describing Lourdes' arrival in the US demonstrates that physical distancing becomes another defense mechanism, as Lourdes feels the need to disassociate herself completely from anything close to or typical of Cuba:

"I want to go where it's cold," Lourdes told her husband. They began to drive. "Colder," she said as they passed the low salt marshes of Georgia, as if the word were a whip driving them north. "Colder," she said through the withered fields of a Carolina winter. "Colder," she said again in Washington, D.C., despite the cherry-blossom promises, despite the white stone monuments hoarding winter light. "This is cold enough," she finally said when they reached New York.  
(69)

The cold of New York City functions in this passage as the polar opposite of the heat in Cuba. Also, it symbolically acts as an

anesthetic that helps deaden the past, freeze the emotions, and reduce the intensity of pain. Lourdes embraces the coldness as a protective barrier, seeing the layers of thick, winter clothes as an armor for her vulnerable body: "Lourdes relishes winter most of all—the cold scraping sounds on sidewalks and windshields, the ritual of scarves and gloves, hats and zip-in coat linings. Its layers protect her. She wants no part of Cuba, no part of its wretched carnival floats creaking with lies, no part of Cuba at all, which Lourdes claims never possessed her" (73). Lourdes' intense need to dephysicalize her own body and the space of Cuba point to the physical abuse she suffered. For the same reason, she gains extra weight: "[m]en's eyes no longer pursued her curves" (21), and she understands her father's obsession with cleanliness: "For her father, conquering the *microbios* required unflagging vigilance" (22). The creation of a sterile and protected space, devoid of uncontrolled experience and pre-assigned meaning, becomes her strategy of survival.

The New York winter symbolizes the loneliness and frigidity of the exilic condition. However, as the title of this section of the book suggests, "Imagining Winter," this absence of homelike warmth conveys a different meaning to Lourdes: it signifies the absence of pain and suffering. In this case, exile is imagined to represent safety and the promise of recovery, and as a space of absence it becomes a potential for creation of new meanings and beginnings. Lourdes considers herself lucky for being given this space and its new possibilities: "Immigration has redefined her. Unlike her husband, she welcomes her adopted language, its possibilities for reinvention" (73). Even the absence of her native language produces a new linguistic territory where she can redefine and recreate her identity. She enters a different signifying frame, which allows her to reinvent herself through the distance from the originary sign.

Lourdes' acculturation and assimilation become defense mechanisms, allowing her to repress the "archaic self" associated with trauma and suffering. Her wanting "no part of Cuba" (73) is her rejection of the troubling past and the disquieting pain. America allows her to live in one time frame and create an ideal, yet false, self-image: a successful business owner who has transcended her past obstacles and has a promising future. She follows the classic

classic American ideal of the self-made woman, adopting the mainstream culture and pursuing the American Dream. Lourdes' single task, as she sees it in exile, is to move forward on her own and never turn back.

However, the narrative suggests that Lourdes recognizes the difficulty of this task and the impossibility of its completion: "She ponders the transmigrations from the southern latitudes, the millions moving north. What happens to their languages? The warm burial grounds they leave behind? What of their passions lying stiff and untranslated in their breasts?" (73). This loss of the primordial self and the untranslatability of inner reality will haunt Lourdes in spite of her profound denial. Through the well-guarded walls of protection, the suppressed memories and longing ultimately manage to seep in: "Lourdes turns south. Everything, it seems is going south. The smoke from the leaning chimneys in New Jersey. A reverse formation of sparrows. The pockmarked ships headed for Panama. The torpid river itself" (24). Her father's visit to the US stirs up the unwanted memories and brings disquietude. She looks for solace in pecan sticky buns and insatiable sex with her husband, trying to block the resurfaced pain through escapist pleasures.

Although assimilation offers Lourdes possibilities for self-invention, it does not eliminate her trauma. It only temporarily shuts out the inner conflict while offering an illusion of fulfillment achieved through a successful acculturation. With the portrayal of Lourdes Puente's character, *Dreaming in Cuban* emphasizes that even when exile offers personal security and fulfillment, it cannot erase the traumatic past. While "The Cariboo Café" presents the problematics of exilic positioning through the unfulfilled dream of recuperation, *Dreaming in Cuban* foregrounds it through the disruption of the present recuperation: the haunting traumatic experience always returns to destabilize Lourdes' enunciative present. The novel stresses that this is why it is of fundamental importance to recognize the necessity of negotiating the past trauma in the space of exile. The self-definition and positioning in the new location cannot be fully achieved without an effort to heal the past injury. As both Viramontes and García show, the exilic "project of restoration" cannot succeed unless the exile's position-

ing is understood in terms of unhealed traumas in multiple locations.

### Transforming Absence into Presence

Julia Alvarez's novel *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1992) exposes different degrees of trauma caused by an exilic displacement. Focusing on the process of acculturation, it tells a story of a Dominican family who leaves its home because of the father's involvement in the resistance movement. After a planned overthrow of Trujillo's government falls short, the García family escapes to the US before a threat of retaliation. The new country offers them security, but the memory of political terror comes to haunt the father: "[f]or the rest of his life he will be haunted by blood in the streets and late night disappearances" (146). As the story progresses, the reader learns that Carlos García lost his brothers and friends to the dictator and was himself on the list for execution. Because of his political engagement, he was followed and his house was continuously watched.

The narrative development of Carlos García's character illuminates one aspect of the exilic existence, allowing the author to impart that the consequences of living in political terror are far reaching. The father's fear of persecution does not disappear with geographic removal; in the US it progresses into an obsession: he cringes at the sight of black Volkswagens or anybody in uniform, imagining the Dominican secret police following him everywhere. The scenes describing the haunting past, found throughout the novel, demonstrate an internalization of violence and a consequent paranoia. For example, the violence on the Dominican streets is superimposed on the American reality: even the person giving out parking tickets, or a museum guard, looks suspicious to Carlos García. As in "The Cariboo Café," two realities merge in the victim's psyche since the fear of political violence ceases to be contained within national boundaries. The self is forever violated, and the trauma does not diminish with distance. Thus, the presupposed safety of exile becomes destabilized and ruptured.

The major part of the novel is set in the "post-exile" years, after the fall of the Trujillo regime. Technically, the Garcías are not in exile any longer: they could finally return home. However, the

author uses this situation to call attention to the complexity of the meaning of exile: the return may be physically possible but not necessarily psychologically attainable, even though the physical danger has been removed. The Garcías manage to go back to their homeland after the fall of the regime, but they never stay for good. After three years in the US and the strong desire of the whole family to go back home, Carlos takes the first trip “for a trial visit” (107) but returns discouraged by the continuing political instability: “It is no hope for the Island. I will become *un dominican-york*” (107). The narrative does not fully describe his first trip back and his experience of the long desired return. However, this narrative silence reflects the feeling of disappointment at the impossibility of such a return, signifying an absence of completion and a lack of closure. Later on, the García children go to the island for summer visits, and in spite of their initial homesickness—“we sisters wailed and paled, whining to go home” (107)—they learn that the Dominican Republic does not signify home any longer: after a few years in the US and their quick acculturation, “Island was old hat” (108). The mother slowly adjusts to American life too, finding more personal freedom and affirmation in the new country. The father still feels out place in the US, but after his first trip and subsequent disappointment he at last realizes the impossibility of a complete return. With this narrative turn, the author communicates that while temporary returns to the originary place soothe, to some extent, the pain of physical dislocation, they also reveal the illusion of a return to the idealized past.

While the novel demonstrates that exile has a universal meaning of physical and mental displacement, it also makes clear that this universality is mediated by specific individual and social circumstances. Although, in the beginning, the life in the new country is hard and painful for the entire García family, the patterns of adjustment differ according to age and gender. The younger generation embraces assimilation in order to fit in their peers’ world, while the older generation resists assimilation in order to maintain their original cultural identity. While the male experience of exile continues to be debilitating and frustrating, the female experience of exile becomes more positive and affirming. The García girls quickly adjust to the American mainstream, which

consequently distances them from their Dominican roots. Their mother opposes their Americanization only at first since later she herself adopts some new practices: she becomes more emancipated and self-reliant, “dreaming of a bigger-than-family-size life for herself” (116). While her husband still debates whether to move back to the Dominican Republic, she is determined to stay: “But Laura had gotten used to the life here. She did not want to go back to the old country where, *de la Torre* or not, she was only a wife and a mother (and a failed one at that, since she had never provided the required son). Better an independent nobody than a high-class house slave” (143).

However, in spite of their relative immigrant hardships, women are portrayed as experiencing affirmation and emancipation in terms of their gender consciousness. The possibility of articulating themselves outside of the domestic space gives them a feeling of independence and recognition. They transcend the roles of devoted wives, mothers, and daughters and are able to develop their own careers and interests. Laura García eagerly embraces opportunities for more education and gains more confidence in her intellectual skills. The possibility of women’s independence becomes the determining factor for her positive experience of exile.

This narrative development clearly asserts that in spite of the conditions of absence and annihilation, exile also carries a potential of presence and affirmation. In the case of female experience, marginalization and physical dislocation become negotiated more easily if the space of exile offers emancipation and recognition. In her analysis of Latin American women writers in exile, Amy Kaminsky emphasizes that women too suffer in exile, but their advantage in exile primarily rests in their [relative] freedom from “the oppressive sexism of the home culture” (39).

In this light, it is home rather than exile that is perceived as a place of absence and annihilation. Its mechanisms of subordination and confinement parallel paradoxically a condition of exile. Besides seeing the Dominican concept of social class as limiting and deluding, Laura feels degraded and marginalized by the patriarchal concept of maleness. She suffers from the lack of recognition for her motherhood because she “continuously fails” to bear a son. Even her husband is displeased, as manifested when he jokes about “his harem of four girls” (26) and boasts that “good



bulls sire cows" (40). His macho sentiments are revealed in an episode where he visits his first-born and long awaited grandson and devotes all attention to him while ignoring his sister. Along with gender discrimination, Carlos exhibits racial preferences: "All the Caribbean fondness for a male heir and for Nordic looks had surfaced" (27). It is this "Caribbean fondness for males," a regionally acculturated patriarchy, that constructs home as a space of absence and marginalization for women, while it reaffirms the power and control granted to men. Its absence in the space of exile leaves Carlos disempowered while it liberates his wife and daughters.

The novel maintains that when in exile in a less male-dominated country than their own, men feel disempowered due to the lack of patronizing patriarchal codes and strict class hierarchy; on the other hand, the less pervasive presence of patriarchy allows women to gain a liberating experience. The more patriarchal social norms guarantee agency and recognition to men, as their regulatory protocols position women in limited and unrecognized roles. Julia Alvarez does not imply that US society is rid of traditional patriarchal norms, but she does maintain that women's agency and emancipation are more pronounced in America than in the strongly macho societies.

Alvarez's novel demonstrates that in women's experience the exilic marginality can be transformed to signify female empowerment. By allowing an easier access to female articulation, visibility, and agency, the exilic absence can provide some form of presence. However, its alienating aspect may not be completely overcome since other dimensions of the exilic experience may persist as annihilating and debilitating, as shown in Helena María Viramontes' and Cristina García's narratives. It also needs to be stressed that exile into strongly patriarchal countries does not carry a potential for emancipation. In that case, women become doubly marginalized: as exiles and as women.

In men's experience, exile becomes a site of disempowerment because it strips male immigrants of agency and phallic presence. It symbolizes emasculation, or, as Amy Kaminsky notes, feminization. Kaminsky connects exile to femininity, noting that the condition of exile and the condition of women in patriarchy are

alike and “both occur with striking frequency, often in the same place” (29). Both conditions signify marginality, lack of agency, and invisibility. As the novel shows, for Carlos García exile is defined by what is missing: male power and recognition; while for his wife and daughters it is defined by what it contains: female emancipation and recognition. This paradoxical condition where absence becomes presence stands again as a very specific exemplification of the annihilating power of patriarchy: the absence of male domination opens a space for female presence.

Throughout the novel, the dialectics of absence and presence in relation to exile and home takes on a non-traditional signification in the context of female experience: exile carries a potential of presence, while home contains absence and marginality. When translated into feminist terminology, exile relates to the public sphere, where it is often easier to realize emancipation, while home is strongly connected to the private sphere, where women become defined only in the domestic context. This division of space does not necessarily always have the same dynamics: the public space/exile is not at all times emancipatory for women, and the private sphere/home is not always confining. However, in this text they are maintained in such correlations.

Revealing the double-encoded meaning of exilic absence, Alvarez’s novel testifies to the complexity of existence in exile. Like the two previous narratives, it foregrounds that exile represents a constant negotiation between two locations, two temporal frames, and two identities experienced in terms of gender, class, age, and nationality. In both a male and a female context, the former location of home is re-experienced in reference to the new place, and living in exile becomes a process of new-identity-acquisition. The “death of the person one has become in a particular context” is inevitably conditioned by the interplay between one’s psychic reality and intersecting socio-political conditions.

### **A Mutable and Paradoxical Condition**

The complexity and the paradox of exile are manifested through different configurations of the exilic absence. As seen in the discussed Latina narratives, the absence can be both debilitating and liberating depending on how it is constructed. When it repre-

sents an enforced separation from home, a subsequent uprootedness, and a social marginalization, it is experienced as limiting and oppressive. On the other hand, when the exilic absence represents absence of violence and authoritative control, whether domestic or public, it acquires positive connotations.

In "The Cariboo Café," the condition of exile is presented as a state of uprootedness, non-belonging, and psychic fragmentation as the life of the exiled Central American woman is infused with a nostalgic memory of the past reality and a desire to return home. *Dreaming in Cuban* departs from the traditional notion of exile as a place of absence and nostalgia for home through the projection of exilic absence as a desired distance from the source of trauma. Focusing on the gendered experience of exile, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* diversifies the meaning of exilic absence by interpreting it as a lack of patriarchal oppression: exile in this text is portrayed as a space of potential female emancipation and self-affirmation.

The three Latina texts investigate multiple and fluid configurations of "presence-in-absence" by placing their narrative protagonists in a perpetual negotiation between home and exile, past and present, memory and forgetting, acculturation and marginalization, and the public and the private. They demonstrate that this negotiation carries further ambiguities and paradoxes: home can signify both safety and danger, acculturation means both gain and loss, memory can haunt and amend, while the public and private spaces lose distinctness.

Depicting different ways of confronting exilic absence and trauma, the three texts foreground that exile must be approached as a complex and ambiguous condition that is governed by shifting social categories and individualized psychological reactions, a dynamic process that requires healing of the ruptured connections with the individual and the communal self.

### Notes

1. In order to describe psychological responses to trauma and exile, I use a range of terms borrowed from psychoanalysis: cathexis as energy attached to an object/representation and used as a defensive strategy of investing in one process in order to facilitate repression of another; the return of the repressed as the involuntary eruption into consciousness of unacceptable derivatives of the primary impulse; defense mechanism as a technique used to protect the ego from neurosis or emotional disturbance; repression as a process, or defense mechanism, by which an unacceptable idea, feeling, or impulse is rendered unconscious or removed from awareness; denial as a defense mechanism used to block painful or depressive feelings and to deny the inner significance of experience. For more, see Laplanche's *Language of Psycho-analysis*.

2. Mothers of the disappeared children in Argentina (*Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*) organized silent protests against the regime in defiance of orders prohibiting public demonstrations. In this way, they focused the issue of the disappeared into the public and, as Jean Franco notes, "redefined the social space" (503). The absence of this kind of communal resistance in "The Cariboo Café" can be interpreted as a public paralysis effected by the regime.

3. The semantic exchange between "kidnapping" and "disappearing" in this story reinforces the idea of the fundamental repressiveness of the state apparatus. While the government authorities in Central America cover up the violence of their system by categorizing the kidnapped/murdered civilians as "the disappeared," the US immigration authorities justify their brutality against refugees by criminalizing them as "kidnappers."

4. Althusser draws from the Marxist-Leninist theory that defines the state as a "machine of repression" which functions in the interest of the ruling classes. In addition to the repressive state apparatus, Althusser identifies another reality that supports the state: the ideological state apparatuses (ISA), which are distinct and specialized institutions belonging to the private domain and functioning predominantly by ideology. In his essay on ISA, Althusser analyzes connections between state power and ISA and discusses the specific role of ISA in the class struggle.

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