

**REIMAGINING THE STAGES OF EXILE:
CARMEN AGUIRRE'S *THE REFUGEE HOTEL***

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the process of translating a personal experience of refuge into a theatre form in the country of exile. The study focuses on *The Refugee Hotel* by Chilean-Canadian playwright Carmen Aguirre, a biographical drama about her exile to Canada at the age of six after the *coup d'état* in Chile in 1973. Aguirre is a prime example of a refugee artist who has transposed her personal experience of exile into her drama, referencing not only her own story and the history of Chile, but also contributing to the history of her country of exile. In the first chapter I attempt to understand the exilic experience in relation to art, with the objective of placing Carmen Aguirre's biography and work within the confines of previous literature on exile artistry and introducing her perspectives on themes of home and exile. In the second chapter I observe the challenges of dramatizing a refugee testimony, and identify the ways in which theatre as an artistic medium can provide unique ways of healing and sharing the experience of exile. The final chapter is focused on the analysis of *The Refugee Hotel* and the specific ways in which Aguirre experiments with theatrical elements in this play in order to offer a diverse representation of the exilic experience to a diverse Canadian audience. With this analysis of Aguirre's *oeuvre* I aim to reflect on the profound complexity of diaspora and how theatre as an artistic medium can offer a stage on which to share and heal the internal, geographical and cultural fragmentations born from displacement.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Table of Contents	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Dedication	v
Introduction	1
Chapter 1. <i>Inhabiting Exile: Carmen Aguirre as Refugee and Artist</i>	6
Chapter 2. <i>Dramatizing Refugee Stories: Empowering Testimony Through Theatre</i> <i>Aesthetics</i>	22
Chapter 3 <i>Chilean Exile on the Canadian Stage: The Refugee Hotel</i>	38
Conclusions	57
Works Cited	61

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To my parents, Gualu y Luis

And my brother, Pollo.

You are my home.

Introduction

Journeys from a place of home into an uncertain state of displacement form a timeless tide in the history of humanity. For thousands of years people have been forced to leave their homes and relocate in foreign territory, faced with the task of reconstructing their lives from the remnants of their loss. Today, whole nations and continents are populated by millions of individuals in search of a new home, entire communities stuck between borders, living in margins. Yet this migrant and diasporic flow of bodies affects not only the demographics of the world we inhabit; it has become a prime force in the reformulation of cultures and national identities. Artists in exile who have, through the force of imposed circumstances, learned to navigate between worlds, to cross old borders and create new ones, to become translators of language, culture and ethnicity, and to reflect on the homelessness and nostalgia of diaspora, offer us the opportunity to enter the ambiguous space of the exile and in it discover our own notions of home and fears of displacement. The objective of this study is to expose the richness of Chilean-Canadian playwright Carmen Aguirre's work as an exiled artist in Canada in order to further understand the subtleties and ambiguities implied in materializing the transitory and often times intangible exilic experience into a theatrical form.

Much of the complexity behind the exilic experience is related to what Silvija Jestrovic and Yana Meerzon refer to as "the contrasts and clashes between an immigrant's desire and actual experience, each of which helps to shape a communal body of the marginalized and of the displaced," what the authors call the *exilic collective* (1). The immigrant's desire, or *exilic imaginary*, contemplates the ways in which the exile reimagines the past or presumes the future, while the *exilic collective* considers the distance between these imaginings and the actual physical experience of displacement. The collectivity of this experience is essential to the refugee because much of the exile's conflict relates to a search for home that stems from a desire to belong, to be part of a community, whether this be a nation, an ethnic group or a family.

Svetlana Boym suggests that “what is important for the national imagination is not history, but biography, not scientific facts, but collective myths” (511). My decision to focus this study on the works of a single playwright has to do with Boym’s invitation to better understand a community by examining the lives of those who integrate it. Carmen Aguirre’s work is, first and foremost, representative of herself, her experience as an exile, an immigrant and a theatre artist. Although her work (like that of any artist) is centered in her individual interpretation of an experience, her plays are also filled with echoes of the history of two continents, the political conflicts that governed a vast part of the twentieth century, and the universal experience of exile. Performance, in this case, serves as a vehicle towards materializing exile by granting it a physical space and inhabiting it with moving bodies that serve as “cultural brokers” (Rivera-Servera and Young, 11) between the exile’s testimony and a theatre audience. According to Jestrovic and Meerzon, “theatricalizations of space and identity, as well as the materiality of the exilic experience in its own performativity, serve to undercut the vagueness and artifice inherent in [...] ‘exile’” (7). By focusing on Aguirre’s dramatic explorations of exile I intend to reflect upon the broader implications of staging a refugee experience, while at the same offer a thorough reading of the ways in which her plays speak of her specific Latina-Canadian experience as both exile and theatre artist.

In my first chapter I attempt to understand the exilic in relation to art, with the objective of placing Carmen Aguirre’s biography and work within the confines of previous literature on exile artistry, as well as introduce her perspective on themes of home and exile. I begin with a search for definitions, trying to formulate notions of ‘exile’ and ‘the refugee’ that consider both the challenges and ambiguities of these terms, while still allowing room for their study. In this formulation I rely most heavily on Edward Said’s *Reflections on Exile* and anthropologist Liisa Malkki’s work on refugee studies, while taking considerable notice of Jestrovic and Meerzon’s insistence on the importance of context and framing when considering these terms. I continue by

briefly explaining Canadian immigration policy in relation to Carmen Aguirre's exile in 1974, and use this connection to introduce the conditions of Aguirre's arrival in Canada. I then offer a brief narrative of her fascinating biography as exile, revolutionary and artist.

I continue by identifying shared qualities of exiled artistry in an attempt to better understand Aguirre's creative process. I observe how, similar to other exiled artists such as Japanese writer Taro Yashima and Chilean novelist Isabel Allende, Aguirre has played the role of artist as spokesman against the systems of oppression that generate exile. Considering, along with Said's *Reflections*, Svetlana Boym's study of exiled Russian novelists Shklovsky and Brodsky, I contemplate the richness of the exilic experience in an artistic context, and identify a tendency amongst artists in exile to "use alienation itself as a personal antibiotic against the ancestral disease of home in order to reimagine it, offering us new ways of thinking about home, politics and culture" (Boym, 513). Relying, as well, on Elie Wiesel's profound writings on the exilic experience, I go on to consider the risks that these advantages pose of romanticizing notions of home and exile that limit, rather than expand, our understanding of them. At this point I go directly to Aguirre's dramatic work¹ to illustrate how she avoids falling into said notions, and how she deals with the contradictions inherent in distance and nostalgia. Using Aguirre's reflection on borderlines published in *Times International* and Gloria Anzaldúa's work on borders, I observe the ways in which the exile creates new physical, social and cultural borders as part of a survival process that both shapes and questions new forms of identity and nationhood. From this observation I trace the intricate relationships among nationhood, xenophobia and displacement. I observe the risks that exile poses in the creation of harmful forms of nationalism and I exemplify the ways in which Aguirre identifies these risks in her plays. I make my final stop of this chapter at Aparna Dhawadker's study on theatre of diaspora in

¹ When considering Aguirre's work in the first and second chapters of this study, I refer only to the three plays previous to *The Refugee Hotel* (2010) in which she deals with her exilic experience. These are *Chile con Carne* (1995), *¿Qué Pasa with la Raza, eh?* (1999) and *The Trigger* (2005).

Canada in order to connect my findings on exiled artistry and Carmen Aguirre's perspective on themes of home and exile with the narrative and aesthetic implications of staging a refugee testimony for a diverse Canadian audience.

This, precisely, is the main focus of the second chapter. In it I observe the challenges of dramatizing a refugee testimony, and identify the ways in which theatre as an artistic medium can provide unique modes of healing and sharing the experience of exile. I begin by considering Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert's topography of a cross-cultural theatre praxis, and place Aguirre's work within this map in order to gain a better understanding of the objectives behind her plays and the ways in which these question and reshape culture. In the following section Julie Salverson and Rea Dennis' work on playback theatre becomes key in my study of the theatrical representation of trauma-based testimonies. Through these publications I observe how Aguirre's plays contain elements very similar to those used in playback theatre practice, both in form and content. I consider, for example, Aguirre's very particular representations of victimhood and the ways in which she avoids what Dennis refers to as "the dampening effects of empathy" (211), which become particularly evident in *The Trigger*, a play based on her personal experience as a rape victim. I then look at Aguirre's approach to representing a collective experience, and in this section I consider not only the community that Aguirre represents, but also her awareness of the community to which she plays. In her work she challenges what Salverson refers to as "paralysis of caution" (2008:251) and aims to transform her audience into active witnesses of testimony. In order to explore this further, I consider Roger Simon and Claudia Eppert's theory of witnessing, composed of three forms of attentiveness (acknowledgement, remembrance and consequence), and identify the ways in which Aguirre has considered these in the construction of her work in order to portray the diversity of an exiled community effectively to a diverse Canadian audience. By examining Aguirre's biography and *oeuvre* as an exiled artist in the first chapter, and the implications of dramatizing stories of trauma and displacement in the second, I have attempted to

set the groundwork for the analysis of what I consider the prime example of Aguirre's exile drama, *The Refugee Hotel*.

In this analysis, I begin by offering a short synopsis of the play and its characters. I then go on to discuss the importance of the process of remembrance to Aguirre's plays by observing the ways in which the "'said' (the marked, the evidential)" and the "'saying' (the transitive, the elusive, the performative moment)" (Levinas qtd. in Salverson 2008:247-8) feed and oppose each other in the retelling of testimony. Along these lines, I examine how Aguirre deals with collective memory in the play and, by considering Ric Knowles' analysis of Ahmed Ghazali's *The Sheep and The Whale*, I identify the significance to Aguirre's play of transmitting "orphaned memories" (Knowles, 2008:117) of muted communities. I then examine the ways in which Aguirre manipulates different narrative orders in her portrayal of the unique temporality of trauma, as well as her exploration of mimesis as "interpretive labour" rather than "illustration of truth" (Salverson, 1999:56) in her stimulating use of stage imagery to represent scenes of trauma. By briefly stopping at the controversial process of the play's first production, I consider the importance of body and ethnicity as signifiers in Aguirre's play, and go on to observe the ways in which she intertwines other forms of cultural codes in order to portray the duality of the migrant experience. In this last section, I examine the ways in which Aguirre juxtaposes English and Spanish in order to empower the exiled community while at the same time inviting her Canadian audience to share in the exilic experience. With this analysis of Aguirre's *oeuvre* I aim to reflect on the profound complexity of diaspora and how theatre can offer a communal forum on which to share the internal, geographical and cultural fragmentations born from displacement; and to show how, through the ability to testify and witness, we can make of the theatre a communal space in which to heal the open wounds of homelessness.

Chapter 1. *Inhabiting Exile: Carmen Aguirre as Refugee and Artist*

“To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.”
Simone Weil (qtd. in Said, 2000)

The magnitude of displaced immigration today makes it impossible to formulate an all-encompassing frame of reference through which to study the term ‘refugee’. In her mapping of refugees and displacement in an anthropological context, Liisa Malkki notes that “‘refugees’ do not constitute a naturally self-delimiting domain of anthropological knowledge. Forced population movements [...] involve people who, while all displaced, find themselves in qualitatively different situations and predicaments” (496). It is possible, however, to observe the diversity of factors that distinguish this type of migration from other somewhat similar forms, in an attempt to formulate a definition to be applied in this study. The first important distinction between refugees and other forms of migration is choice. In his *Reflections on Exile* Edward Said defines *émigrés* as all those who emigrate to a new country, and *expatriates* as those who decide to do so for social or political reasons. “Expatriates may share in the solitude and estrangement of exile, but they do not suffer under its rigid proscriptions” (181). In the case of the expatriate, choice is a possibility, one that is unavailable to exiles and refugees. Said further distinguishes these latter experiences by explaining that the refugee, a creation of the twentieth-century state, has a political connotation that “suggests large herds of innocent and bewildered people requiring urgent international assistance, whereas ‘exile’ carries with it [...] a touch of solitude and spirituality” (181). The refugee in Said’s view is conceived as part of a larger group of displaced persons living in a state of urgency that allows for neither reflection nor individuality, while the figure of the exile is delineated through the solitary and reflective qualities of an individual who outlives his banishment in a foreign land. Still, the refugee cannot be understood

simply as a member of a ‘herd’ in urgent search of international assistance, nor is the exile always the wise and solitary wanderer of alien nations. Connotations aside, the key distinction between these two concepts is historical: the refugee is a form which exile has taken in our modern political context, and as such, the two terms will be used interchangeably when referring to cases that fall within this context. Instead of trying to fit these cases into preset notions of exile, the very particular social and historical conditions that constitute them will determine the way in which refuge and exile are understood throughout this study. As Silvija Jestrovic and Yana Meerzon caution in their introduction to *Performance, Exile and ‘America’*:

“Exile” and “the exilic” only work as umbrella terms if they are used so as to make us acutely aware that there are different levels of exilic loss and pain, and no equal opportunities for experiencing *pleasure of exile* (Said, Lamming). In other words, the discourse on exile does not only concern issues of place and displacement, but also the framing of these categories along temporal and historical axes (4).

Refugee is a twentieth century concept that was not socially or legally conceived until after World War II. According to Malkki there is no ‘proto-refugee’ from which the modern conception of refugee stems (497). She explains that during WWII the administration of refugee camps became a “technology of power in the management of mass displacement” (498), encompassing the ability to manipulate the spatial relationship between groups of refugees, their living conditions, and the policies of their repatriation and resettlement. Under this optic the administration of displaced people was conceived as a military problem, and it was not until 1951, with the creation of the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), that refugees became primarily a humanitarian concern. The Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, devised that same year, offered the following definition:

The term ‘refugee’ shall apply to any person who...owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself to the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (qtd. in Malkki, 501)

Around the same time that the UNHCR was created, Canada adopted its first formal immigration policy in the 1952 Immigration Act, an act that primarily “promoted immigration for national economic ends and excluded social undesirables” (García y Griego, 122). In the 1960s Canada took a step back from its initial, highly discriminatory immigration tactic and incorporated the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees into the 1967 Immigration Act. This new system allowed for “universal admission based on skills, family unification and humanitarian considerations,” an immigration act in which the Canadian government “embraced the liberal principle of racial non-discrimination of immigrants and recognized an international obligation to provide refuge” (García y Griego, 123). Through this change of focus in immigration policy, Canada became one of the leading asylum-providing nations in the world.

In 1974, 218,465 immigrants landed on Canadian territory; amongst them was Chilean refugee Carmen Aguirre, age 6, who along with her mother, father and younger sister was forced to leave Chile after the military *coup d'état* in September of 1973. Her parents, both university professors, were fervent supporters of liberal President Salvador Allende, a condition that after the *coup* made them targets of political persecution by Chilean military forces. Allende had come to power in 1970 as the first democratically elected socialist president in Latin America. During his presidency, Allende attempted to lead “Chile’s unique experiment in making a socialist revolution by constitutional means” (Williamson, 505). In the midst of the Cold War, Allende’s policy of Chileanization of industry and land reform was seriously destabilized by the US government’s financial blockage and the lack of support from the Chilean right and capital-holding class, conditions that quickly led to economic crisis and general discontent. Three years into Allende’s presidential term, the Chilean military, led by Minister of War Augusto Pinochet, staged a *coup* against the President and opened the way to General Pinochet’s sixteen-year military dictatorship. Allende died in the Presidential Palace in Santiago during the *coup* and

within a year “the Chilean left had been broken at a cost of several thousand lives and the exodus from the country of some 30,000 supporters of Popular Unity” (Williamson, 505). Aguirre’s family was part of this left, and, like many other Chileans, had to leave the country if they were to remain alive. In her memoirs, Carmen Aguirre describes the moment she and her family became exiles:

We’d flown north, in the middle of the night, as people wept into their hankies. Someone had spread a Chilean flag and a banner of Allende in the aisle. When the pilot announced over the loudspeaker, “We have crossed the border into Peru. We are out of Chile,” the passengers, grown men and strong women, had cried even more loudly. Someone started singing the Chilean national anthem, and everyone joined in. My parents had put their arms around us and said, “You will never forget this. You. Will. Never. Forget.” Their faces were distorted from all the crying. (2011:10)

Five years after they had resettled in Canada, Aguirre’s mother and her new husband, Bob, took Carmen and her younger sister back to South America in an undercover mission as part of the underground resistance against Pinochet’s regime. During her remaining teenage years, Aguirre went back and forth between this secretive life in South America and life in Vancouver with her father. In 1985, at the age of 18, Aguirre joined the resistance herself and for the next four years was dedicated to smuggling goods across the Chilean border. In 1989 general elections were held in Chile and won by Christian Democrat candidate Patricio Aylwin, although General Pinochet remained Commander in Chief of the Chilean army until his arrest in 1998. In 1989 the Chilean resistance dissolved and Aguirre returned to Vancouver to pursue a career in theatre.

She trained as an actor at Langara College Studio 58 and has since then worked in theatre as actor, director and playwright, and performed in both film and television. In 1994 she founded the Latino Theatre Group, a community theatre workshop created by Latinos and focused on Latino issues. The LTG was developed along with Headlines Theatre, a Vancouver-based company that has taken the principles of Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed to create Theatre for Living, a theatre forum where communities question the oppressor-oppressed

binaries that govern the systems they inhabit. Aguirre's work as a playwright over the last twenty years has been closely related to sharing and retelling stories of trauma and oppression, and the process of connecting these stories to a heterogeneous community. In her work Aguirre reawakens forgotten or unheard episodes of a shared history, and in her drama gives identity and individuality to the anonymous subjects of such stories.

This claim for individuality is essential in the formulation of an artistic discourse in the context of exile. In her reflections on borderlines, Gloria Anzaldúa identifies the risk of disappearing between frontiers when the parts that constitute us (in the case of the exile, the abandoned home and the homeless present) never assimilate into a whole: "I have so internalized the borderland conflict that sometimes I feel like one cancels out the other and we are zero, nothing, no one" (85). Anzaldúa also identifies a tendency to become passive victim to a series of unwanted circumstances (in this case, displacement) that lead the individual to "not engage fully...not make full use of our faculties...to abnegate," and yet she recognizes that "there in front of us is the crossroads and choice: to feel a victim where someone else is in control and therefore responsible and to blame... or to feel strong, and, for the most part, in control" (43). Anzaldúa's invitation suggests that, despite the extremity of the circumstances in which the refugee exists, individuality and will are always present. Even when choices have been reduced to the minimum, there is always a margin in which to act (even if this action is simply the choice of adopting one or another attitude towards a thing or situation). This action, or lack thereof, proves, however small, the potentiality of choice. This perspective allows for the conception of the refugee as active agent, not merely as victim. The refugee, then, becomes empowered by her own ability to act as individual.

This process of re-empowerment can be traced when observing the work and practice of artists in exile. In 1943 Japanese artist Taro Yashima (born Atsushi Iwamatsu) published an autobiography titled *The New Sun*. After openly opposing his government during a time of war,

Yashima was granted political asylum in the United States, where he became a refugee in enemy territory while remaining an enemy in his homeland. Yashima's publication was an act of both defiance and gratitude towards the two countries between which he stood, and with it he "strived to convince Americans and Japanese of their mutual humanity" (Shibusawa, 258). More than sixty years later, Naoko Shibusawa reflects on the importance of Yashima's publication, and his role both as refugee and artist during a time of war.

Yashima came to believe that artists had an obligation to understand and bring greater awareness about the struggles of ordinary people. [...] The artists believed that they had to extract a power deep within the people to 'stop the militarism, the oppression, the fascism of our time.' (260)

Similarly to Yashima, Aguirre has shaped her career very close to the idea of the artist as a spokesperson against systems of oppression. In the 1999 LTG production *¿Qué pasa with La Raza, eh?* Aguirre introduces a young generation of Latino immigrants who have been exposed to such systems of oppression in their home countries, and as a result have emigrated to Canada. Sombra, a girl whose parents were tortured and killed in Guatemala during the 1980s, recognizes a young refugee, Julio, as the man responsible for her parents' disappearance. Following her interest in providing a voice for the disappeared (to whom the play is dedicated), Aguirre backdrops the confrontation between Sombra and Julio with images of real victims: "*Sombra's parents kissing, dancing, holding Sombra in their laps. If possible, use pictures of real disappeared people*" (Aguirre, 2000a:100). Aguirre, working with these themes many years after her exile, has experienced both the geographical and historical distance that has strengthened the art form through which she treats these topics.

Her 2005 play, *The Trigger*, tells of Aguirre's personal experience as a rape victim while living in Vancouver at the age of 13. Interviewing Aguirre for the *Victoria Times* after a reading of the play in 2008, Adrian Chamberlain asserts that she was able to "approach the subject of her rape dispassionately while creating *The Trigger*, as she had had time to heal. Aguirre felt

“neutral” about the crime and “doesn’t feel any strong emotions about the original experience” (Chamberlain). Although the play is not strictly about her refugee experience, it treats the oppressor-oppressed relationship and highlights her condition as an immigrant in Canada. Throughout the play she talks about her upbringing as part of a revolutionary, Latin American family, referencing the dreams and expectations her family constructed around her and that became faded or were lost whilst an exile in Canada:

I was raised to be a revolutionary. When I was born there was an unspoken vow: I would have the choices and opportunities none of my elders had had [...] And I started fantasizing at a very young age about who I would give my virginity to [...] The comrade in the struggle and in love would always be fighting revolutions – no, LEADING revolutions – all over Latin America and yet he would drop everything at the mere mention of my name [...] This is the man who I would give my virginity to and no one else would do. (Aguirre, 2008:28)

We know from the start of the play that in fact she lost her virginity to a rapist in a foreign land at the age of thirteen, giving way to the recurring feelings of inadequacy young Carmen experiences as an immigrant in Canada: “The hunters of the serial child rapist have daughters. I’m sure their daughters are not like me. I’m sure their daughters are squeaky clean and strawberry blond. I’m sure they wear alligator shirts in pastel tones. Their daughters are not dirty. Like me” (Aguirre, 2008:50). In her study of Latina Canadian drama, Jill Edmonson reads in Aguirre’s *The Trigger* not only a story about rape in its most literal form, but a testimony on the immigration experience: “There is a metaphoric element of rape among many immigrants: rape of their identities and of their dreams” (27).

The condition of exile has come to be seen by some artists as a privilege and a desired state, as it provides a plurality of vision unlike any other. “Isolation, solitude, alienation and uncertainty are necessary preconditions for ‘great art’ since it is distance and perspective that produce ‘vision’” (Kaplan qtd. in Malkki, 513). In some cases the idea of exile implies a solitude that allows for a more productive transmutation of the experience, a condition with which ‘home’ is not usually associated. But as Svetlana Boym points out in her study of Russian writers in exile, these associations sometimes lead to erroneous romanticizing of the exilic experience.

Exile cannot be treated as a mere metaphor – otherwise one could fall into the somewhat facile argument that every intellectual is always already a “spiritual exile.” Rather, it is the other way around: actual experience of exile offers an ultimate test to the writer’s metaphors and theories of estrangement. (514)

The refugee has experienced at least two settings and has learned to live simultaneously within the two in order to survive. She has become an outsider both to old and new realities, giving way to a unique conversation between cultures. Although these conditions may be shared by all exiles, only some find the means and will to communicate their experience through art.

According to Said, exiled artists elevate the status of all exiles by dignifying the experience.

“These and so many other exiled poets and writers lend dignity to a condition legislated to deny dignity- to deny an identity to people” (175). In an interview with Chilean novelist Isabel Allende (niece of the late President), Carmen Aguirre discusses the ways in which Allende has acted as an agent for the voiceless and the displaced through her work and status as an exiled artist. In this interview Aguirre confesses that Allende’s first novel, *The House of Spirits* (1992), granted her a bridge into the life and history of a country she could not return to: “Reading the history of my country through the eyes of four generations of women almost compensated for all the losses I had suffered” (Aguirre, 1999a).

Yet despite the uniqueness of the exile’s vision, by no means can the idea of exile or the condition of refugee be idealized or generalized as a romantic state. As Elie Wiesel points out in his essay *Longing for Home*, “except for romantic expatriates who worship literature, mainly their own, the effect of exile on its protagonists is basically negative” (23). Refugees, by definition, have been forcefully displaced from a place of home, and the significance of their loss cannot be forgotten just because of the magnitude of their achievements. Doing so would undermine the gravity of their condition and absolve the forces that cause millions to live in a state of diaspora. More pertinent to the purpose of this work, a biased understanding of the refugee’s condition based on an idealization of its nature would considerably limit its potential as

an object of study. According to Malkki, ideals of ‘home’ and ‘exile’ should be eliminated in order to allow for a more accurate reading of the refugee experience, both in anthropology and literary studies (514). In a similar manner, Shibusawa highlights the complexities involved in transnational art and identity creation, and argues that while Yashima’s story is proof of the richness of a transnational experience, it also “reminds us that transnationalism should not be equated or celebrated as cosmopolitan” (258).

In *The Trigger* Aguirre sets out to question idealized notions of exile by exposing the falseness behind the sense of security often equated with asylum. Through Father’s character, Aguirre exemplifies what Jestrovic and Meerzon refer to as the *exilic imaginary*, the “internal exile and an almost pleasurable dream of the remote and happier place” (1) that will inevitably conflict with the reality of physical exile. In the play, Father’s reaction to his daughter’s rape exposes his frustration and anger at the realization that despite the enormity of his efforts to find true asylum, there exists no ultimate place of safety for his family. “FATHER: What were you thinking? What were you thinking? ... I hate this fucking country I hate this fucking country I hate this fucking country ... Look at my girl, oh, God, look at my girl...” (Aguirre, 2008:38). His protest reveals a feeling of betrayal by an imagined friend (Canada) who has not kept his promise to protect.

Just as Aguirre questions a false sense of security in the country of exile, she challenges idealized notions of home by reflecting on the complexity of her own experience. The nostalgia for home has a strong presence in all of Aguirre’s work, but in her treatment of this nostalgia she recognizes the complexity and contradictions inherent in the relationship between the exile and the abandoned home. In many of her plays, children play a central role both in the dramatic action and as characters who reflect deeply on notions of home and exile. This has to do, in part, with the fact that Aguirre emigrated when she was a child and most of her plays are highly autobiographical. Despite her biography, however, Aguirre’s treatment of testimony through

children's voices strongly echoes Elie Wiesel's observation that "children know things that adults have already forgotten. They know where home begins – inside certain gates – and where it ends: outside family doors. Children know that beyond home lies the frontier" (19). Eight-year old Manuelita, the protagonist of Aguirre's *Chile con Carne* (1995), tells of her experience as a Chilean exile in Canada during the mid-1970s. Throughout the play, Manuelita fantasizes about seeing her beloved grandmother again, with whom she has a very close relationship and sustains a heartfelt and frequent correspondence. At the end of the play, Manuelita learns of her grandmother's death. In Manuelita's description of her reaction to the news, Aguirre conveys the complexity of the protagonist's relationship with her country by tellingly combining the fractured reality of Manuelita's homeland with the profound affection that still connects her to that place of origin:

My mom phoned the Chilean consul and begged him to give her a twenty-four hour permit to go to Valparaíso to bury my grandmother. The consul said, "Over my dead body you fucking Communist bitch." I just sit here. Keeping Cedar company. My parents and the other adults always say we kids don't remember anything, but right now I'm on the train to Santiago with my grandmother and we're buying *churros* at the Cerro Santa Lucía... *Caballito blanco llévame de aquí, llévame a mi pueblo donde yo nací, tengo tengo tengo tú no tienes nada.* (Aguirre, 2000b:85)

Earlier in the play, Manuelita has received a letter from her Chilean school friend, Gabriela. Along with the letter, Gabriela has sent a postcard of Manuelita's hometown, Valparaíso. In the letter, Gabriela writes: "Valparaíso is the same as when you left it," to which Manuelita secretly responds (in a confession to her Barbie doll, Tania): "I wish she had sent me a picture of herself. I can barely remember what she looks like" (Aguirre, 2000:84). As much as her memories of home remain close to her heart, young Manuelita is already unintentionally leaving behind a good deal of her past life. As Elie Wiesel pointedly notes, "nostalgia can create heartwarming links in time but in space they are heartbreaking" (25). If she is to maintain the memory of her friend alive, Manuelita will need to reimagine Gabriela's features as a new, reinvented version of

the original, as she will have to do with many other aspects of her past that have slipped away from her memory and remain physically out of reach.

In this way the condition of exile is not merely a constant state of loss but a continuing process of transformation. A home is lost, as is a given identity or a sense of culture, and though they might never be recovered in their original form, they will be transformed and reformulated into new forms of home, identity and culture. When an individual or a group of individuals is displaced, they fall into the marginal space between borders, beyond where one world ends and another begins. “A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants” (Anzaldúa, 25). In this place of homelessness, the home that has been left behind frequently becomes romanticized as it remains the only point of origin on which to locate the self in the immensity of an endless world. The refugee may long for a sense of home but not necessarily desire to return to the life that was left behind. In order for home to exist, circumstances must allow for the safety and belonging that, in refugee cases, are no longer possible. The home they once knew has ceased being home not only because it was abandoned, but because it can no longer act as sanctuary-- for if it could, it would never have been left in the first place. Even once it has become safe to return, much of the home that was lost will remain in the past and, therefore, be impossible to access. “It is because I wish to go back in the past that the present keeps me imprisoned” (Wiesel, 23). In Aguirre’s conversation with her, Isabel Allende touches upon Mario Benedetti’s idea of *des-exilio* (de-exile), the challenging process of returning home after years of exile: “it’s very hard to go back because you have changed, the country has changed, the world has changed” (Aguirre, 1999a).

The estrangement from one’s home and the strangeness of a new land leave the refugee submerged in endless space. In order to survive, the individual creates borders to contain this endless space and transform it into a concrete and habitable place. “Borders are set up to define

the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge” (Anzaldúa, 25). However temporary this new ‘home’ might be, the individual, having experienced a previous loss of home and knowing the vulnerability of all things, will be inclined to heartily protect whatever lies within these new spatial and cultural borders. In a short reflection on the significance of these borders published in the Canadian edition of *Time International*, Aguirre clearly identifies this development in her current context: “Vancouver is a city of borders, heavily guarded by language, culture, religion, class and race. There are no armed guards or documents to flash as you enter or leave a section of the city, but the borders are there all the same, as clear as the lines on a map” (Aguirre, 1999b). In a positive sense this need to own and belong allows the refugee to survive beyond their loss and inhabit a new life, what Boym calls “exilic self-fashioning and arts of survival” (514), but it might also degenerate into a sense of ownership of identity that can lead to the creation of harmful forms of nationalism that might culminate in new forms of exile. “All nationalisms in their early stages develop from a condition of estrangement” (Said, 176).

Going back to the origins of the refugee, it is important to keep in mind the circumstances under which the refugee is first categorized as a legal and social problem. Despite the shift from a military to a humanitarian approach established in the 1951 Geneva Convention, we must remember that our modern understanding of refugee was born during a time of war. When a group of countries is engaged in armed conflict, the displacement of their civilians into militarized camps reveals the deeply complex relation among the notions of nationhood, xenophobia and displacement. When studying a refugee experience it is essential to recognize the ways in which these factors affect the process of transference and the reformulation of the self. Malkki refers to Hannah Arendt’s 1951 study on totalitarianism as one of the most perceptive works of the time on the subject, in which “she explicitly traced the political and symbolic logics that had the effect of pathologizing and even criminalizing refugees” (502). Just

as the refugee may be defined through xenophobic or nationalistic sentiments, refugees often reproduce discriminating social behaviour based on similar prejudices. Said explains it in the following manner:

Exile is a jealous state [...] and it is in the drawing of lines around you and your compatriots that the least attractive aspects of being in exile emerge: an exaggerated sense of group solidarity, and a passionate hostility to outsiders, even those who may in fact be in the same predicament as you. (178)

Like Arendt, Manuelita's mother warns her daughter against this practice after Manuelita, unaware of its implications, shares with her parents a very prejudicial song about Chinese and Japanese immigrants that she has learned from a friend at school. "Don't you ever say that again. Don't you dare. We're just like them, Manuela del Carmen González Mancilla. We're just like them. We're not like the gringos here, we're like other immigrants. Don't you dare turn against your own kind" (Aguirre, 2000b:70).

In her reflection on borderlines, Aguirre fantasizes about the disappearance of the invisible lines that divide her city, while at the same time acknowledging that she's "pretty comfortable identifying as a Latina theatre artist, giving voice to a vibrant community full of fascinating stories, and I cling to my Chilean roots as I break new ground in Canada" (Aguirre, 1999b). In this scheme, displacement helps to both weaken and strengthen notions of nationhood by fracturing the homogeneity of the host country while empowering the romanticized image of an abandoned nation through what Knowles and Mündel call "compensatory nostalgia" (xv). Governed by a fear of losing their roots, Manuelita's mother in *Chile con Carne* forbids her eight-year old daughter to adapt to Canadian culture, ordering her to reinforce her Chilean self and avoid all forms of acculturation:

My mom always says we never get any furniture 'cause we're leaving next month, as soon as he [Pinochet] falls, she always says, the revolution will come and he will fall, he will fall, that's why we have to work hard, to make him fall, that's why you can't forget Manuelita don't ever forget, you are one hundred percent Chilean, Manuelita. Don't ever forget. You are a mix of Basque blood and Mapuche blood. Don't forget. Don't speak that ugly language, Manuelita, speak Spanish, speak Spanish, you are not Canadian, so don't even try it, speak your language, Manuelita, *now!!*" (Aguirre, 2000b:69)

In this example, Canada becomes nothing more than a temporary, neutral space devoid of value as a nation subject, and is powerfully upstaged by the solid pride of being Chilean and the reinforcement of Chilean nationhood.

In her portrayal of the Latino community in *¿Qué pasa with la Raza, eh?* Aguirre touches upon this issue through the character of Skin, a young Latina who is constantly attempting to define herself despite an internal and external bicultural conflict. Although she has lived most of her life in Canada, she refuses to be Canadian, and instead fights this influence by aggressively reinforcing her difference as a Latina:

Skin: How many times do I have to tell you? How many times? I, no no no, I renounced my Canadian citizen - don't mock me! I renounced my Canadian citizenship. I am not a fucking, I'm not gonna be suckered in, I'm not gonna be a part of, I'm not gonna be suckered in like you idiots to this imperialistic, capitalistic, racist, whitewash, superiority complex country- (Aguirre, 2000a:69)

Skin's aggression embodies her conviction to remain an outsider in the country of exile in order to protect her origins from being diluted and deemed unworthy by the dominant culture. Her reaction can be read as a "defense strategy that the self uses to escape the agony of inadequacy" (Anzaldúa, 43). Skin's tone is also representative of Aguirre's own sharp style as a writer, clearly visible in her thematic choices and in the directness with which she goes about making them. According to Said, this style is common to many exiled artists. The refugee has not chosen her condition of exile, but she may well choose to remain different in the reformulation of a new world, and to make of this difference a discourse that results in the creation of objects of estrangement. Tainted with an inherent feeling of resentment against a forced fate, the refugee's work may draw attention to the "state of jealousy" Said refers to. The willful aggression or unpleasant assertiveness of a work of art may be part of the artist's intention to make an enemy of the witness in order to remain different from them. In observing the characteristics of such works, Said lists willfulness, exaggeration and overstatement as "methods for compelling the world to accept your vision--which you make more unacceptable because you are in fact

unwilling to have it accepted” (182). This suggests once more that the exilic experience should be understood through the complex web of disassociation and reassembly that constitutes the process of identity formation.

The refugee’s binary dominion of borders and space adds to the richness of vision that the exiled artist can possess, resulting from their ability to internally and physically break through barriers and negotiate different worlds. This negotiation gives way to unique interpretations and representations of space and placement in artistic contexts. In a study of theatre of diaspora in Canada, Aparna Dhawadker demonstrates this argument by suggesting that the theatre artist needs to undergo a process of detachment from their origins in order to then be able to reformulate their combined identity into a piece that represents the reality of diaspora, and not just recreates the reality of a lost home.

Original theatre develops in the diaspora only when it distances itself from the culture of origin and embraces the experience of residence in the host culture, with all its attendant problems of acculturation and identity. Without this detachment from origins, diaspora theatre can only *re-present* the culture of the nation, in expatriate plays about ‘home,’ local productions of plays from home, and full-scale imports. (Dharwadker, 136)

This necessary detachment mirrors a distance intrinsic to the experience of exile. As Boym suggests, the exiled artist can reproduce the acts of displacement and estrangement in order to offer a more authentic reinterpretation of the exilic experience: “By making things strange, the artist does not simply displace them from an everyday context into an artistic framework; he also helps to ‘return sensation’ to life itself, to reinvent the world, to experience it anew” (515).

As I have outlined in this chapter, the exilic experience is both a complex and transformative process that can only be understood through the particularity of each case. The cultural, political and social conditions that create displacement in our modern world are, to different extents, linked to notions of nationhood that affect the ways in which the refugee reformulates her own identity in a foreign land, and consequently, the ways in which these heterogeneous experiences question and reshape national identities. Stranded in the unfamiliar

space of displacement, the exile must create physical and cultural borders in order to generate a place to inhabit, to call their home (however temporary), and many times these survival mechanisms can culminate in harmful forms of isolation and nationalism. Yet borders, as Richard Sennett pointedly attests, provide “a site of exchange as well as of separation” (Sennett, 231). In this way, Aguirre’s complex biography has allowed her, as Dhawadker notes, to “embrace the experience of residence in the host culture,” and her dramatic *oeuvre* is a result of the ways Chilean and Canadian cultures are interwoven inside of her. Although Aguirre’s work is filled with Latino references and themes, she nonetheless writes primarily for a Canadian audience (with all the cultural heterogeneity that such an audience implies), maintaining a style that is accessible to those who do not necessarily share her Latino roots. Her ability to oscillate between languages and cultural references in her personal life is a determining factor in the multifaceted style and construction of her drama. Equally, Aguirre’s themes of refuge and her interest in exploring theatrical representations of her personal experience within systems of oppression permeate her work with factors commonly connected to exile artistry, such as an attempt to formulate less idealized notions of home and exile, a deep understanding of the importance and risks of borderlines, and the ways in which exile determines and affects concepts of nationhood. In this way Aguirre’s drama is deeply intertwined with her unique biography as a young exile and a growing artist, both in her thematic choices and in the layered components of her plays. In the following chapter I will look at Aguirre’s most significant dramas written prior to *The Refugee Hotel* in an attempt to understand the ways in which she has explored her biography as an exile in a theatrical medium, and the creative process that led to the creation of her most recent play.

Chapter 2. *Dramatizing Refugee Stories: Empowering Testimony Through Theatre Aesthetics*

“We must not surrender to fear, but surrender to life because life itself never, ever surrenders.”
The Trigger (Aguirre, 2008:48)

Like exile, culture is a dynamic system that cannot be viewed as a set concept, but rather must be seen as an always-changing process of transformation. Culture creates social constructs and institutions at the same time that it is transformed by them, and the crossing of cultural codes in today’s world is constantly reformulating personal, national and global identities. The aesthetic, narrative and witnessing concerns of the representation of the refugee’s process of transference and reformulation of the self are a prime expression of the fluctuating nature of the global cultural system of which we are a part. The forms through which different cultural experiences can be crossed onstage are mapped by Lo and Gilbert in their topography of a cross-cultural theatre praxis. Lo and Gilbert’s topography provides an essential starting point to the study of what results from the crossing of cultural codes in a theatrical context, and the ways this product has reshaped culture.

In this categorization the praxis is divided into three main rubrics: Postcolonial Theatre, Intercultural Theatre and Multicultural Theatre. The first type is concerned with “a historical and a discursive relation to imperialism” (35), and articulates these concerns either in a *syncretic* form, in which elements from different cultures are integrated to create a discourse, or *nonsyncretic* form, in which cultures are presented separately. Intercultural Theatre is a type of theatre in which different cultures and traditions are intentionally conjoined, a type divided further by Lo and Gilbert into *transcultural theatre*, *intracultural theatre* and *extracultural theatre*. *Transcultural theatre* is a form in which the director aspires to a universal codification

derived from the mixture of different traditions, which “aims to transcend culture-specific codification” (37); *intracultural theatre* focuses on cultural encounters within different regions of a nation-state; while *extracultural theatre*, in some ways its opposite, aims to combine cultural codes on a more global scale, containing “theatre exchanges that are conducted along a West-East and North-South axis” (38).

Although there is evidence of both Postcolonial and Intercultural interests in her drama, Aguirre’s work is not primarily focused on the effects of imperialism, as Postcolonial Theatre would suggest, nor does she predominantly intend to juxtapose different performance traditions into an Intercultural Theatre experience. Aguirre’s treatment of multicultural activity and her active commentary on that experience most comfortably accommodate her drama within the category of Multicultural Theatre. Multicultural Theatre is divided into what the authors call small ‘m’ multicultural and big ‘M’ Multicultural. The first type refers to racially mixed performances that intend no commentary on cultural difference or the meanings that stem from crossing, while the second, Multicultural theatre, “is generally a counterdiscursive practice that aims to promote cultural diversity, access to cultural expression, and participation in the symbolic space of the national narrative” (33). Lo and Gilbert divide Multicultural theatre into three possible forms: *ghetto theatre*, which is usually staged for and by a specific ethnic community and is monocultural in that sense; *community theatre*, which has the prime goal of creating change in a specific community; and *migrant theatre*, a form which speaks of the process of migration and adaptation, and which reflects on the cultural hybridity of the in-between experience. This hybridity is usually expressed in the aesthetics and narrative content of the performance, and it involves cross-cultural negotiations in its reception as well as its articulation (that is to say, it plays diversity to a diverse audience) (34).

Of the three forms of big ‘M’ Multicultural theatre, Aguirre’s work primarily gravitates towards the category of *migrant theatre*. Although some of her work has developed as

community theatre (especially with relation to LTG), in all the examples of her drama thus far considered, Aguirre explores the hybridity of the migrant experience both in her thematic and aesthetic choices, and her work is directed towards a diverse and equally multicultural audience (unlike the case of the monocultural *ghetto theatre* audience). Placing Aguirre's dramatic *oeuvre* into Lo and Gilbert's topography helps to understand some of the key objectives behind the work. Read through this lens, the cultural crossing in Aguirre's drama takes a clearer shape: it is intended to reach various audiences and to make these diverse audiences actively witness from different perspectives a migrant experience that, in one way or another, includes them all.

Theatrical representations of the refugee experience such as those formulated by Aguirre bring to the forefront conceptions of victimhood that are fundamental to the social systems that generate exile. Whether the theatre event is developed and performed by the exile or by a third party, understanding the roles of victim and witness as elements that affect the portrayal of the refugee testimony in live performance becomes essential to its study. The artist's relationship to loss and suffering can either predispose the audience to approach the refugee merely as victim, or create an encounter which allows for the refugee (and consequently, the audience) to become an active agent in a shared transformative experience. "The nomadic impulse, estrangement, and exilic ritual offer another chance of escaping the fate of a passive victim on the grand historical scene of the crime" (Boym, 528). Julie Salverson invites us to find a place for joy in the process of representing refugee stories, allowing for a wider variety of forms and interpretations of a condition that is invariably understood in a context of pain and ongoing loss, providing "the opportunity for a performance from where the relationship between suffering and survival might be negotiated" (2008:245). Similar to Salverson's estimation, in an interview about *The Trigger* Aguirre speaks of the relevance of mixing trauma with comedy when retelling a story of injury: "It is not at all difficult to marry the two...if you've been through something, it is very easy to

see the humour in it. Other people cannot, but most people are able to laugh or laugh at themselves in the midst of a traumatic situation – whether that trauma be rape or torture” (Helsen).

By drawing focus to survival as opposed to suffering, or to accomplishment as opposed to injustice, the artist can avoid falling into limited preconceptions of victimhood and suffering that can blunt the audience’s ability to respond freely to the experience. Aguirre’s most explicit experiment with concepts of victimhood is found in *The Trigger*, where she very consciously questions her own condition as victim as well as the rapist’s antagonist role. In the preface to the play Aguirre openly manifests this interest: “I had wanted to write a play about this experience for years, propelled by my anger at how often rape was portrayed in a titillating, shocking, gratuitous way on screen and stage. Rapists were evil and the victims were only that: victims” (Aguirre, 2008:13). When simplified relations of meaning such as ‘oppressor-oppressed’ are used to tell a complex story, even when the objective is to empower the ‘oppressed’ by telling their story, the binary universe in which the narrative is set annuls the subject’s power by creating what Joan Scott calls a “metaphor of visibility as literal transparency which denies the multiple realities and contradictions present in those who testify” (qtd. in Salverson, 1999:63). Many times these interpretations of the ‘injured’ help only to feed a binary conception of the world that maims the testifier’s chances of breaking free from a classification of weakness.

One of the things that Aguirre does in *The Trigger* is to suggest an uncommon interpretation of what identifying as a victim or pitying oneself might imply. Aguirre’s unique upbringing as part of a revolutionary family in exile helps to explain the conception of victimhood that 13-year old Carmen expresses in the play:

CARMEN: [...] The day of the rape is over and it is never spoken of again. Because speaking of it would mean you feel sorry for yourself, and in a Chilean family living in exile, that is strictly forbidden. One feels sorry for the executed. For the tortured. For the disappeared. One gives one’s life for the cause. But one never gives one’s life for oneself. That would be considered bourgeois. And bourgeois is the worst thing one can be. Is being bourgeois worse than being a rapist? Probably. (Aguirre, 2008:46)

In this reflection we understand why young Carmen automatically avoids identifying as a herself – the role of the victim is reserved for those who have suffered in the name of the cause, not to those who have suffered (or have been made to suffer) only for themselves. In the case of Carmen’s rape, self-identifying as a victim would be shameful. Her denial is the result of an ideological survival skill she has learned as part of her refugee experience and revolutionary upbringing. In this excerpt Aguirre is not only questioning social notions of the victim by vehemently refusing to label herself as one, but is also challenging an ideology that dehumanizes individuals by implying that dignity can only be equated to the victim when her suffering serves a greater cause. Having grown up in an ideologically charged environment, the protagonist of the story has a hard time finding a place for her shameful suffering as a rape victim because her rape it is not connected to a superior social cause through which to validate it. Young Carmen’s confusion aside, the 13-year old girl portrayed in *The Trigger* hardly fits the conception of the self-pitying, weak and powerless victim. Throughout the play the main character digs into an endless source of internal strength in order to recover from the trauma of rape, never allowing victimhood to take over: “I try to act normal, I try to tell [my boyfriend] that it’s nothing really and that we must not surrender to fear, but surrender to life because life itself never, ever surrenders” (Aguirre, 2008:48). This 13-year old girl has been raped, but she does not surrender to the condition of victim – instead she focuses on her condition as active agent of her own life.

The most effective way in which Aguirre questions the victim-rapist binary is not so much in young Carmen’s character as in the complex portrayal of HE, the rapist. To begin with, the same actor plays both CARMEN and HE, so that physical differences between the two characters become indistinct. Aguirre creates a similar ambiguity by mirroring this physical indefiniteness in the content of his character. This is very clear in her decision to introduce him through his role as the receiver with pain: “HE: The thing was to let others put out cigarettes on

the inner skin of the forearm [...] I was the king of pain. Not the giver. The receiver” (Aguirre, 2008:20). The decision to merge the two characters into one body also suggests that his interventions and his character are young Carmen’s own creation – the image of the aggressor that she has reinvented for herself – whose words speak more of Carmen’s experience than of the man himself. “HE: [...] You are convinced your life is not precious to me. You are deeply mistaken. Life is precious. My life is precious to you. Your dreams are peopled by my presence and not a day goes by without you thinking of me” (Aguirre, 2008:35). In the construction of his character the enemy seems to be embedded inside the victim, both parts played by the same body and uttered by the same voice. As soon as this association is made, the audience is invited to share young Carmen’s frustration at the inability to place the enemy – a new kind of enemy that, unlike those in her past she had been taught to watch out for, does not wear a uniform that makes him easy to identify. Because her conceptions of the victim and the aggressor fail to conform to set profiles, arranging these pieces in her internal reality becomes one of young Carmen’s predominant conflicts:

CARMEN: [...] I didn’t see the rapist but I don’t think he looks like the enemy. He’s not a military man, he’s not Pinochet, Rios Montt or Reagan. Or the fascist motherfuckers who tortured my uncle in Chile. He’s not the hunchback man or a Sasquatch. I didn’t see the rapist at all, yet I don’t think he looks like the enemy. If you were to see him having a picnic in the park you wouldn’t know he’s the enemy. Shit. Now I don’t know what the enemy looks like. (Aguirre, 2008:46)

By conveying the difficulty in drafting the rapist’s profile, Aguirre is making the danger that he poses much more imminent. “One doesn’t know what the enemy looks like, and he’s usually someone you didn’t expect, like you – a man catching a bus by the trail of a forest, a man who is a brilliant painter, a man who is a son, a brother, a lover, a colleague, a lonely little boy” (56). By blurring the physical and internal distinctions between victim and rapist, Aguirre portrays a system of abuse that does not separate the pieces that compose it, but instead weaves them into a conflict that exists internally just as much as it depends on external manifestations of aggression.

A theatre practice aimed at dealing with these implications in relation to refugee testimonies is playback theatre. In a playback theatre scenario, a group of actors and an audience retell their stories by combining live testimony and improvisation. In this form of performance, someone from the audience shares a personal story while choosing actors to represent her and other people in her story. After the story has been told, the group of actors develops an improvised representation of the person's narrative that is witnessed by the teller and the other audience members. Rea Dennis writes of her experience as part of a playback theatre group in asylum contexts. In her reflection she observes that placing the individual under the label of 'refugee' in a playback theatre narrative can sometimes neutralize personal identity and thus obstruct the possibility of new or unknown subject-audience encounters by reproducing known, and perhaps inaccurate, scenarios.

This builds a familiar, reductive scaffold that shores up the promise of mutual understanding and the redemptive power of empathy, a scaffold built on the necessary central positioning (and presence) of the *refugee* subject in relationship to a *non-refugee* witness (or audience) and a particular conception of representation. (Dennis, 212)

In order to avoid the "dampening effects of empathy" (211) in these contexts, Dennis argues that the focus on strong aesthetics is essential. The artist should aim to balance the content of the story with the aesthetic tools of theatre, resulting in an experience that will allow for different optics and interpretations of the story. The focus on strong aesthetics is a key aspect in Aguirre's dramatic reinterpretations of testimony. In her drama, traumatic experiences are frequently expressed through the constructions of theatrical moments that act as metaphors of the original experience, and that help create a distance that protects the audience from these dampening effects of empathy:

How would I stage it? How would I tell the story? Why would I tell this story? After a decade of chewing over these questions, the image of a young tree lying on its side came to me. A man was chopping an axe through its centre. A girl in a harness spun out of control above him. The sound of their breathing filled the space. The seed for *The Trigger* was planted. (Aguirre, 2008:13)

During the process of designing a theatrical form to fit a testimony, the artist must consider the active tension between aesthetics and accountability, and acknowledge the ways “representations transform experience” and similarly, “how transformation might distort or misrepresent experiences” (Shauman qtd. in Dennis, 213). In the case of playback theatre, the presence of the teller and the audience during the process of reinterpretation reminds the artist of their obligation to serve the original testimony, while at the same time allowing them to take the story into new landscapes by making the audience witness to their aesthetic exploration. This configuration also forces the artist to focus on the particularities of the testimony at hand and avoid telling the same refugee story every time, faced with the challenge of “playing culturally specific yet unfamiliar worlds” (Dennis, 211). A different kind of exchange is experienced, where the acts of listening and responding constitute a balance between obligation and freedom. When the artists assume the risks and vulnerability that the playback scenario implies, they are honouring the risks that the teller is taking by sharing their story. In a way the artists embody the refugee’s vulnerability and enact their ability to transform and create, instead of simply injecting their story into a predetermined discourse of ‘otherness’.

Although her drama does not make use of the same improvisational techniques, Aguirre offers a similar structure to that of playback theatre by prefacing her printed drama with a short testimony of the episode on which the play is based. She opens the prologue to *The Trigger* with the following introduction:

When I was thirteen I was raped by the Paper Bag Rapist. I was with my younger cousin at the time, and neither of us ever saw him – he used a paper bag to cover his own head or those of his victims. Not that we would have seen him anyway; a gun was held to the backs of our heads and if we turned around, he’d kill us. He only had one bullet left, he said, so he’d have to chop up my cousin while I watched, then shoot me. By the time the attack was over and we were left lying in the mud, we were both different people. (Aguirre, 2008:13)

The reader enters the play knowing the event that it was based on, and aware that what they are about to read is a dramatic reinterpretation of the testimony that prefaces the play. Although Aguirre resorts to her biography in the narratives of her drama, in her plays she also retells the

stories (directly and indirectly) of those involved in her life episodes. In this way Aguirre puts herself in a position similar to the playback theatre artists by acting as reteller of a communal story. The play is primarily about her experience, but in the last scene of *The Trigger* Aguirre mentions some of the other victims of the Paper Bag Rapist whom she met at his first parole hearing in 2001. HE recites names, dates and places of seven of his crimes, starting with “Jane. With her best friend. Bible camp. Abbotsford. April 26, 1978” (59) and closing with “You. With your cousin. The woods. University Hill Secondary School. University Endowment Lands. April 26, 1981” (60). Aguirre ends the play with the description of a conversation among the women, a conversation that, we could assume, is based on a real encounter.

The conversation revolves around our death fantasies for him. Laura doesn't have a death fantasy. Barb has a death fantasy: he is hung by his balls from the Burrard Street Bridge for all to see. Jane, well, she's from the Bible belt so she won't say exactly how she'd like to see him die. Andrea thinks he should just commit suicide. As for me, I have this fantasy that all of a sudden, from one day to the next, he starts feeling things. [...] And all his feelings of remorse, compassion, sadness, grief, anguish, devastation and bone-crushing pain come up like a flood. And his heart explodes with it all. No, I mean, literally. His heart explodes from feeling too much. (63)

By including the other women in the closing scene, Aguirre creates a sense of community around the event of rape, and by acknowledging their experiences, she recognizes the others as part of the event that served as the inspiration for the play. The women are portrayed as allies, as survivors – more than victims – who in coming together discover a profound gratitude embedded in the trauma: “Here's to meeting a rapist, not a murderer” (63).

In *¿Qué Pasa with La Raza, eh?* Aguirre offers a similar structure by including a prologue composed of a sequence of slides that introduce the ensemble and let the audience know that what they are about to see is based on their own stories:

Slide #2: “The Latino Theatre Group was created in 1994 to express our Latino selves through theatre”

[...]

Slide #4: “We're a soulful bunch, full of Latino pride and lots of stories to share with you”

Slide #5: “Like, did you know that none of us are actors? No! We're all like journalists and cashiers and child care workers and high school students and college students and computer geeks and so on and so on and so on”

Slide #6: “In other words we’re the real thing from the real Vancouver Latino community here to tell you some real stories based on our real selves.” (Aguirre, 2000a:55)

The play effectively illustrates how a wide range of refugee testimonies can be negotiated into a single dramatic narrative (although it must be said that not all the characters in the play are refugees – many have immigrated to Canada under different conditions and for different reasons). “Because the play is a composition of collective voices, the structure required innovation and openness to register multiple Latino Canadian experiences” (Haskell-Pallan, 114). In this negotiation, Aguirre and the rest of the ensemble express the heterogeneity of this experience in an attempt to move away from the “reductive scaffold” Dennis refers to, and thus offer a more inclusive interpretation of their community. In a way the players act as both witness and verifier to each other’s testimony, and in this process they oscillate between what makes them similar and what distinguishes them: “The bonds of ethnicity stretch and shrink in response to settings and situations. Among themselves, the characters in *La Raza* make distinctions about nationality while simultaneously celebrating brotherhood” (Edmonson, 17).

The character of Julio clearly shows how the heterogeneity of the refugee experience is captured in the play. With this character Aguirre touches once again on the ambiguity between victim and aggressor. Julio, like others in the play, has entered Canada under refugee status, but unlike them he has been playing on the opposite team. At the dissolution of the Guatemalan Civil War, human rights investigations outed many soldiers who had been involved in the violent persecution of the opposition. Afraid of being found and trailed, many like Julio applied for refugee status in order to leave Guatemala untouched. At the beginning of the play Julio has just arrived in Vancouver, and is introduced to the young Latino community by Rata, a Guatemalan immigrant who had been Julio’s childhood friend but who has had no contact with him since they were children. Amongst this group of Latinos is Sombra (a name that nicely echoes Anzaldúa’s metaphor of “life on the borders, life in the shadows” (19)), a young girl who came

to Canada after her parents were tortured and killed in Guatemala. Soon after she meets him, Sombra recognizes Julio as the man responsible for her parents' disappearance. Near the end of the play, she finally decides to expose him in front of the others:

RATA: No, tell me it's not the truth Julio. Tell me.

JULIO: They were terrorists, Rata. You are so fucking naïve. Who do you think saved Guatemala from communism? I did. People like me. We did the dirty work for you, Rata, so you could live in peace –

RATA: Holy fuck. You. You're a torturer. I –

SOMBRA: And you think you can walk among us, claiming to be a refugee, well, I am here to tell you that I offer you no impunity. (Aguirre, 2000a:99)

The confrontation that follows between Julio and Sombra stages a profound ideological debate that reveals the roots of the conflicts that generated abundant waves of exile in Latin America during the second half of the twentieth century. This dispute also reveals many of the dynamics and themes connected to the condition of exile. In his confession Julio refers to a profound kind of rejection to which refugees are subjected at home – in many ways a deeper form of rejection than that which they face when coming to a new country – that brands them as outsiders in their own land: “JULIO: I felt quite proud when the government gave me the task of getting rid of the scum of society. You. Terrorists, Communists. Lunatics” (98). Julio also manifests the placelessness and the threat of invisibility so often equated with the condition of the refugee by confessing that not even in the memory of the torturer will there be room for his victims: “In a few weeks, I will forget your face, your name, what you did, you will just be one of the others. So don't start to dream on. Soon enough, you will be nothing and you will never make it to the history books. You never existed” (99).

In her response to Julio, Sombra speaks against this threat of oblivion and appeals to the power of memory and humanity to reaffirm her identity: “You have taken everything away from me [...] You disappeared my parents, but they left me something. They left me my humanity. What have you left your children? [...] You should have killed us all. 'Cause I have my memory, I have my humanity, but not you. So in the end, we win” (100). Sombra's response questions

conceptions of victimhood by reversing common notions of loss – in Sombra’s estimation, Julio’s losses amount to much more than hers, even if he has taken “my mom and dad, my childhood, my *familia* [and] my country” (100). Along with this explicit contrast between characters, the play also admits more subtle differences that exist from testimony to testimony, such as the infinity of aspects that make each Latin American country unique, and the contrasting experiences of newcomers and older immigrants, as well as those who feel very satisfied in their new environment (such as Monica, who is delighted with the success of her Latin Lovers Anonymous Dating Service agency) and Skin, who is constantly battling against that same environment in the search for her identity. The amalgam of such distinct testimonies in *¿Qué Pasa with la Raza, eh?* not only challenges notions of victimhood in an exile context (as is clearly exemplified in Sombra’s response to Julio), but as a complex work of migrant theatre the play succeeds in exposing the heterogeneity of the community that it portrays.

Representation of trauma will sometimes expose uneven power relationships that may generate audience resistance to witness, particularly if audience members are in some way responsible for the unevenness of those relationships. In her study of Latina drama, Jill Edmonson refers to the witnessing implications of portraying rape according to Gilbert and Tompkins: “Theatrical images of sexual violence can have more than merely illustrative functions; in some instances they also challenge the voyeuristic gaze of the white spectator, inviting him/her to admit complicity in that violence” (qtd. in Edmonson, 27). Whether it be rape or the portrayal of other forms of abuse, in such cases the artist must be careful not to alienate a segment of the audience by exposing them, but instead should aim to create an atmosphere that encourages both sides to consider the other (again, avoid simplistic ‘oppressor-oppressed’ binaries). Ideally, a representation of trauma will incite the witness to question the different roles that he or she plays as an active subject in creating the power relations that lead to

trauma, and instead of being pre-categorized by the story, to experiment with the varying realms of victim, rescuer, spectator, accomplice and oppressor throughout the representation.

Manuelita in *Chile con Carne* is a good example of how one individual can inhabit several roles within the same system of discrimination. Near the beginning of the play Manuelita tells the audience about her experience at school as a newly landed Chilean refugee in Canada: “Everyone at school thinks I’m mute. So they always say things to me, ‘cause they know I’m not gonna talk back. ‘Fuck you, bitch,’ and ‘Hey, Speedy González, why don’t you speedy back home,’ and ‘You’re from Chile, chilli con carne’” (Aguirre, 2000b:63). In this example Manuelita is portrayed as the ostracized character, rejected by her classmates in great part due to her inability to communicate with them in their language. It would not be surprising, then, if Manuelita were to encounter a Spanish-speaking character in this new context, that she would want to reach out to someone with whom she shares a language. After seeing her feel out of place at school, Leslie offers Manuelita an encounter that might help her feel more comfortable. But when she goes to her friend Leslie’s house (whom she mistakenly refers to as Lassie – a name that seems less foreign than Leslie thanks to the world-famous golden retriever) and meets María, Leslie’s maid, Manuelita’s reaction is quite the opposite:

“This is María,” says Lassie. She’s a lady that looks like my mother. She’s wearing a black dress and an apron. She speaks to me in Spanish. She sounds different. María says she’s from Mexico. She says that Lassie told her about me, so Lassie brought me here to meet her. María asks me what part of Mexico I’m from. I say I’m not from Mexico. I’m from Chile. María laughs and says that Lassie thought I was from Mexico. My throat’s got a big knot in it. María’s really nice. But I hate her. I wish she would die. (66)

María represents everything that makes Manuelita feel ostracized at school – her skin colour, the language she speaks, a mother who works cleaning people’s houses – and because of this Manuelita’s automatic response is to reject María rather than become her ally. Manuelita’s case allows us to appreciate through the confession of an eight year-old girl how common it is to oscillate from role to role when expressing the dynamics of discrimination. The honesty and

transparency of Manuelita's testimony serves as an invitation to the audience to imagine their own journey through the different roles that create unevenness in our relationships.

'Paralysis of caution', according to Salverson, is a circumstance that arises from a contemporary need to justify our actions with critical arguments, and results in a shared fear to execute any movement that cannot be rationally justified. Sometimes ethical reasoning intended to avert appropriation or intrusion acts as an excuse to mask this "fear of making contact, of being rejected, of looking ridiculous" that reproduces "a crippling carefulness" (Salverson 2008:251). In *¿Qué Pasa con la Raza, eh?* the character Skin identifies a similar paralysis in her Canadian context that has brought about her resistance to full assimilation: "I don't feel like I'm part of the multicultural mosaic when I'm surrounded by bleeding hearts who suffer from amnesia about their own country and hide behind a mask of political correctness" (Aguirre, 2000a:76). In order to disable this paralysis, the theatre spectator must actively engage in the act of witnessing, an action that according to Roger Simon and Claudia Eppert's theory on witnessing is "neither natural nor inevitable" (qtd. in Salverson 2008:247). According to this theory, a spectator becomes witness (as opposed to remaining merely a consumer of the story) by experiencing three forms of attentiveness: acknowledgement, in which the material and historical significance of the story is recognized; remembrance, in which the observer becomes part of the act of bearing testimony; and consequence, in which an obligation to the knowledge gained is assumed. By actively engaging in these three stages of witnessing, the audience member becomes a responsive subject who is part of an encounter with the storytelling party and who, through this encounter, contributes a unique experience of witnessing to the performance.

As is characteristic of big 'M' Multicultural theatre, part of the goal in Aguirre's drama is to comment on the testifier's experience (in this case, the migrant experience) and generate a response to it. In all three of Aguirre's plays that have been examined thus far, there are moments in which the author invites the spectator to bear witness and appeals to the activation of

the three forms of attentiveness that Simon and Eppert cite. By developing her drama around known historical and social episodes such as the Chilean military dictatorship in the 1970s and 1980s, the waves of exiled immigrants that entered Canada during the second half of the twentieth century, and the well-known case of John Horace Oughton, the Paper Bag Rapist, Aguirre demonstrates the resonance and significance that these events still have. With the use of prefaces and her explicit inclusion of autobiographical content, Aguirre makes her audience part of her process of remembrance and leaves it to the spectator to either reject or accept the players' invitation to assume an active part in bearing witness to their story.

In her three major works previous to *The Refugee Hotel*, Aguirre considers notions of victimhood and bearing witness that are essential elements in the construction of a Multicultural migrant theatre experience. She directs her work towards a diverse audience, and similarly focuses on how this diversity is present in the systems of abuse that much of her testimony deals with. She identifies the need to appeal to her audience in a way that will be aesthetically appealing while at the same time avoid the creation of a simplified universe. Similar to a playback theatre practice, Aguirre's dramatic works explore the implications of telling other people's stories along with her own testimony, and the importance of recognizing individual testimonies as part of a shared history. Aguirre exposes the contrasts between differing experiences in similar contexts (such as the varying migrant experiences portrayed in *¿Qué Pasa with la Raza, eh?*), and also deals with the different roles that an individual can play in the construction of asymmetrical social dynamics.

By observing Aguirre's experience as refugee and artist in the first chapter of this study, and her dramatic exploration concerning themes of exile, victimhood and witnessing in the second chapter, I have attempted to set the groundwork for the analysis of *The Refugee Hotel* as the prime example of Aguirre's exile drama. Aguirre's biography and her process as an evolving theatre artist are essential elements when reading the layers that make up *The Refugee Hotel*. In

it, Aguirre deals again with her personal experience as a Chilean refugee in the 1970s in Canada – just as she does in *Chile con Carne* – but in this case she is not the central character of the piece. Instead, she combines the stories of those who emigrated with her to portray the experience of a community of exiles and the community that received them. In the play, Aguirre brings together distinct cultural elements in music, language and image, continuing to explore the crossing of cultures on stage while maintaining the focus on strong aesthetics that has been a central part in the construction of her work. In this way *The Refugee Hotel* becomes key to understanding Aguirre's long process of dramatizing exile.

Chapter 3: *Chilean Exile on the Canadian Stage: The Refugee Hotel*

“It takes courage to remember, it takes courage to forget. It takes a hero to do both.”
The Refugee Hotel (Aguirre, 2010:18)

The Refugee Hotel tells the story of eight Chilean refugees during their first week of asylum in Vancouver five months after the *coup d'état* in Chile. Flaca, a university professor who had joined the resistance two years previous to the beginning of the play, had been held hostage and tortured by the military until a week before her programmed execution, when she was granted permission to flee abroad with her family. Handcuffed to an airplane seat, she was reunited with her husband, Fat Jorge (who had also been taken into custody by the military, although he was not part of the resistance), and their two children, ten-year old Joselito and eight-year old Manuelita. Together, the family flew out of Chile and arrived at the refugee hotel in Vancouver, where the play begins. Throughout the play the family is joined by other refugees: Cristina, whose Mapuche family has been disappeared by the military; Isabel, who has been left mute by trauma; Manuel, who has been brutally tortured and crippled in a concentration camp near Antarctica; and Juan, who escaped from jail in Valparaíso and snuck out of Chile on a Swedish freighter that landed in Vancouver. The other three characters in the play, Pat Kelemen the Social Worker, Jackie the Receptionist, and activist Bill O'Neill, are all Canadian and play a key role both in the refugees' process of adaptation and in creating cultural contrast between the two groups. Carmen Aguirre is represented by Manuelita, who plays her part in the main action as an eight-year old girl but also guides us through the play as her adult self, observing and commenting on the action from outside the time and place of the fiction. With the use of a prologue where Adult Manuelita contextualizes the play and an epilogue where she tells us what became of each character, Aguirre makes remembrance a central theme –not only is it important

that the story is being told, but the act of remembering and retelling these testimonies becomes fundamental to the play.

Although the play is highly biographical, it is hard to know to what extent the story adheres to fact. The characters in *The Refugee Hotel* and the narrative of Aguirre's family testimony are widely present in her previous work, and in every case details change. In an article for *The Globe and Mail*, Michael Posner attests that "the central character of the play [Fat Jorge] is based on her uncle, a former political prisoner, tortured while in custody, who was the first Chilean refugee to arrive in Vancouver" (Posner). In *The Trigger* there is brief mention of this uncle: "I didn't see the rapist, but I don't think he looks like the enemy. He's not a military man, he's not Pinochet, Rios Montt or Reagan. Or the fascist motherfuckers who tortured my uncle in Chile" (2008:46). But in *Chile con Carne* it is Manuelita's father who draws the attention of the military:

That day, they took my dad away and my mom and grandma were crying. My dad didn't come back. A whole year later me, my mom, and my grandma went to Santiago in El Italiano's taxi. [...] We got to the airport and I looked for my dad everywhere 'cause my mom said he'd be there waiting for us. But I didn't see him. Finally we got on the big plane and we saw my dad. He looked different. He was really skinny. My mom climbed on him in front of everybody and my dad hugged her with his one arm. The other hand was handcuffed to the airplane seat. (2000b:67)

In one of her conversations with her husband in *The Refugee Hotel*, Flaca provides a very similar testimony regarding her flight from Chile and the time away from her family: "FLACA: I sat on the plane, handcuffed to the seat, my heart pounding. I hadn't seen you and the kids for so long. Months. Centuries. Lifetimes upon lifetimes. Then you came down the aisle and when I saw you I just..." (2010:51). This series of anecdotes exemplifies Aguirre's tendency to compile and reassemble life stories in such a way that they become a recurrent but indefinite part of her fiction. In a less evident manner, characters and facts from her previous works (such as Juan of the Chickens dancing cumbias on street corners to make a living, Allende's last speech at La Moneda Palace the day of the *coup*, or the boycotting of Chilean wine) dress the narrative and

climate of *The Refugee Hotel*. Whether or not these are all conscious choices made by the author, and despite the reasons behind the changes or the repetition of elements, Aguirre's play touches upon the complex process of remembering and retelling a communal story. By telling and retelling other people's stories (as well as her own), Aguirre inevitably changes the form and content of these stories, both intentionally and incidentally, as the distance between fact and representation wavers with each piece.

Aguirre's work is a clear example of how the "'said' (the marked, the evidential)" and the "'saying' (the transitive, the elusive, the performative moment)" (Levinas qtd. in Salverson 2008:247-48) interact in the retelling of a story by simultaneously feeding and opposing each other. The 'said' or the remembered testimony comes into existence once again in the form of the 'saying', which at the same time exists in service to the 'said,' yet will invariably transform it. This process of reproduction "invites us to develop a more embodied and imaginative rendering of the experience shared: the experience told, the experience of telling and the experience of listening or witnessing" (Dennis, 214), and to allow for this shared experience to exist through the acknowledgment of the limitations involved in storytelling and the impossibility of faithfully reproducing memories that by definition have already been modified in the act of remembrance. Authenticity, Lo and Gilbert caution, is a politically charged concept that does not stand in for truth but rather "registers, and responds to, hierarchies of power" (46). Representations of testimony bring into question the ownership of a story and the 'authenticity' of its reproduction. Although a story directly belongs to those who experienced it, it also constitutes part of a shared cultural memory and may be recovered and re-embodied by others. This is sometimes understood as 'false memory syndrome' (Martia Truken qtd. in Knowles 2008:168), an instance in which an individual recalls a memory that did not happen to them as part of their communal reality. *The Sheep and the Whale*, a play by Moroccan Canadian playwright Ahmed Ghazali, tells the story of a group of stranded Moroccan refugees looking for

asylum after the boat on which they were being smuggled into Europe was ravaged by a storm. In his reading of the 2007 production of the play, Ric Knowles points to the actors' ability to transform a 'false memory' of the traumatic events the refugees had experienced into a performance of homage. "Like the bearers of Ross Chambers' 'orphaned memory,' the players and the play in *The Sheep and the Whale* became the bearers and transmitters of the memories of the dead" (2008:177). With a similar emphasis on the act of remembering and transmitting fragments of the orphaned memories of her community, Aguirre (through the voice of Adult Manuelita) opens and closes *The Refugee Hotel* with a reflection on the difficulty of dealing with remembrance: "ADULT MANUELITA: It takes courage to remember, it takes courage to forget. It takes a hero to do both" (Aguirre, 2010:18). Aguirre's work with words follows on the path of remembrance traced by Boym, who observes that "poetry is a vehicle for memory, lines are rails of 'public transportation'" (528).

Another way in which a performative transformation of a story may occur is through experimentation with types of mimesis and narrative systems. Although a chronological narrative order that decreases the risk of drifting away from the original testimony may seem the logical scheme by which to organize the retelling of a story of injury, many times such a form is not as effective in capturing the timelessness of trauma. In her review of the 1999 production of *¿Qué Pasa con la Raza, eh?* Michelle Habell-Pallan observes the importance of experimenting with narrative structure in order to capture the multiplicity of the Latino Canadian experiences that the play attempts to portray: "These requirements were met by a frenetic pace and nonlinear structure that moved back and forth in time, like the performers' memories that constitute the play" (114). The exploration of nonlinear narratives is also an essential part of the dramatic construction of *The Trigger*. During the 2005 production of the play, director Katrina Dunn commented on the importance of Aguirre's playfulness with time when dealing with her experience of rape: "Because we are trying to figure out how something like (violation) affects

you for all your life, the play moves back and forth in time and is a delicate and complex portrait of a lifetime” (Helsen). Salverson speaks of two types of mimesis, “mimesis as a mirror of reality or illustration of truth, and mimesis as performative ‘interpretive labor’” (Salverson 1999:56). Experimenting with different narrative orders allows the audience and the players to remain aware of the illusion of representation (mimesis as performative labour and not as illustration of truth), and this way avoid the risk of re-playing trauma in a potentially re-violating form, while offering new ways of witnessing a known story. In *The Refugee Hotel* the presence of Adult Manuelita serves to break the illusion of time in order to emphasize how the act of remembering modifies a story. This character shares with the audience her reassembly of past, present and future as part of her attempt to deal with exile: “ADULT MANUELITA: If these walls could speak, they’d tell you a story about the past that informs the present and illuminates the future” (2010:17). Throughout the play we see her witness the scenes of her past, go back to them, stop time, elongate the moments that need to be reflected on, and through this active process of remembrance aspire to heal the wounds of the past: “*The next day. “Pollera colorada” plays, mixed with a soundscape of wind. FLACA, FAT JORGE, and JOSELITO are frozen in a tableau in the lobby. ADULT MANUELITA enters and walks around, taking them in. She joins the tableau and we are in the past again*” (2010:17).

Another way Aguirre experiments with mimesis as interpretive labour is through the imagery she creates to represent trauma on stage. Along with Adult Manuelita, there is another presence in the play that does not fit into the diegesis. Introduced in the prologue, the male Cueca Dancer enters and exits the space throughout the play, permeating the action with the cadence and sound of Chilean culture while mirroring the intensity of the characters’ testimony with his movement and the rhythm of his *zapateo*:

MANUEL: Cigarette burns. Blow torches. Electricity. Many blows to the head. Heart failure. Brought back to life. Fingernails pulled out. Raped by men. Raped by dogs. Electricity. To the gums. To the eyes. To the tongue. To the anus. To the testicles.

Starvation. Dehydration. Hypothermia. Solitary confinement. Many, many, many blows to the head. And I'm alive.

The DOCTOR places a stethoscope to MANUEL's heart. The sound of a beating heart fills the theatre. The lone male CUECA DANCER emerges, doing the zapateo in the background.

MANUEL: I'm alive.

The DOCTOR leaves. MANUEL continues to stand, naked.

The CUECA DANCER continues to dance. (2010:56)

Fat Jorge's nightmares also exemplify Aguirre's distinctive way of representing trauma. In *Chile con Carne* young Manuelita mentions her father's nightmares: "Sometimes at night my dad screams in his sleep. He yells out, 'No, no!' and my mom has to shake him awake. My mom told me he has dreams at night that the military's going to get him" (2000b:67). But in this drama Aguirre does not go further in transposing the content or the effects of the dreams onto the stage. In *The Refugee Hotel* these nightmares take a predominant role in the aesthetic narrative of the play. The set suggested by Aguirre is a multi-level space in which the audience can see what happens in all the rooms of the hotel, even though the main action circulates from room to room. During Fat Jorge's nightmares, certain characters distributed around the set come out of the time and place of the story to represent the scenes of torture that haunt Fat Jorge's dreams:

Later that night. Everyone is asleep in their rooms. FAT JORGE sings the Inti-Ilumani song in the lobby, wine bottle in hand. His nightmare continues. He takes on the same position, of being hung by the wrists from the ceiling. FLACA and MANUEL also take on the same shapes as before [FLACA, in the family's room, takes on the position of a woman hanging, as if crucified, from a wall. MANUEL, in his room, takes on the "man" character, also hanging (56).] The cast help to create the soundscape by moaning, coughing, praying, and weeping.

WOMAN (played by FLACA): Where are we?

MAN: In the bowels of this country. (87)

With these scenes Aguirre materializes the traces of torture present in the characters' internal realities on which much of the dramatic action of the play stands. In the same way that his dreams are governed by his inability to escape trauma, when he is awake Fat Jorge repeatedly

expresses a feeling of imprisonment generated by exile. “The opposite of home,” Elie Wiesel observes, “is not the prison – which may, eventually, become home – but exile. More than prison, exile suggests uncertainty, anguish, solitude, suspicion, hunger, thirst and a constant feeling of guilt” (19). Trapped by the ceaseless screens of Vancouver rain and the language barriers that render him useless in this new country, Fat Jorge spends the play trying to break free from the ghosts of his past and the confinement of his present situation: “FAT JORGE: She’s not a traitor. But I am, Flaquita. I am. I’m here when I could be there. Oh my God. (*running helplessly around the room*) I’m stuck here. I’m stuck here. I’m stuck here...” (2010:75). Fat Jorge’s desperation and his consequent demise (we learn in the prologue that Flaca left him soon after the end of the play, and he eventually drank himself to death) are illustrated by strong theatrical moments that condense much of the frustration connected to both trauma and displacement.

As people are displaced, a displacement of codes simultaneously occurs. In a new and unknown context various sets of codes are negotiated and transformed into different, hybrid forms that lead to new patterns of conduct. This process of negotiation can be transferred onto the stage by crossing sets of codes in a theatrical context. Bodies, for instance, “encode difference and specificity” (Lo and Gilbert, 47), and if the meanings that they generate on stage are to be decoded, shared conventions of those codes should exist between player and audience. In the case, for example, of playback theatre, the cultural and material differences between the refugee and the artist already present a necessary negotiation of codes, and must be consciously incorporated in the retelling of the testimony. For Aguirre, ethnicity plays a key role in maintaining the veracity of the testimonies on which *The Refugee Hotel* is based. A first production of the play under the direction of Ken Gass at Toronto’s Factory Theatre was scheduled to premiere in the spring of 2004, but casting decisions brought to the forefront questions of ethnicity over which Gass and Aguirre strongly disagreed. Gass argued that “the

play is not about racial issues as such, and so racially accurate casting is not imperative,” while Aguirre felt that “only non-white actors can accurately portray the Latin rhythm and culture of the eight Chilean characters” (Conlogue). In the end, the production was cancelled and the play did not premier until 2009 under the direction of Latina theatre artist Marilo Nuñez. According to Jill Edmonson, “casting choices in *Refugee* and other Latino Canadian plays go right to the heart of the discussion on ethnicity and equality, especially given the broad strokes of uniformity with which Latinos are painted in other aspects of their lives in their adopted Canadian home” (5). Alongside the risk of stereotyping Latino culture or lessening the veracity of the testimonies portrayed, disregarding ethnicity can also weaken a key thematic element of the play. Although the play is not strictly about ethnicity, it deals very openly with themes of cultural contrast and the ways in which difference complicates the experience of exile. For this reason the decision to adhere to non-white actors to represent the Chilean refugees in contrast to the three Canadian characters could serve as an effective way of highlighting the obstacles of difference in the process of adaptation.

Aguirre’s work constantly intertwines Chilean and Canadian references, creating a conversation between cultures led by the plurality of her vision and her ability to navigate in both contexts. As we encounter the male Cueca dancer and the revolutionary songs of Inti-Illimani in *The Refugee Hotel*, Joselito and Manuelita stare in awe at *My Favorite Martian* playing on TV, trying to learn this strange language, as their father says, “by osmosis” (44), while the Receptionist mouths the words to “Diamonds are a Girl’s Best Friend.” Her ability to comfortably manipulate this contrast becomes for Aguirre an important tool in creating comedic moments while showing the vast distance between two worldviews. Juan, who has spent his life building railroads in Chile, seems ecstatic at the prospect of his new job as a cumbia dancer in a chicken suit (or as he calls it, his uniform), while Bill (the Canadian activist who after being

mistakenly held by the Chilean military at the Chile stadium became a fervent supporter of the revolution) is appalled at Juan's situation:

FAT JORGE: So he's literally fresh off the boat and we walk by this fried chicken place and Juan goes in there and says, "Me job," and before you know it they've got him in this chicken costume and all he has to do is dance cumbia on the corner there.

BILL: Juan, you not do that job: (*enunciating every syllable*) Humiliation –

JUAN: Are you kidding? Getting paid to dance on a corner all day? I gotta go back.
(2010:108)

This is a good example of how Aguirre's competency in both cultural domains allows her to play with difference in order to expose a form of miscommunication that goes beyond language, but is rather associated with a contrast in values and personal experience. Through these humorous yet telling moments, Aguirre exposes new layers of miscommunication and deepens her portrayal of the migrant experience.

This type of negotiation of codes can be most clearly identified in the languages that are used to represent a story. When several languages interact on stage, one must consider the power relations that are generated through their use (i.e., which language carries the cultural authority in a given representation), as well as the different ways in which they animate one another or make one another opaque. In the case of Aguirre's drama, English is the predominant language in which the story is told. But her preference for English over Spanish may have more pragmatic than thematic reasons. Because she writes mainly for a Canadian audience, writing in English allows the content of her plays to reach her desired audience. But in much the same way that the image of the Chilean nation upstages Canadian nationhood (even when the plays are set in Canada), in Aguirre's drama Spanish seems to hold a higher position than English in the cultural hierarchy of language. If Aguirre is in search of a balance between the two languages that make up her story, this might be the way to achieve it. Because the main action of the play must be in English, exalting Spanish becomes a way of giving it a place in this new world, thus balancing the language that makes up the identity of the characters (Spanish) with the language necessary

to communicate this identity in the migrant's new context (English). This being said, the prominence of English may also serve as a distancing tool, another way of reimagining and reformulating the past into a new narrative. "After all, a foreign language is like art – an alternative reality, a potential world" (Boym, 529).

The juxtaposition of different languages in a stage play can serve several objectives. The incorporation of a minority language may be a tool for resistance against the dominant culture by forcing the audience to live temporarily in the universe of a fiction governed by the codes of the minority. This experience of estrangement can allow the opportunity for elements of the dominant culture to embody the minority's constant feeling of out-of-placeness, if only for the duration of a performance. "By presenting dialogue and/or narration in languages that are foreign to the dominant society, playwrights such as... Canada's Guillermo Verdecchia express the 'double vision' which typically characterized migrant experience" (Tompkins qtd. in Edmonson, 18). In these cases Julie Byczynski argues that the fluctuating nature of the dominator-dominated relationship should be accounted for if minority languages are to be used effectively as tools for social commentary, and that "it is necessary to minimize negative responses and encourage positive ones while introducing an alternative worldview on stage" (70). In order to be heard, the artist must first create a space for dialogue that will only be achieved if estrangement is used to invite and not simply to attack an audience.

Juxtaposing languages in a stage play can also introduce the audience to new cultural experiences and invite those spectators who already know these codes to share their culture with fellow audience members. By incorporating elements of Chilean culture such as the cueca dancer, the revolutionary songs (for which translations are not included), pisco (an alcoholic drink) made by the Artesanos of Cochiguáz, and reference to the full-blooded Quechua Indian whose gaze "was like looking into the very heart of the highlands" (53), Aguirre is sharing with the audience the richness of her culture. Yet unless proper means of translation are considered in

the production, the use of foreign languages on stage runs the risk of alienating the witness and exoticizing the subject. An audience member may feel frustrated at not being able to understand or follow the performance, and feel excluded from exchanges between actors and other audience members who do understand the language. This can limit a spectator's reading of the play not only because they might lose interest, but because they might automatically categorize what they do not understand under inaccurate stereotypes of the minority culture, causing the incorporation of foreign languages to achieve the opposite of the desired effect.

In her drama, Aguirre is very careful to incorporate Spanish in such a way that it does not acutely hinder the audience's engagement with the story. The moments in which long fragments of a play are spoken in Spanish (primarily the conversation between Manuelita's parents and the other revolutionaries in the prologue to *Chile con Carne* and Salvador Allende's last speech in the prologue to *The Refugee Hotel*) are presented along with subtitles or a simultaneous translation by one of the characters. In this way Aguirre provides non-Spanish speakers with necessary information regarding the story, while at the same time she avoids alienating a segment of the audience at the opening of the play. In the cases where Spanish words are used intermittently in the English dialogue, they help to add colour to the characters and specificity to the drama, but hardly determine the action of the scene: "MÓNICA: I will find you another one, don't, *no te preocupes*. [...] Teresita, *mañana*, okay, hold on, okay, *chao, chao, chao. Mua*" (2000a:86). In other cases there are words that cannot be translated, expressions that have such culturally engrained meaning and connotations that translating them would deplete their significance, such as Eduardo's use of the famous call to his race and people in *¿Qué Pasa with la Raza, eh?*: "We're all in this together, brother. *Viva la raza!*" (2000a:64). Even when some audience members can understand the minority language, meaning is many times reduced to very specific "cultural, social, political, religious and even geographical contexts" (Byczynski, 70) that makes it impossible to predict to what extent an audience will be able to understand. It is

therefore impossible to eliminate the distance between every audience member and every specific reference in a play, especially when the work incorporates several languages and cultures. In the case of Aguirre it is not only the Spanish (or specifically Chilean) references that can be lost, but also the specifics of her experience in a 1970s Canada that might be foreign to many, especially the young, in her audience. Consider the TV shows she mentions or her description of the hotel's décor: "...Red shag carpets, plastic orange light shades, macramé, a bean bag in the corner and – ah, yes – the lava lamp" (2010:17). What estranges one audience member becomes a point of entry into the drama for another, and in this respect Aguirre's *The Refugee Hotel* succeeds in considering the diversity of its audience.

As Lo and Gilbert's notion of big 'M' Multicultural theatre would suggest, *The Refugee Hotel* not only focuses on playing diversity to a diverse audience but also comments on the process of communication and miscommunication between the diverse sectors. In this play Aguirre goes a long way in experimenting with theatre conventions in order to explore instances of verbal correspondence between cultures such that the audience can witness the clumsiness and misunderstandings behind miscommunication without having to be a part of it. If some characters spoke in Spanish and some in English, the audience would become instantly divided – some would understand one language, others would understand the other, and only some would truly grasp the subtleties of how and why the characters are failing to communicate. In order to avoid this, Aguirre asks the audience to imagine for the sake of the fiction that the characters are speaking two different languages when in fact they're not. When Fat Jorge asks the Receptionist, "Uh, we were wondering if you have a record player for us to listen to this" in perfect English, the Receptionist responds, "I don't understand what you're saying!" (85). Similarly, when the Social Worker explains something to the refugees, she immediately asks Bill to translate, even though the characters have been speaking in English throughout the play: "Well, the volunteers should be arriving any minute now to take you to your new homes. Bill, translation please"

(122). This is only one instance in which a Spanish-speaking character employs inaccurate English to create contrast in the conversation (specifically in Fat Jorge's indicated pronunciation): "FAT JORGE: (*nodding*) Jes jes. / CRISTINA: What did she say? / FAT JORGE: I have no clue. Just say jes jes to anything she says. It's called minding your manners" (36).

In all the other cases it is the Anglo-speaking characters who have trouble with grammar or pronunciation. When they try to communicate in Spanish, they may speak in a mix of English, French and Spanish (the case of the Receptionist and the Social Worker): "Ici! Uh...le hotel! Tu stay ici until moi can place tu in a casa! Comprenez?" (22). In the case of Bill, who is moderately fluent in the language, his Spanish takes the shape of a broken English commonly attributed to the immigrant in English-speaking countries: "Me Bill. Just got back from Santiago. Hear me, me spend four weeks on the National Stadium and then four weeks on Chile stadium" (58). By simply switching the roles of fluency, Aguirre reflects on how, as Edmonson argues, "linguistic ability is used as an indicator of mental acuity. 'Stupid' is what's often assumed of Latinos (and other non-English speaking immigrants) who have not yet mastered English as a second language" (18). By unveiling the process of miscommunication, Aguirre questions the ways in which we construct false or limited images of the other based merely on their ability to speak a second language. Similarly, she shows how a language barrier can hinder communication even when navigated by cultural empathy and good intentions, and how other levels of non-spoken communication become determining factors in such cases:

SOCIAL WORKER: Je ne sais pas if this means anything to you, my family and moi arrived from Hungary, in 1956. We're jews – uh, not Cristianos (*crossing herself*) –

FLACA: Ahhh! Cristiana!

SOCIAL WORKER: No. No. NOT Cristianos. Jews. Anyway, and it meant a lot to have fellow Jews waiting for us when we landed –

FLACA hugs the SOCIAL WORKER. (37)

In this conversation Flaca is reading the Social Worker's good intentions accurately. But at the same time, the lack of communication through spoken language leads Flaca to read the Social Worker's body language and consequently misunderstand an essential part of her story (that she fled Europe during WWII precisely because she was a Jew, not, as Flaca understands, a Christian).

Refugee testimony many times represents a transgression against the authority that has been left behind. Losing the ability to express dissatisfaction or opposition is as estranging to the refugee as the loss of a home. Regaining this language in a performative scenario makes utterance a political act, an action that defies a silencing authority in a context of censorship, even when the words are spoken in an uncensored setting (the country of exile). Although Aguirre's plays were staged many years after the coup, her characters' re-empowerment through speech is an essential part of their journey towards healing, and in this way she acknowledges the power of the mother tongue when in exile. As Anzaldúa notes, "ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself" (81). In *Chile con Carne* Aguirre illustrates the power of uttering the unspeakable in Manuelita's recollection of an interview her father gave soon after they had arrived in Canada:

My father's face lights up for the camera, and Bill can barely keep up with the translating [...] We are here because we want the world to know that the Chilean people haven't laid down to die, that in spite of the unbridled murder, torture, and disappearances being carried out now against our *compañeros*, we, the exiles, continue to fight for our country, even from outside [...] My father's old voice, the one from before, comes to life and that old sparkle, the one he lost after the coup, the one that died when we came here, explodes into his eyes. (77)

This brings to the fore the notion of what Judith Butler refers to as 'impossible speech', in which the censoring context is considered beyond the act of censorship itself. "The question is not what it is I will be able to say, but what will constitute the domain of the sayable within which I begin to speak" (Butler qtd in Salverson 2008:252). In these cases, the incorporation of foreign language becomes the medium through which the subject is re-empowered and a home is

reformulated. In *The Refugee Hotel* there is a moment when Manuel looks back at the days before he had been tortured and exiled, when he had raised his voice in public and chanted the phrases of the revolution:

I remember the day Allende won, the march with my school, down the Alameda, to La Moneda Palace, Comrade Allende, the people united will never be defeated! ¡El pueblo unido jamás sera vencido! And now I'm here. And I can't breathe. Or think. Or see. And enough is enough. ¡Ya basta ya! Basta. My mother used to say, nothing belongs to us, Manuel. Absolutely nothing. Not even our bodies. We come from the dirt and when we die we go back to the dirt. (76)

'*¡El pueblo unido jamás sera vencido!*' doesn't only mean 'The people united will never be defeated!' (a translation that Aguirre makes sure to include in the passage in order to contextualize it). It was also the precept of the revolutionary movement that gave a voice to millions of disappeared, tortured and marginalized people. The title of President Allende's campaign song (famously recorded by Inti-Illimani and one of the most renowned songs of the New Chilean Song movement of the 1970s and 80s), the phrase became a mantra for the Latin American revolutionary movement and was exported by millions of exiles around the world, for whom it served as an anchor to the cause.

The importance of verbalizing trauma in the process of healing the wounds of displacement is a recurrent theme in Aguirre's work. The cases of Manuel in *The Refugee Hotel* and Manuelita's father in *Chile con Carne* are good examples of how uttering certain words can help counteract the effects of depression caused by exile. In *The Refugee Hotel* Flaca's resolute insistence on talking to Fat Jorge about the violence to which they have been subjected is her way of confronting the wounds in order to avoid being consumed by them:

FLACA: Come on. Ask me a question. I need to know that you can stand this. You want to be a revolutionary. Well, the revolution starts right here. Right now.

FAT JORGE: Don't tell me about the torture.

FLACA: Start by asking me something you can stand. But start. Somewhere. Now. (51)

To Flaca, talking is an essential tool for survival. She knows that if she is to save her relationship with Fat Jorge, if they are to recover and build a new family life in exile, the extent of the damage needs to be acknowledged. By pushing Fat Jorge to the limit, she is trying to save him:

FLACA: Maybe if you talk about it you won't dream about it anymore.

FAT JORGE: I won't talk about it. I can take it.

FLACA: Fat Jorge, you **MUST** take it. (89)

In the end we learn that he couldn't take it and that the depression caused by torture and displacement finally consumed him.

Throughout the play the topic of how to deal with exile becomes central to the interaction between characters and to the establishment of their relationships. One of the most heated scenes revolves around the process of trying to arrange the conjunction of loss, trauma, and ideology in a foreign land, or, as Fat Jorge calls it, enemy land. The eight refugees have succeeded in escaping the regime, but the impotence and strangeness of being in exile has forced them to evaluate the roles they play in the revolution and in their own lives.

FAT JORGE: I see it clearly now! Thank you, comrade Cristina, for the clarity! I see it so well! Here we are, in a hotel, a HOTEL – that's just too fucking ironic, in a goddamn hotel, in the heart of the monster, as refugees, REFUGEES, do you hear me? Since when do refugees stay in hotels and watch TV and learn English? I see it now! This is all a set-up! That's what it is! Exiles, my ass. If we had balls, we'd be there, we'd be living in the underground, helping out. I'm leaving. Come on! Get up! All of you! You too, comrade Bill! We're leaving this place right now! (73)

Now that he is in an apparently safe, neutral place, imprisoned by his condition as a refugee, Fat Jorge is calling everyone to action, trying to ignite in them the guilt he feels after having confessed under torture and then escaped. But the others don't take the bait – Cristina, indignant, calls Fat Jorge out on his minimal conception of the world, outraged at how he can “look me in the eye with no shame whatsoever and ask me why I love life so much that I decided to live it?! Fuck you” (74). For Cristina, her journey of exile is linked to rediscovering life, to healing her wounds by reconnecting to the past through the power of the senses. In the scene where she

becomes intimate with Manuel, Cristina reconciles with her past through the smell of his body, the smell of home: “Your poncho, your sheets, the armpit of your shirt, it all smells like the house where I was born, with the kelp and the seaweed drying on the sill... You smell like my past, the good past, the one that existed so long ago” (115). A strong connection to the senses is again present when Flaca attempts to calm her children by offering them “tea with condensed milk, like your grandma used to back in Chile” (83) and talking of “the smell of fresh bread and the vineyard giving grapes” (84). Although he has been able to avoid talking about his nightmares or the torture he and Flaca experienced, Fat Jorge cannot prevent his body from reacting to Flaca’s sensory invocations: “Flaca! You’re gonna make me and the kids cry too! Jesus! We held it together with the suicide attempts last night but all this talk of food and beverage will do us in!” (84). The body, then, becomes a key player in dealing with injury and displacement, an element that has remained fundamental in Aguirre’s exploration of her own trauma as a theatre artist. In an interview with *The Globe and Mail* she talks about the importance of the body in dealing with the healing process of a traumatic experience: “As a stage artist, the instrument is the body, so you have to deal with [the trauma] in order to access the instrument [...] The body will let you know very, very quickly how [screwed] up you are” (Hampson). Similarly, in their introduction to *Performance in the Borderlands*, Ramón Rivera-Servera and Harvey Young consider the ways in which the body registers movement and displacement, observing that “the body alters the way that bodies carry and, indeed, perform themselves not only in the moment of encounter but also for years (and even generations) afterwards” (2).

In her synopsis of *The Refugee Hotel*, Aguirre states that the play is “an uncompromising look at exile, torture, guilt and betrayal,” yet is “ultimately about love and its power to heal” (15). In it, some characters prove to be better than others at dealing with trauma or adapting to

exile, and Aguirre finds in her narrative a place for them all. In a short conversation between the two children, she very accurately condenses the two postures:

MANUELITA: Her nipples were cut off.

JOSELITO: She's making that up.

MANUELITA: No. I saw it.

JOSELITO: Liar.

MANUELITA: Just 'cause you don't want to look doesn't mean they're liars.

Pause.

MANUELITA: All these military guys raped her –

JOSELITO: Shut up. (96)

Manuelita acknowledges the inevitability of their situation as she unquestioningly accepts what they have been made to face, while Joselito, like his father, refuses to recognize the reality of his circumstance and so fights against it by antagonizing those who he believes are responsible. Although each character in the play has a different way of dealing with exile and trauma, they are all on a journey towards survival. They have managed to escape and have survived the imminent threat of death (or, in the case of the children, orphanhood), and now this new pursuit of survival has to do with conserving an identity while reconstructing a new life in diaspora.

Seen as a case of migrant theatre, *The Refugee Hotel* exemplifies some of the ways in which the condition of exile can be examined through theatre. The play offers a dramatic form of remembrance that stems from Aguirre's experiment of retelling a shared memory, in which she explores different forms of narrative and mimesis in order to convey the complex temporality of trauma. The multiplicity of testimonies in this drama (unlike Manuelita and Carmen's unilateral storytelling in *Chile con Carne* and *The Trigger*) renders a rich variety of responses to exile, as well as revealing the ways in which these responses affect and determine each other. Aguirre expands this diversity by crossing ethnicity and language, and using this crossing of cultural

codes to highlight difference so as to unveil the challenges involved in the process of adaptation. In the form of a play Aguirre sets the memory of her refugee days in the rainy confines of a Vancouver hotel, and through the bodies of actors and materials of the stage she offers the world outside those hotel walls a view into the ambiguous place of exile.

Conclusions

The 21st century exile is faced with a series of challenges that bring to the fore profound issues of identity and belonging, and is forced to adapt to continual estrangement, to inhabit marginalized uncertainty, and to learn to communicate with a new set of cultural and linguistic codes in order to survive. Above all, the exile is faced with the challenge of surviving beyond survival, that is, maintaining (or perhaps reinventing) an individual identity that will prevent her from disappearing into the homelessness of displacement. In these three chapters I have explored the ways in which Carmen Aguirre has re-imagined exile by offering in her plays dramatic renderings of her own testimony and those of her migrant community. By combining personal experience with broader themes co-extensive with other cases of exile such as home, nationalism and victimhood, Aguirre translates the ambiguous experience of displacement into concrete scenes inhabited by live bodies and moving dialogue.

As I observe in chapter one, Aguirre's drama reflects deeply upon these issues, and suggests two very important aspects of the exilic experience that might help prevent one from falling into this threat of oblivion. The first is the conception of exile as a collective experience, harbouring displacement in what Arjun Appadurai calls a "*community of sentiment*, which describes a group of de-territorialized persons who 'imagine and feel things together'" (Jestrovic and Meerzon, 9). *¿Qué pasa with la Raza, eh?* exemplifies how a community helps solidify identity even amongst the confusion and out-of-placeness inherent in migration. The play as a fiction and the LTG itself embody the virtues of communal solidarity in the process of reformulating the self and reconstructing a new home in a different land. Carmen's rape in *The Trigger* represents a transgression not only against a young girl's body, but against an entire community that harbours it and responds in her name: "The knowledge that this most intimate act is not occurring with a man of my choosing, with the love of my life, the knowledge that the first-generation girl who I am will let down an entire community who has raised me so carefully,

breaks my heart” (58). *Chile con Carne*’s Manuelita is embedded in a protective community that extends across North America and south to the tip of the continent, and keeps her firmly connected both to her origins and to her everyday life in Canada. It also connects her exile to a larger cause that grounds much of the suffering and confusion that result from displacement. Similarly, the exiled artist becomes a bearer of this sense of community, the meeting point for a group of people that can no longer access their old places of congregation and can now only connect to them through the work of the artist. Yet in this process, Aguirre, similar to other artists and theoreticians, acknowledges the danger of portraying romanticized notions of home and exile that will wrongly represent the experience. She does this by openly recognizing in her characters’ conflicts the ways in which the exilic imaginary both contrasts with and feeds the reality of an exilic collective, and avoids (and warns against) the construction of harmful forms of nationalism and discrimination.

The second element that I have identified in Aguirre’s drama as an important consideration when representing the exilic experience is agency. By reflecting upon her own story, the artist owns her testimony and becomes the author of its own narrative. This extends to all cases of exile – Aguirre identifies the possibility, as a refugee, of regaining your power, your voice, and with it reformulating a new set of borders that allow for the protection and exchange of this power. This continuing process of transformation of the self parallels the creative process of transforming and adapting an experience to a dramatic narrative. As Lo and Gilbert have shown, there is a series of paths the artist can take in order to express the crossing of cultures on a theatre stage. Aguirre, interested in both exposing and commenting on the migrant experience, has shaped a dramatic *oeuvre* along the lines of migrant theatre that involves the diverse communities that compose a multicultural crowd such as the Canadian audience. In order to do so, she has had to consider first what constitutes and determines that experience (as I have shown in the first chapter), and second, how to construct her drama in such a way that it speaks to the

diversity of her audience (the objective of the second). In this second chapter I have found that strong theatre aesthetics, such as the use of metaphors in the creation of a playing space (the borders of the hotel) or the rhythmic accompaniment of dance and confession, are essential when replaying stories of injury in order to avoid falling into reductive portrayals of trauma. Here again, the theme of agency resonates in Aguirre's work through her interpretation of victimhood. By stressing the agency of the victim as a powerful, live subject, and blurring the line between victim and aggressor, Aguirre questions common oppressor-oppressed binaries and our interpretation of how the two relate in systems of power that we all inhabit. Her work not only activates the subject (or testifier), but also considers the importance of activating the audience as responsive witness to the testimony.

In *The Refugee Hotel* Aguirre's thematic and aesthetic explorations of exile are clearly revealed. She offers us a neutral place – the hotel – that represents the transitory but limiting nature of displacement. It suggests, as well, a level of comfort that other places of asylum do not offer, adding to the specificity of Aguirre's particular circumstances as a Chilean exile in Canada. The concrete walls that make up the hotel offer new borders, new possibilities of home, as each character arrives in the fiction and is designated a space to inhabit, their own hotel room. The walls of Vancouver rain that surround the building (that we do not see, only hear) suggest the imprisonment of exile, of entrapment by uncertainty and inhospitable conditions. This neutral space, the Canadian hotel, also becomes a space of contrasts, where ethnicities, language and culture oppose and overlap in the form of comedic and frustrating encounters. Finally, Aguirre's clever mixing of English and Spanish exposes scenes of miscommunication that lead us to re-evaluate the ways in which language and ethnicity limit and affect our relationship with the other. In this mix, she brings to the fore the prejudiced relationship between mental acuity and spoken fluency, and explores ways in which language can act as a tool towards reempowerment

through political utterance, while at the same time, can present cultural barriers that segregate through miscommunication.

Like many other artists and exiles, Aguirre, comfortable with estrangement, relies on distance to construct the play. In the fiction, the characters have escaped the imminent threat of death and can now look back and reflect, at a distance, on the decisions and circumstances that led them to exile, on their sense of family and community, and on the frustrations and possibilities regarding the future. This distance is embodied by the character of Adult-Manuelita, whose role as distant observer throughout the play stresses the audience's own role as witness. More than thirty years after her exile, time allows Aguirre a more harmonious portrayal of trauma in which, although all the parts are exposed (as crude as they may be), they are revealed with healing hands. Her strong and evocative portrayals of trauma, the simplicity of the children's profound dialogue in relation to displacement, and the incorporation of Chilean elements such as the male cueca dancer as part of the theatrical landscape, are concrete examples of Aguirre's material reimagining of exile. The distance that characterizes her work allows her to avoid romanticizing the experience while at the same time keeps her from representing it through a solely negative lens. In these ways Aguirre's testimony and artistry reflected in *The Refugee Hotel* and the rest of her drama reveal the vast and painful experience of exile, while at the same time suggest ways of dealing with displacement and healing these wounds despite hostile circumstances. Her work is a precious contribution, not only as exile literature and drama but also as a unique record of Chilean and Canadian history. It offers distinct proof of the ways in which an individual's performance of her own exilic experience can affect the shape of a nation's identity.

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