

Vulnerability and Resistance in Carmen Aguirre's *Mexican Hooker #1*

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Cinta Mesa,

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Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 21.1 (2019)**

Special Issue ***Gendered Bodies in Transit: Between Vulnerability and Resistance***. Ed. **Manuela Coppola and Maria Isabel Romero Ruiz**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol21/iss1/>>

Abstract: In her article, "Vulnerability and Resistance in Carmen Aguirre's *Mexican Hooker#1*," Cinta Mesa examines Chilean-Canadian playwright and actress Carmen Aguirre's latest autobiographical novel, *Mexican Hooker#1*, to analyze Latina vulnerability in relation to exile, emigration, gender violence and stereotypes. The article relies upon Judith Butler's definition of vulnerability (20), which is excluded from official texts. The consequences of these types of trauma, which are written on female bodies, are expressed through post-traumatic stress disorder. The author expresses the difficulty of acting because of her post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms and the challenges she meets on her way to heal herself and her community. As Aguirre's body becomes the repository of many kinds of violence, acting means resilience for the actress.

Cinta MESA

Vulnerability and Resistance in Carmen Aguirre's *Mexican Hooker#1*

Carmen Aguirre is a Chilean writer and actress who was exiled from her country to Canada when she was a child and who lived in the underground for many years, a status at first forced by her parents as a way to protect her and her sister which later became a chosen condition. Exile, sexual violence and racial stereotyping of the colonized body affect this strong woman who is able to fight against the oppressive state and gender constructions, through a long process of self-knowing and self-healing. For Rossi, "Exile and trauma are interconnected. A victim of sexual violence (trauma) can become emotionally separated (exiled) from the own body, and a child forced from their country, with no control over her immigration (exiled), can feel traumatized by this geographical separation" (203). As a Chilean exiled, fear colonized her body through most of her life, determining her identities as refugee, exile, rape survivor and wife. Being an exiled child who suffered sexual abuse, her body becomes the repository of many kinds of violence that are filtered through the many PTSD symptoms her body underwent, ordeals which were either silenced or traumatically expressed.

Following Rossi's words, I consider Aguirre's body as an exiled, gendered, traumatized body. With that in mind, I will focus on how Aguirre's cultural body is vulnerable since she is affected by gender violence as well as by physical and psychological exile. Furthermore, I will examine how the artist reflects on the different ways in which performing interacts with trauma to heal her traumatic wounds in order to demonstrate how for the Chilean-Canadian author performing is the best resistance tool to voice the many stories experienced by oppressed people and to ensure survival.

This contribution analyses Chilean-Canadian playwright and actress Carmen Aguirre's latest autobiographical novel, *Mexican Hooker#1*, to examine Latina vulnerability in relation to exile, emigration, gender violence, and stereotypes, addressing the post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms she suffers and the difficulties she finds on her way to heal herself and her community. Despite all the difficulties that the author meets on her way to becoming an actress, resilience is translated in Aguirre's work as a testimony to her physical and psychological wounds. Her autobiographical account offers a meditation on the extraordinary resilience of Latina exiled women. Having said that, this paper argues that resisting the vulnerability of the Latina female exiled body and voicing trauma are only possible for Aguirre through the dramatized body.

My choice of Chilean-Canadian playwright and actress Carmen Aguirre, especially her last autobiographical work, is based on her account of exile, her analysis of Latina female stereotypes, and her wide-ranging discussion of trauma and sexual violence and vulnerability. Those issues are not specific to Aguirre, but rather, they affect Latina women in general. Therefore, this book stands as a metaphor of Latina concerns throughout the Americas. It is especially important in Canada, where Chilean refugees were welcomed during Aguirre's early years in the country: "In the 1970s, Canadian trade unions had successfully worked with church groups to pressure the government to accept more Chilean refugees from Pinochet's government" (García 146). It provides, thus, a focus for awareness and critical thinking about these issues. In this regard, I consider that Latina author Carmen Aguirre has not received the critical attention that she deserves. She has also published another autobiographical work devoted to her life underground titled *Something Fierce, Memoirs of a Revolutionary Daughter* (2011), and plays such as *The Refugee Hotel* (2010), which narrates the experiences of a group of Chilean refugees in Canada, or *Blue Box* (2013), a monologue performed by herself in which she talks about her acting roles as a Latina actress as well as her sexual life.

As a theoretical framework, I will use the works on violence of relevant critics such as Slavoj Žižek or John Keane, among others. Trauma will be examined closely by focusing on the ideas exposed by Rossi, with particular attention given to the interaction between sexual violence and exile by paying close attention to the ideas defended by Yvette Flores-Ortiz and Martin Baumann. I will then discuss the importance of voicing trauma as a survival technique and as part of the process of healing historical, personal and communal wounds, taking into account different discussions on the topic. I then briefly consider how vulnerability interacts with the dramatized word in *Socially Engaged Theatre* to provide a space both of healing and of subversion. I conclude with a close reading of Aguirre's non-fictional account in order to demonstrate its importance for the author and Latina exiled women.

After returning from Latin America, where she joined the resistance as a way to be safe from the political violence, she chooses to exile herself:

Just as no map had been provided to help us find our way through the trials of exile, I was completely unprepared for the crossroads I now found myself at. Either I became an immigrant, a label implying that

uprootedness was not only a choice but a welcome one at that, and yet the only label available if I were to stay outside Chile's borders, or I returned to a homeland where my sacrifice would not be celebrated, revered, or respected. On the contrary, my revolutionary activity would be not only something to hide but something to be ashamed of, that some comrades would apologize for in order to be embraced by the new, "free" Chile, no referring to itself as the Tiger of the South. (*Mexican Hooker* 28)

Using the expression "chosen involuntary act" is significant for Aguirre. According to Martin Baumann,

Exile is a state forced upon individuals, groups or nation; they are passive reactors subjected to this state. Exile is rarely sought. At times, though, individuals, entire groups and peoples may actively escape into exile in order to seek refuge and avoid persecution (...) Usually, exiles think of their exile as temporary state and their focus of identification, attention and activities clearly rests with the territory and culture of their former home. Conceived of as transitory. (19)

"Chosen involuntary exile" implies leaving the country forced by the violent circumstances in search of protection or a better life, getting to another country, in many cases as a refugee, as Carmen and her family did. It constructs part of her identity as an exile in search of safety: "those who were in exile constructed a sense of self-as-exile inextricable from the sense of self as national subject" (Kaminsky 36). Throughout the autobiographical novel, the reader can see how her identity as well as her experiences are inextricably linked to the political reality of her country of origin, affecting both her body and her mind.

Once the adverse political situation seems to change, and they can feel safe back in Chile, Carmen and her family decide to remain in Canada, leaving behind their identity as exiled Chileans to become Chilean migrants in Canada. Amy K. Kaminsky defines de-exile as "another way of living after exile, in the choice to remain in the diaspora" (16). Thus, de-exile would be the process through which any person decides to stop living in exile to become a migrant in the destination country. Once this new migratory stage occurs, the person stops being in a solitary state in order to become part of the migrant community. De-exile, in other words, would be the step between exiled loneliness and being part of a community.

The de-exile process will also affect Carmen's life and work in many different ways: "Little did we know that what awaited us was a long process of de-exile. Ironically, it would inflict a dull pain not unlike the torment of exile itself" (*Mexican Hooker* 27). As Cathy Caruth asserts, it is not the violent event which determines the traumatic feeling, but the unassimilated nature of that trauma during the process of psychological interpretation once it has already happened (4). The de-exile process means that Carmen, and also her family, must painfully adjust to the many PTSD symptoms that she has to undergo due to her migration and to the violence suffered in the diasporic context, such as the sexual abuse or the racialization of her body.

Regarding gender violence, for Flores-Ortiz, "the body, both metaphorically and factually, is often the site where women's oppression is recorded" (347). For that reason, "exposure to the multiple types of violence Latinas routinely endure does affect the psyche, the body and the soul" (348). Thus, the body becomes the repository of gender violence that affects every aspect of women's lives. The traumatic effects of violence and exile are best exemplified in the trauma suffered by the Latina victim:

Violence is a relational act in which the victim of violence is regarded, involuntarily, not as a subject whose 'otherness' is recognized and respected, but rather as a mere object potentially worthy of bodily harm, or even annihilation. It is worth reiterating that violence is always 'embodied' (Keane 36).

The embodiment of violence highlights the dehumanization suffered by Latina women for being both an exiled person and a woman. Therefore, women's bodies are objectified and violently oppressed, causing multiple traumatic wounds in Latina women that have been officially silenced in historical and socio-cultural accounts.

Violence interconnects both the body and the psyche, affecting the victim's body in painful ways: "Violence is world-destroying. It cuts the tongue, and the pain that is felt is partly due to this dissection of speech from the body" (Keane 38). The consequences of those types of trauma, written on female bodies, are expressed through post-traumatic stress disorder. Even though her parents take her and her sister with them to Canada in order to flee violence on her country and to physically protect them, she only finds another kind of violence: the sexual abuse suffered by herself and her cousin Macarena at the age of thirteen: "Again, the irony was that Mami's precious girls hadn't fallen into the hands of the military that guarded the border or the secret police that pulled buses over the middle of the night, but rather into the grip of a pedophile" (*Mexican Hooker* 175). Her trauma and her account, therefore,

are divided into two different geographical narratives: her northern narrative of rape and her southern narrative of political violence. Aguirre lives in between two different "spaces of vulnerability". On the one hand, Latin America is for her a space of vulnerability where she is victim to the state violence that forces her into exile. On the other hand, in Canada she suffers from racial and gender violence in the public space of the street: "This man who still held my life in his hands was in the room now. He was always present in my bedrooms of love and sex, in the four chambers of my heart, my guts, my womb, in the childhood forest I hadn't returned to since rape, present in the booming recital hall of my skull" (*Mexican Hooker* 215). The traumatic effects are also different, not only regarding the geographical location or the acts of violence themselves, but also due to the meaning attached to them: "Political violence was a concept that I got; senseless violence left me with nothing to excuse him with" (*Mexican Hooker* 165). Finding meaning to the sexual violence suffered in the north was even more damaging than the fear and dangers of living in the underground, provoking a series of post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms that reinforced the disconnection of her body from her mind, as her acting lessons demonstrated. "It wasn't just language. It was dissociation, she said. The concept was new to me, though not the sensation. I had left my body unplugged my heart many times to survive traumatic moments" (*Mexican Hooker* 74). This dissociation has its roots in her compartmentalized life. According to that constructed and compartmentalized identity, Carmen would belong to three different communities: the exiled one, the Latina one and the victim one, making her even more vulnerable to violence.

Feeling like a victim also determines the identity of many women who have been sexually abused, in her own eyes and in the eyes of her community. In the documentary *Don't tell Any One. No le Digas a Nadie*, Rivera tells her story as a refugee in the US after being raped. Rivera tells how her mother asks her not to tell her story, but she refuses to be silent in order to help herself and other women who have been sexually harassed. In an interview with María Hinojosa, Rivera asserts that her visa does not define her identity: "Identity is not defined for being a victim". Not only her, but other authors such as Haitian-American Edwidge Danticat have expressed feelings of vulnerability both in Haiti and in the USA for being a woman. Thus, Aguirre is situated in a wider community of exiled and migrant Latina women, even though she represents a geographical difference. Attention has been paid to Latina artists in the United States, but not in Canada where refugee seekers were welcomed, as we have already seen before.

As the Latina women mentioned before and other Latina women, her broken identity becomes the source of other post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms. Since her body becomes out of control there are many episodes of self-inflicted violence. She suffers eating disorders, she cannot avoid crying and she is unable to have sex: "Sex was not the problem; intimacy was. I was good at giving during sex, putting my focus on him and being beyond generous. Receiving was the issue, because in that position I was vulnerable. Giving put me in control, receiving was loss of control" (*Mexican Hooker* 216). The rape, as an act of intimacy, left an imprint on her mind:

It had been four years since the rape, and although I had never seen him, he lived in me. His voice, his smell, the taste of his saliva, the texture of his skin were imprinted in me, the way one's first love might be (...) And yet there was no denying that there was an intimacy to rape, that to be attacked with someone's else naked body, their sex a weapon, was intimate. (*Mexican Hooker* 164)

Losing control of both her body and her mind as well as the search for a sense to all her wounds make her confront traumatic violence with more violence. She inflicts violence on her male partner:

It was impossible for me to admit—to myself, much less to him—that the violence in our relationship had always come from me. Being raised a radical feminist, I had interpreted that ideology to mean that the patriarchy was to be blame for everything, that I could basically beat a man and still be considered the victim. (*Mexican Hooker* 69)

Her trauma goes even beyond her own mind and body to encompass her whole family and community. Being part of a Chilean family who has failed in her attempt to protect her daughter from one of the most harmful and shameful acts of violence, Carmen is forced to silence her experience. This fact is both the cause and the consequence of her PTSD symptoms: "There were stories that were not shared, such as the rape. The Chilean part of the clan didn't know about it and the exiles never spoke of it" (*Mexican Hooker* 26), factors which made her feel isolated from her body, her family and her community. As a woman who belongs to a Latina family and community, feeling isolated in her traumatic experience—although shared with her cousin—become another source of trauma.

However, community is an arbitrary association, as Anderson posits. In this sense, as Edwidge Danticat expresses: "Community, like family, is sometimes a result of arbitrary grouping" (*Create*, 205). Therefore, being part of a community of traumatized women who takes part in their healing process provides her a safe space to voice her trauma. Finding a something in common with other people soothe her anguish:

I had had many communities in my life thus far—the Chilean community in exile, the underground, the MIR community in South America, the Latino community in Vancouver, the theatre community—but in that room I encountered a tribe that would have verged on the surreal two days earlier. It was the community of the Pape Bag Rapist's victims and their families. Although I had known there were other and had seen them at the lineup a decade earlier. I had lived that defining story in isolation. It had never occurred to me that perhaps I could have reached out before now, formed a sisterhood. (*Mexican Hooker* 212)

In spite of stereotypes, once more Aguirre stops being a victim in exile to become a migrant victim, who takes part in a community of former solitary victims. Sharing their own traumatic stories and finding comfort in someone else who has undergone the same experience, without inflicting psychological harm on her family, is the best way of reliving herself from her psychological and physical burden; that is, stopping feeling guilty for having been raped implies overcoming one more of those PTSD symptoms. Expressing her vulnerability in a conscious way through her autobiographical writing becomes an act of resistance that opens the path so that other Latina women may express their own experiences:

her readers, through reading what she has to say, through reading about her, are reading about ourselves and our own experiences. This phenomenon takes place simply because by writing she has put a name to what we have felt—a name to feelings of anger, pain, love, joy, sympathy, strength, celebration (...) She becomes the creator of a work of art and the creator of a destiny (Sánchez 66-67).

Step by step, Aguirre realizes that she is not only a victim or a Latina living in Canada: "I was not his victim. There was some truth to this, for there was so much more to my identity than being the Paper Bag Rapist's victim" (*Mexican Hooker* 271). Unlike her cousin, Macarena, she confronts the man who sexually abused her in order to find the answers to the questions that kept haunting her in order to let her suffering go.

Distancing herself from her trauma in order to become an artist is only possible when the healing process is completed. It implies not only facing the rapist, but also finding the best physical and psychological tools to relieve her suffering. The process of healing entails a series of conscious and unconscious acts that the victim has to undergo in order to survive and to construct a public consciousness that helps to end the violence endured by the female exiled body. According to Keane,

Healing entails transforming trauma into recovery—shifting from feeling victimized to feeling like a survivor. Central to this journey is healing the spirit, reconnecting the body and the mind and regaining a sense of agency. Most victims of violence, however, need to find meaning in their experiences of violation. Women also seek explanations for the behavior of the perpetrator. If he or she is a family member, women tend to seek explanations and create narratives that exonerate the abuser (354).

Facing the rapist means for her the embodiment of the sexual victimization of the gendered body through her own body and another rape survivor:

But now I saw him feel. And the foundation of my convictions that he was, when all was said and done, a heartless creature was shaken. I marvelled at the soul's capacity to transform, and wondered at the terrain of the journey the past three decades had taken him on, culminating in his heart attack and this very meeting with Laura, the star witness at his trial, and me, the embodiment of so many of his faceless, nameless victims (*Mexican Hooker* 272).

After facing the rapist, however, she felt she was wrong to consider guiltiness, both hers as a sexual victim and his as the perpetrator, as the proper tool for resilience:

"John, I have spent many years pondering why you did what you did to me. And I know why. It was to teach me compassion. Even in the moment, during the actual attack, I could feel your pain. I could feel it"—I patted my heart—"right here. And so I want to thank you for teaching me compassion" (274).

Surprisingly, empathy turned out to be the key to relieving her body of its PTSD symptoms, a lesson from her traumatic experience that is even more useful for her than her acting lessons.

In Canada, as well as in USA, the acting role reserved for a Latina women are just a representation of racial stereotypes:

For Latinas, it is the gendered media practices that surround sexual exoticness, racial flexibility, and ethnic ambiguity that position them as globally consumable docile bodies subject to the erotic and voracious gaze of the United States. Through dialect coaches, exercises, and dieting, among other bodily practices, Latina actors are expected to display a familiar hyperfemininity and exotic sexuality that always exists in relation to normative white heterosexuality. (Molina-Guzmán 14)

Aguirre's body is enclosed in those acting roles:

During my talk, it was mentioned that I was entering a racist business where more often than not I would be offered Mexican hooker and Puerto Rican maid roles. Was I sure that I wanted to continue? (...) But now my color was being directly addressed (*Mexican Hooker* 59).

Becoming aware of her fragmented identity and the narratives that represent the two "spaces of vulnerability", she acquires her acting skills:

I left my political being at the door when I entered theatre school, compartmentalizing my life for the millionth time, and in so doing inadvertently shut off access to the wealth of emotional material I could have drawn from. It was no wonder I couldn't stay connected onstage: the compartmentalization was so airtight that my very identity was absent from my acting classes (*Mexican Hooker* 157).

Because of her traumatized, fragmented identity, becoming an artist turns into a long process. Thus, her traumatic experiences surface at the acting lessons she takes in Canada. Being unable to confront her own trauma, Aguirre cannot act her roles since they are too personal for her. No matter the role, trauma always surfaces, taking control of her body: "I found that taking a risk on the page was not difficult for me. When the instrument was written text, I was able to overcome my fears with exceptional ease" (*Mexican Hooker* 152). Performative healing, therefore, implies three main stages. First, being vulnerable in front of the audience:

I was vulnerable in front of a warm, safe audience who wanted me to succeed in whatever I was experimenting with, people who had never experienced political violence witnessing my first step in the long journey of desegregating my life in order to be an artist. A step symbolized not only by the story I was telling but by whom I was telling it with: my childhood friend who had hidden his Chilean-exile identity and was only letting the school know about it now, on the cusp of this exit. My exploration was straightforward: How do I unmask myself, my true self, in front of an audience of mainstream Canadians? How do I become vulnerable as an artist? (71)

According to Judith Butler, "when a vulnerability is recognized, that recognition has the power to change the meaning and structure of the vulnerability itself" (Butler 43). Breaking the silence before the audience and, especially, her father helps her to overcome her post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms.

Second, realizing that performance is not therapy: "I thought I succeeded that day. But when I checked with my voice teacher, she was clear: 'That wasn't performance. That was therapy. It was too personal'" (*Mexican Hooker* 71). This realization becomes the first step toward her healing process.

Finally, taking control of her body. As the writer and actress expresses in an interview: "To be an actor you are the instrument, it is your body your voice your emotional and spiritual being." For that reason, she has to learn to take control of her own body "on the thesis that in order to be an actor, you have to be on your body, in order to embody text and interpret text I have to figure out a way to get back into my body and in so doing I have to confront again the trauma of having lived in a state of chronic terror for most of my youth (...) by being numb." Performing helps her to confront her physical and psychological wounds: "As for the childhood rape that had come to the surface, always present, never dealt with, it was clear as day that it was now cast out from my body, never to come back and bother me again" (*Mexican Hooker* 5). The physical burden of her body is relieved once her trauma is healed. Therefore, mind and body become one.

Writing and playing turn out for her into a much bigger project: bringing on stage the experiences, affects and problems of the Latino community in exile:

The story my play told, although common to thousands of immigrant Canadians, was so absent from Canadian stages that it was met with incredulity from the very artists presenting it, who could not integrate it until they knew it was backed up by a middle-class, white, liberal organization such as Amnesty International. I decided

that one of the reasons I was acquiring theatre skills was to tell the stories of my silenced, isolated, and disbelieved community, the Latino community in exile (*Mexican Hooker* 157).

For her, acting means both performing and striving for agency in a Western, heteronormative world. For that reason, she commits herself to Socially Engaged Theatre or Theatre of the Oppressed.

Socially Engaged Theatre began as a way to achieve social change by giving voice to the people against their oppressor, mostly colonial powers, and as a "movement capable of speaking to and for the various countries in the region still struggling to find their own identity" (Versényi 564). In *Forging Community: The Latino Experience in Northern Western Indiana, 1919-1975*, James B. Lane and Edward J. Escobar explain how there has been a long tradition of theatre in Latino communities, but this specific socially and politically engaged theatre developed after Luis Valdez used his Teatro Campesino [Farm Workers' Theatre] to promote the lettuce boycott in 1965 (280).

Thus, Socially Engaged Theatre sheds light upon different kinds of oppression, such as gender and racial, expressing personal concerns, feelings and affects. Elizabeth C. Ramírez and Catherine Casiano also defend the leading role of Latina playwright in Latino theatre: "it is evident that the momentum of Latinas contributing to the annals of the stage continues. In effect, this compelling voice remains at the very forefront of Latina/Latino theatre in the United States, making an impact on the U.S. stage" (1).

With that in mind, we consider Socially Engaged Theatre or Theatre of the Oppressed as the space where vulnerability is confronted by the subaltern. In order to elaborate my argument, I will briefly discuss and connect this popular art to the theory of affect. Nicola Shaughnessy analyses the relationship between applied theatre, affect and socially engaged theatre. According to the critic, applied theatre "involve(s) a diversity of participatory practices in educational, social and community contexts (...) in order to achieve a particular objective which is generally defined in terms of change, learning or 'development'" (7), which involves operating "outside of 'mainstage' and 'mainstream' traditions (. . .) utilitarian purpose (...) an active engagement" (7). As Carolyn Pedwell and Anne Whitehead posit, affect should be explored "less for how they dominate, regulate or constrain individual subjects and more for the possibilities they offer for thinking (and feeling) beyond what is already known and assumed" (115). Understanding affect as an essential aspect of socially engaged theatre gives the performers the possibility of staging feelings that, although filtered by hegemonic structures, exist prior to these structures. At the same time, the audience connects with those feelings, reconsidering imposed histories and structures.

In this sense, José Esteban Muñoz defines affect and relates it to the role played by the subaltern. For the critic, affect is

supposed to be descriptive of the receptors we use to hear each other and the frequencies on which certain subalterns speak and are heard or, more importantly, felt. This leaves us to amend Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous question, "Can the Subaltern Speak? (1988, 1999) to ask How does the subaltern feel? How might subalterns feel each other? (677)

Introducing feelings and affect in the subaltern's speech grants her the possibility of speaking her experiences. Whereas, as Marta Caminero-Santangelo argues, Spivak was not so wrong when she affirmed that the subaltern cannot speak, "at least with the final authority and conclusiveness regarding the facts of trauma" (15), approaching the mainstream culture through socially engaged theatre allows the subaltern to have the final authority on her own trauma. Performing the subaltern's own story allows oppressed people to confront their own vulnerability as a further step toward healing their psychological wounds.

In the exile context, socially engaged theatre or theatre of the oppressed becomes the space where a negotiation of a fragmented identity could take place, deconstructing imposed constructions. Furthermore, in a transnational context, socially engaged theatre articulates strategies of resistance against the production of vulnerability so that other actors, such as international institutions or non-Latino readers, might fight against those kinds of violence, raising global awareness in turn. There are many other relevant examples of the transnationalization of Socially Engaged Theatre or Theatre of the Oppressed. In this sense, it is worth mentioning *Antígonas. Tribunal de Mujeres*, a play performed by Colombian, non-professional actresses, along with a group of professional actresses, who tell their own stories of violence and other oppressed people's stories as a way to heal their country's wounds and their own traumas. Thanks to this play, those women get to denounce the state and gender violence in their country for a national and transnational audience in order to spark political and social change. The transnationalization of the play offers them international protection against national threats.

Aguirre's political commitment to her country of origin and her fight against the dictatorship takes a new form once it is over. She began a dramatic activism to give voice to her Latino community:

I started facilitating Theatre of the Oppressed workshops around Greater Vancouver with a local company, Headlines Theatre Group. With their support and backing I formed the Latino Theatre Group, made up of anyone from the Latino community who wanted to join, as Theatre of the Oppressed was not for actors but for non-actor community members. (158)

Giving oppressed bodies in transit a space where their vulnerability is exposed provides them with new tools for healing and performing alternative stories to western heteronormative discourses. Therefore, Aguirre's theatrical and autobiographical productions propose strategies to heal her southern and northern narratives.

The final step toward healing is giving voice to trauma through autobiographical testimonial writings. Latina testimonio plays a key role in subverting this silence and recovering the female Latina voice. Examples include Julia Alvarez's *Something to Declare* or Jennifer Browdy de Hernández's collection on Latina testimonies titled *Women Writing Resistance, Essays on Latin America and the Caribbean*. According to Hannah Huxley, "testimony cannot be fully formed without accessing internal, deep-rooted memory. The reality of traumatic events must first be accessed through the individual's subconscious, in order to be constructed as part of a testimonial" (49). This is a long and hard process for Latina women who are victims of gender violence as well as the physical and psychological violence derived from their experiences as resilient survivors of exile. However, as Jennifer C. Rossi asserts, the victim's voice is key to remembering what "official" history and politics erase:

Giving testimony of trauma fills in gaps in the historical record, and in this way remembering becomes an act of resistance to the fragmented historical narrative of oppressed peoples. Performing—through different forms of storytelling—moves these memories into the public mind, where social change can occur (205).

That is, thanks to Latina testimonio, the body becomes one with the psyche and the tongue can no longer be cut. As Ylce Irizarry posits, "testimonios foreground the need for communities to cohere and free themselves from oppression, a narrative form that not only calls for the awareness of brutality, but also documents survival and self-determination" (264). Remembering becomes the basis of subversive performances that can be expressed through testimonio, becoming a way of resilience for those oppressed communities. In this sense, Aguirre gives voice to her trauma. First, she performs and, thus, confronts, her trauma by being vulnerable in front of a particular audience, that is, her rapist:

When it was my turn to speak, I told him that I understood that he denied being my attacker, that I nonetheless believed he was my attacker, and that we could agree to disagree on that. And then I spoke to him about the effect the rape had had on Macarena, my parents, my siblings, my friends, my community. And I said that that was what caused me the most pain. I told him I didn't feel comfortable going into my intimate life and the effect the rape had had on me and my relationships (*Mexican Hooker* 273).

And, finally, she confronts her trauma by telling it to a wider audience in a written form through her own testimonio: "I had been working through trauma onstage. Now I knew that simply recounting a story as part of a healing process was not art, but therapy (...) That kind of distance from the story could only happen after healing" (*Mexican Hooker* 160).

By giving a coherent account of her traumatic experience and her psychological wounds, she stops circling that wound to speak with the conclusive discourse denied to oppressed and victimized people. For Žižek,

A distinction needs to be made, as well, between (factual) truth and truthfulness: what renders a report of a raped woman (or any other narrative of trauma) truthful is its very factual unreality, its confusion, its inconsistency. If the victim were able to report on her painful and humiliating experience in a clear manner, with all the data arranged in a consistent order, this very quality would make us suspicious of its truth. (Žižek 4)

Being able to communicate her feelings about the rape and its traumatic outcome to her rapist, and later to write it in order to be read by a wider audience, means that she has survived her trauma and that she is no longer an emotional victim of a physical traumatic experience.

Aguirre's testimonio, thus, fights against sexual abuse, gender inequality, and racial discrimination, contributing to her healing process—healing wounds from the sexual abuse, the Chilean dictatorship,

the exile, and the racialization of her body by the media industry. The final step, therefore, is writing her autobiographical work where she tells the public not only of the violence suffered but also her inner thoughts and feelings, becoming vulnerable as the final stage to heal both her body and her mind.

As it has been argued here, after the shift from feeling victimized to feeling empowered, the victim can regain self-control and recover from her traumatic experience. In order to do so, the victim has to confront the causes of her trauma and find the hidden meanings of her experiences. In this context, Aguirre's narrative becomes a way of subverting official accounts and empowering women to consider themselves as subjects of alternative stories.

If theatre, then, is a survival mechanism for both the traumatized Latina community and the community of rape victims, the role that the racialized, gendered and cultural body plays in the author's autobiography is also quite significant. Overcoming her own trauma, especially the one derived from gender violence, in a public way, Aguirre finds the solace that allows her to go beyond resilience towards a state of resistance, subverting the silence imposed over the Latina community and rape victims. Embodying Latina stories, then, is a means of survival, that breaks the silence and heals the dramatized body and its community, fighting against the dangers of gender and cultural vulnerability. In fact, for Aguirre, her healing depends on her capacity to take control over her previously victimized body.

Aguirre's traumatic experience turns into story once the wounds become scars that no longer hurt. They become stories when they can be told and written. Thus, Aguirre's book is her last step towards healing herself from communal, physical and psychologically trauma.

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