

**Chileans in Exile:** Confronting the homelands

Carole Concha Bell

## Confronting the homelands: The role of literature in second generation refugee identity struggles.

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In 1973 Socialist President Salvador Allende, democratically elected by the people and radical in his vision for Chile, was deposed by the military junta and his supporters hunted down, rounded up, and tortured or killed. During the 1970s and 1980s as the regime took hold of the country, it has been estimated that nearly half a million Chileans were exiled following the military coup. The families left Chile under traumatic circumstances, some vowing to return as soon as the dictatorship was over, others choosing to remain in their countries of exile. Most of the refugees were survivors of torture and persecution, and witness to the murder of their comrades and the massacre of a dream.

The onslaught of Chilean exile was profoundly political and distressing, made all the more difficult by the typical struggles faced by newcomers in foreign lands: learning new languages, taking poorly paid jobs and confronting cultures vastly different from their own. Caught between two worlds, the children of exiles either born in exile or leaving Chile as children, became the reluctant witnesses of their parents' painful adjustment processes.

The UK welcomed no more than 3,000 Chilean exiles (in comparison to over 100,000 in Sweden) making it a tight knit community. While they were located across the UK, big cities such as Birmingham, Edinburgh and Sheffield spawned strong Chilean communities often supported by sympathisers such as trade unions and humanitarian organisations like the Quakers. I grew up in one of these communities, first in Cambridge and then, when my parents received a World University Scholarship, in Birmingham. Most of my friends were also the children of Chilean exiles and much of my childhood was spent at solidarity events where my parents tirelessly campaigned against the dictatorship. However, I came to resent their insistence on trying to form me as a Chilean. My very survival depended on assimilating British culture, and like many children, I simply wanted to blend in. I identified as British and that feeling grew ever stronger as I became a teenager. I did not understand why my parents were so determined to maintain their cultural identity or fight for a country thousands of miles away, lost in time.

### **Confronting the Homeland**

In 1990 I was 15 and living in London with my father. He was the coordinator for Chilean Exile NGO Chile Democratico based in Old Street, North London, and as a result, privy to much information. He assured me that the dictator would fall, and we would finally 'go home'. Junot Diaz the Dominican American writer once spoke about this shadow that loomed over his childhood in an interview:

"From the moment I could remember, it was made very clear to me that I was going to the United States," he says. "There was already the shadow of the United States over all of our lives. There was a sense that the world that we were inhabiting, the people that we

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were connected to, the neighbourhood that was more or less my entire universe, that all of these things would soon vanish.”

From 1988 things changed quickly in Chile, the fax machine at Chile Democratico tirelessly churned out lists of people allowed to return. Finally, after 13 years of being blacklisted, 450,000 Chileans living in political exile across the globe were permitted to return to Chile (Artigas, 2006).

I did my best to swerve those uncomfortable conversations about ‘returning’. London was my home, not that hot, dusty hell that represented death, persecution, and rejection. All I wanted to do was prepare for my upcoming exams and not think about Chile. Alas, I was never to take them. Shortly after my 16th birthday my father came home bursting with excitement, his handsome face beaming. It had finally happened. We were off the blacklist and now free to return. My tiny acts of rebellion such as running away to Wolverhampton for three days and hiding in a shed, did little to affect the inevitable. On 26 October 1990 we boarded an Avianca Plane toward Caracas and then Santiago bound.

We landed in Santiago and lived there for a few months until my father rented a flat in the Southern city of Chillan, where he was from. Chillan is a small conservative rural city that, unbeknown to me, was socially segregated and still reeling from the effects of the regime. The shock of being transplanted from the multicultural metropolis that is London to this small outback where bulls and horses roamed the streets, was immense.

My father adjusted quickly, reverting to whoever he was before his enforced exile in the UK. He took a new wife and started a new family. I on the other hand began to wilt like an uprooted plant. I made friends but could not adjust to Chile’s antiquated cultural norms. There were structural issues too, like schooling and the language. I furiously clung to my British identity, refusing to learn Spanish and or to engage in norms, breaking rules at every opportunity.

I eventually found my tribe, composed mainly of other exile kids from France, Belgium, Sweden, Canada, and Switzerland. We were united in our alienation from Chilean society and proud of our misfit status. Chile had forgotten us, and we returnees were a thorn in its side: a reminder that a very brutal exile had taken place. Chile wanted to move forward from the past but without addressing those dark issues of the past or acknowledging our existence at all. The order was to blend in and shut up. Shut up about Europe, stop wearing those clothes, stop listening to that music.

What we did not grasp was that the dictatorship propaganda machine had manufactured the concept of a ‘golden exile’ during the regime. The claim was that Chilean exile was a privilege, pitting incoming returnees against our compatriots that had lived through one of the most heinous regimes in Latin America. (Wright and Zuniga, 2007:63). And while this notion of ‘golden exile’ originated from right wing elements, it proliferated across Chilean society, including those on the left who felt abandoned by us.

At parties we debated our legal status at length. Were we really exiles if born abroad? Was this forced ‘return’ not a sort of exile? Was this new Chilean identity not being imposed upon us? Eventually most of us left Chile. I was one of the last to leave, hanging on for six years.

Eventually I made enough money through teaching English to the pampered upper classes of Santiago who requested my services because of my exquisite British accent. I arrived back in the UK in 1997, alone and even more confused than when I had left as a teenager.

### **Making sense of identity: first v second generation exile**

In 2019, I decided to examine the theme of exile and identity by embarking on a Creative Writing MA. Once I had learned about the varying literary devices that exist, fiction in all its forms stood out as the vehicle that would enable me to begin the process of interpreting my experiences. In contrast to writing from an academic perspective, fiction, whether it be via a novel, short stories or a full blown longform novel, gives writers the artistic freedom to incorporate not personal experiences, but that of others observed. In preparation I devoured books by Chilean exile authors such as Roberto Bolaño and Ariel Dorfman, yet while I was mesmerised by the writing and identified with much of the visceral descriptions of uprootedness, I did not feel they encapsulated my experience as the daughter of exiles. These were first generation writers who, like my parents, had lived through a painful exile and possessed something I did not: a strong sense of identity, for they had lost their homeland whereas I had never known mine. And I would never know mine because I did not have one, being the bastard child of dictatorship and rejection, too British to be Chilean. Too Chilean to be fully British. It dawned on me that a distinction needed to be made between the generation of those expelled from Chile as exiles and identified as such, versus those of us born or bred in 'host' countries and who identified with their cultures.

I decided to write my Masters dissertation on the theme of second-generation exile in fiction and while searching for academic texts on the literary output of second-generation Chileans. I stumbled upon the term 'hinge generation' and 'double exile' or 'counter diaspora.' (King and Christow 2009;3). Still, I struggled to find authors specifically discussing the topic of second generation Chilean retorno and struggled even harder to find any novels written by hybrid retornados. It was time to finally rise to the challenge of writing the text I longed to read despite the pain of having to relive unpleasant memories.

Discovering Junot Diaz' Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* turned me upside down. I saw myself reflected in this tale of political exile and identity struggles as Diaz skilfully conveyed how dictatorship and exile impacts upon families. After reading and analysing its contents I felt validated enough to begin planning and writing my novel. The artistry involved in the construction of these experiences using fiction as a device acted as a buffer, enabling me to detach myself and recall 1990s Chile as an observer. Chapters began to flow, though sometimes stunted by the minutiae of everyday tasks and the typical doubts most writers suffer.

In her blog Isabel Allende speaks of how writing fiction helped her overcome the trauma of exile:

"It took me many years to get over the trauma of exile. I was lucky, though. I found something that saved me from despair. I found literature. Frankly, I think I would have not

become a writer if I had not been forced to leave everything behind and start anew. Without the military coup I would have remained in Chile. I would still be a journalist and probably a happy one. In exile, literature gave me a voice. It rescued my memories from the curse of oblivion. It enabled me to create a universe of my own."

El Retorno was a strange period: a homecoming for some, an exile within an exile for others. In this case, the use of stories over academic interpretation fulfils many functions. It enables writers to document their experience of this particular point in history, and in turn carve out a unique identity separate from that of our parents and grandparents, that has its own characteristics and layers of pain. Documenting our perspective on this event gives us a voice to tell our stories and claim back our complex identities as players in this chapter of Chilean history.

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