

6-1-2013

The Boo of Viramontes's Cafe: Retelling Ghost Stories, Central American Representing Social Death

Karina Oliva Alvarado
University of California Los Angeles

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [Latin American Literature Commons](#), and the [Modern Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Alvarado, Karina Oliva (2013) "The Boo of Viramontes's Cafe: Retelling Ghost Stories, Central American Representing Social Death," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 37: Iss. 2, Article 6.
<https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1806>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

The Boo of Viramontes's Cafe: Retelling Ghost Stories, Central American Representing Social Death

Abstract

Chicana author Helena María Viramontes's culturally complex "The Cariboo Cafe," renders a contemporaneous example of social death in the lives of undocumented migrants. Sociologist Orlando Patterson bases "social death" on the "profound natal alienation of the slave" (38) that once cut off from a past and future, promulgates the slave's desocialization and depersonalization: systems also at play with undocumented Central American immigrants. While Patterson refers to an overt and systemized economic exploitation of a people, the concept remains relevant to this analysis, though symbolic. It examines a three-fold negation through the representational experiences of undocumented immigration, gender, and what Arturo Arias calls Central American "nonentity" (186), in Viramontes's short story to address Central American differences erased by the utopian desire for reconciliation in Chicana/Latina texts. While social death is originally conceived and applied through "a mode of oppression through which slaves, and by extension those who grew up under the control of Jim Crow society" were coerced through hegemony (JanMohammed 246), its current relevance is allegorical to the conditions that delocalized and depersonalized literary representations of Central Americans. The question is what contemporary hegemonies socially kill the articulation of Central American subjectivities in a Latina/o US imaginary.

Keywords

Chicano/a, Chicana author, Helena María Viramonte, The Cariboo Cafe, migrants, undocumented migrants, social death, immigrants, Chicana/Latina texts, oppression, slavery, hegemony

The Boo of Viramontes's Cafe: Retelling Ghost Stories,
Central American Representing Social Death

Karina Oliva Alvarado
University of California Los Angeles

“The Cariboo Cafe” in Helena María Viramontes’s *The Moths and Other Stories* (1985) introduced one of the earliest representations of a Central American protagonist in Latina/o literature. Viramontes foreshadowed subsequent representations of Central American characters and protagonists in Latina/Chicana novels such as Demetria Martinez’s romance novel *Mother Tongue* (1994), and Ana Castillo’s *sapogonia* (1990) that spoke to the people’s suffering in the isthmus through the traumas of wars in Central America and of experiences of (un)documented immigration. The stories were received as statements of solidarity with Central America in general in a type of second-voiced testimony or fictionalized testimonios. The specific wars of each nation were generalized as the countries were spoken for and at times written as a region through an imagined ethno-Central American subjectivity that prioritized political mobilization over first-hand experience of the narratives portrayed. For example, Luis J. Rodríguez urges on *Mother Tongue*’s back cover, “Read it. Get angry. And act.” While compelling, and at the time urgently needed, the generalization dissipated each person’s story and experience.

Representing regionalized people in a generalized state-terror would create what Ana Patricia Rodríguez calls “undifferentiated” Central Americans (“The Fiction” 212),¹ an act (of writing) that continues to promote a lack of knowledge of specific Central American histories and narratives if and when the loci of (representational) enunciation are left unexplored beyond the given that these are narratives of Third World Chicana/o, and/or hemispheric

solidarity. For example, in Viramontes's short story, the nameless literary character has been presented as Salvadoran (Sonia Saldivar-Hull 2000; José David Saldivar 1997; Barbara Harlow 1991; Anna M. Sandoval 2000; Ivonne Gordon Vailakis 2000), yet the cultural markers represented indicate that the immigrant washerwoman is most likely Nicaraguan. Undifferentiation promotes historical and cultural erasures through mis-characterizations, generalizations, and denial of first-hand lived specificities.

These negations and cultural negotiations are a form of symbolic (literary/social) death of Central Americans as undocumented or illegitimized immigrants in real and imagined American and Latina/o communities. The undifferentiated representations of Central Americans intersected with gender and the non-being or ghosting² of the represented existence of undocumented immigrants allegorize a contemporary example of social death. Sociologist Orlando Patterson bases social death on the "profound natal alienation of the slave" (38) that once cut off from a past and future, promulgates the slave's desocialization and depersonalization, systems also at play with undocumented Central American immigrants. While Patterson refers to an overt and systemized economic exploitation of a people that used race to institute class divisions through Manichaeian cultural/biological hierarchies, the concept remains relevant. This article explores a three-fold negation [undocumented immigrant, gender, Central American "nonentity" (Arias 186)] in Viramontes's short story to address Central American differences erased by the utopian desire for reconciliation in Chicana/Latina authored texts. While social death is originally conceived and applied through "a mode of oppression through which slaves, and by extension those who grew up under the control of Jim Crow society" were coerced through hegemony (JanMohammed 246), its current relevance is seen as allegorical to the conditions that desocialized and depersonalized literary representations of Central Americans in Chicana authored texts, which informs the question: what contemporary hegemonies socially kill the articulation of Central American subjectivities in Latina/o US?

Undocumented Social Death, Fragmentation and Denial

Viramontes renders precisely from firsthand experience the California and Los Angeles topographies that characterize her short stories and novels. Her acclaimed first book, *The Moths and Other Stories* (1985), was followed by *Paris Rats in E.L.A.* (1993), and a first novel, *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995), with the most recent being *Their Dogs Came With Them* (2007). Viramontes's work and presence has impacted Chicana/o and Latina/o literature through her centralizing of Chicana and Latina subjectivities and struggles. The impact has also been literary, fracturing the magical realist moments that are part of her mood, style, and narrative structure to reveal multiple and contradictory subjective, familial, and communal voices struggling to speak from sites of pain forcibly shaped by economic, cultural, religious, ethnic, classed, sexed, and gendered dominations.

Chicano literary critic José David Saldívar places Viramontes's work within the "*transfrontera* contact zone" that he defines as the physical, cultural, and geopolitical border that disrupts the US/Mexico dyad (13) that "can no longer be exclusively located within the border-patrolled boundaries of the nation-state. Chicana/o America therefore defines itself as a central part of an extended *frontera*. Its cultures are revitalized through a re-Hispanicization of migratory populations from Mexico and Central America" (128). In critiquing this, Rodríguez examines "feminist transfronterista logic and anti-colonial imperatives" that "produced 'fictions of solidarity' predicated on Chicana/Mexicana subjectivities" (200). However, Saldívar, like Viramontes, suggests that there is no absolute Chicana/o subjectivity, and that instead of an imperialist or recolonizing venture, Chicana/o "border crossing" can be understood within "the phenomena of the 'unhomely'" (98) where the comfort of the familiar may seem recognizable, but is only a ghost of the meaning it once (falsely) held without question.

This analysis acknowledges Viramontes's disruption of a sense of nation or culture by playing with familiar understandings of national-ethnic-cultural signifiers. The plot is about two lost children from the inner city who seem to be Mexican (American) and are taken by a woman who seems to be Central American. When the woman takes the children to a deteriorated diner, the American owner recognizes her from the news. Branding her a kidnapper, he

calls the police, who shoot and kill her during a standoff. The story's fragmented narrative form, its use of internal analepsis, the woman's total silence, and the deployment of the uncanny create a complex and disrupting narrative.

Viramontes tactically structures confusion to highlight fragmented social relations and the characters' economic and intersubjective alienation along with the protagonist's psychosis; however, the confusing structuring becomes problematic in that it spreads beyond the text as readers continue to misread the characters in an attempt to locate them in a social order. Like in most of Viramontes's narratives, the story is told through various perspectives that in this case replicate the washerwoman's ruptured psyche. Flashbacks and foreshadowing disorient the reader to demonstrate the incoherence and unintelligibility of the nameless washerwoman's trauma.

The viewpoints expressed by the Latina girl, the nameless woman, and the American cook, render their internalized fears and tensions which include cultural allusions, assumptions and disassociations as when the cook describes the washerwoman, "Already I know that she's bad news because she looks street to me. Round face, burnt-toast color, black hair that hangs like straight ropes. Weirdo.... Right off I know she's illegal, which explains why she looks like a weirdo" (69-70). What is the correlation (in the cook's thinking) between illegal and weirdo? Rather than odd or abnormal, the term "weirdo" connotes the root term "weird" and its denotative meaning of uncanny and eerie. Strangely, the uncanny is dependent on the familiar. The cook is familiar with immigrants (whether they are undocumented or not). But the uncanny becomes uncanny through defense mechanisms such as repression and denial because the uncanny is the trace or feeling of what is actually already known. The washerwoman's humanity ends up being nullified with the denial of her diversity through the naturalizing of her presumed illegality as a type of social abnormality.

Viramontes increases the voids and tensions in the story by refraining from narrating how to culturally (and even racially) locate the characters. For example, the children do not have to be read as Mexican since Viramontes does not disclose any of the characters' nationalities either. However, cultural markers such as

flour tortillas, Vicente Fernandez, and even their “Popi’s” warning to never approach a police officer because they are *la migra* (54), the feared immigration deportation officers that will send them back to *Tijuana*, are Mexican specific referents. The latch-key kids are actually lost in Los Angeles’s shadowy skid-row, but because the washerwoman keeps them (she imagines the boy Macky is her murdered son Geraldo), she is stereotyped as a kidnapper by the characters in the story, and by literary analysts thus far who continue to label her as a kidnapper even though she finds the children by accident. The children are rescued when police confront and kill the woman, who refuses to surrender the boy. Her death becomes a moment of emotive relief in the narrative. Yet, her shooting offers a false resolve since the woman dies without articulating her story or testimony; thus she is killed as an inarticulate nonbeing, her nonpresence is finally recognized. While her racial and illegal weirdness conjured the uncanny, her death seems to place everyone and everything in rightful order.

Immigrant displacement is implicit in social death that allegorizes the oppressive nonpresence of undocumented people. Patterson explains, “The slave is violently uprooted from his milieu [...] This process of social negation constitutes the first, essentially external, phase of enslavement” (38). For immigrants, especially for the undocumented, the initial deracination occurs through forced migration (whether economic represented in the story by the Mexican children, or political, represented by the Central American woman) to arrive in what Saldívar describes as “the harrowing underside of the glossy ... postmodern such as it is in Los Angeles [a]s a fully planned strategy, the social and psychic effects of which are historical dislocation and cultural relocation” (102). Saldívar names what is supposed to be a momentary phase of experience of the “border limen” but becomes instead a “position and not as threshold” (99). How can liminality become a state of existence then? Is liminal stasis equivalent to social death? As sociologist Susan Bibler-Coutin claims, “Those who do not exist legally are made to not exist socially as well” (47) since state persecution in Central America, and legal nonexistence in the United States, are acts that erase people and personhood (24, 47). Thus, social death becomes the norm within the national/legal/psychological

borders that undocumented immigrants cannot cross. Since they are not allowed this transgressive act that would otherwise legalize immigrants' presence, Saldívar, like Harlow, looks to literature to breach said threshold.

Saldívar, like other Chicana/o analysts of Viramontes's short stories, is interested by the aesthetic and political "transgressive border crossings.... of Chicana resistance literature" (102). Moreover, he locates "Adorno's aesthetic philosophy of nonidentity and negative dialectics" in its potentiality for social transformation (102), which in this case is the utopian striving to reconcile lost migrants through a reformulated Latina/o-Chicana/o family. But Adorno states that these utopias must be questioned also. Not negating the horizon proposed by Saldívar (and other Latina/o critics), Rodríguez contributes to the dialectic by questioning how "Central Americans have been read by many Chicanas/os, Latinas/os, and others as part of a larger hemispheric 'familia' and as 'relatives' in need of a helping hand" (154). In order to arrive at a reconciled new pan-Latina/o family, it is necessary to continue to override the characters' historical and cultural differences as they are posited counter to US law through the characters' overdetermined undocumented facticity. Their undocumented status also generalizes the characters so much that they are no longer personalized people with cultural and historical differences. Though the reader may prefer to reconcile the tensions and contradictions within the narrative, there is a need to interrogate these to gain a more realistic and material understanding of the social, if not symbolically represented, relations. Does Viramontes attempt to equalize the children's marginality to the nameless washerwoman's liminality? Is she suggesting a new Latina/o family as an ideal or imminent reality as so many critics have suggested? And if the answer is yes, why would she tell a tale where the Central American woman is killed? While her killing by the Los Angeles police creates a correlative link between local violence and US sponsored military violence in Nicaragua (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Panama), the end result nonetheless is a representational annihilation of the Central American woman from belonging in a Chicana/o and Latina/o imaginary. The utopian dream or striving to reach beyond borders re-allegorizes exteriorities, and materializes (in a

fictionalized sense) the nameless Central American woman's death.

Social death is predicated on the negation of the slave as a subject where his "death is conditionally commuted and can be revoked at the master's whim.... he is incorporated into the new society as an internal enemy, as a non-being" (JanMohammed 248). "The Cariboo Cafe" tells a story that can be read in relation to US geopolitics that compels immigration (to Los Angeles in the story) where immigrants have come to embody enslaved social relations, turned into internal enemies by xenophobes and xenophobic laws. The story can also represent developing Latina/o and Chicana/o relations where a Central American character's life is revoked after its uneasy antagonistic incorporation, whose life might have been extended if she (or he) remained silent and inactive, if she (or he) continued to *ghost it*. Does the Central American woman negate the hegemonic negations through her murder? Can the ending of the story, her defiance against the police, be a self affirming act, or is her obliteration a sign of an enforced exteriority, and a continued denial in American, Chicana/o and Latina/o cultures? According to Arturo Arias, her non-presence began in Central America itself (189). If so, how can the Central American character exist beyond his or her reification? This question will be readdressed when discussing social death represented by Central American writers and the alternatives they posit to insist on presence.

La Llorona, One Word for Woman Wailer, Weeping Women as One

An appeal of "The Cariboo Cafe" for some academics is the introduction of what seems to be a Central American protagonist in a Chicana authored text. Latina literature critics such as Sonia Saldivar-Hull, Barbara Harlow, Anna M. Sandoval, and Maria Herrera-Sobek have centralized an internationalist agenda, in a reading of the protagonist as a Salvadoran immigrant woman who comes to embody the myth of *La Llorona* as a universal character who unifies all women in their struggle against patriarchies and the lingering specter of colonization. This is a problematic terrain since no experience can be so typified. Historically, myths have not served the purpose of dismantling hierarchical positing of cultures, but rather of integrating others into hegemonic culture. While *La*

Llorona is presented as a universal, most of the Chicana/o critics make note that the legend originates in Mexico and is of Mexican tradition and folklore. This act of first reading *La Llorona* as a universal bridge, and then of specifying her cultural if not national origins raises a question. If the myth bridges women's struggles, why re-nationalize her at the moment of analysis instead of historicizing the underlying attempt in the narrative to denationalize a specter of patriarchal oppressions?

Even when critics have noted that the short story deconstructs geopolitical borders (Sandoval; Harlow) they nonetheless apply nationalities to the characters, which points to interpolated interpretations of cultural signifiers. The washerwoman is nameless and silent, and as such, represents the subaltern as understood from an American top-down perspective. Even though Gordon Vailakis states that because the washerwoman speaks in first person "she is not silent" (95), the washerwoman speaks only in her mind through her memories and shattered desires. The fact that she speaks internally and not externally heightens her alienation and disconnection with reality. Gordon Vailakis writes,

The *Salvadoran refugee*[s] ... only alternative to fill the void left by the absence of her son is to *steal two Chicano children* and *pretend* they are her own. As readers we realize that the abduction of the children will not convert absence to presence. *Her destiny is that of her predecessor, La Llorona, not as phantom but as a concrete being whose physical presence impinges on the borders of others as it attempts to reinstate, reconstitute its own borders, its family.* (101, emphasis added)

In this typified reading, the "Salvadoran" woman is the embodiment and incarnation of *La Llorona*. This quote highlights the strained relationship of imagined Central Americans in a Chicana/o Latina/o subtext. The logic of impinging borders is built on the idea of difference through an absolute exteriority of *the Other*. Gordon Vailakis discusses the impingement in context to the perceived abduction of the children by the supposed Salvadoran woman, implying unauthorized or illegitimate actions through the usurping of what has already been established prior to Central American attempts at presence.

This absence includes the Central American woman's specific story and subjective stance. For example, the woman has been considered Salvadoran, yet the military figure in her flashbacks repeatedly accuses her and her son of being in alliance with the US backed Nicaraguan anti-Sandinista Contras (73), the counter-revolutionaries. The following flashback takes place when the woman speaks to a military official:

He fills in the information, for I cannot write. Statements delivered, we discuss motives. "Spies," says he... "We arrest spies. Criminals." ... "He is only five and half years old." I plead with my hands... "Anyone who so willfully supports the Contras in any form must be arrested and punished without delay... Contras are tricksters... Perhaps they convinced your son to circulate pamphlets" ... "This," he says, screwing his boot into the ground, "is what the Contras do to people like you." (73)

The passage is odd in that it evokes the Contras as the revolutionaries. The persistent misreading that the woman is Salvadoran, further knots the narrative, driving the reader to attempt to disentangle it. Regardless, the consequence of overlooking specific details, where the message overrides historical accuracy, ends up recreating the undifferentiated Central American that Rodriguez has noted (212). The washerwoman's description of her disappeared son and the mention of the Contras are the only cultural markers that have caused the persistent misinterpretation that the woman is Salvadoran, which is itself an historical erasure.

The written textual confusion that has caused continued misreadings is written to heighten an anxiety already underlying Mexican-Latina/o-Central American relations that does not dissolve through the commonality of gender. "The Cariboo Cafe" is described as "the zero-zero place" because the neon sign shows only two-letter o's as the dehistoricizing processes of late capitalism in globalized hegemony in a fractured city (Jameson 1991) or the double 00 zeros in the dollar bill. The double zeros also bring to mind what Saldívar-Hull describes as the "o in *Chicano*" where Chicanas must insist on the letter "a" to signify and historicize themselves (2000, 26-27). The double zeros of the (carib)oo cafe when applied to Central Americans also signal double layers of negation (gender/cultural

abjection) which end in the *Centroamericana's* annihilation.

Moreover, the double zeros suggest a parallelism of negation between the nameless and traumatized Central American woman and Sonya, the Mexican American Latina girl who does have a name, but who is overlooked and dismissed by both the cook and the woman. The fixation on Sonya's little brother indicates the continued undermining of Chicanas' centrality, contribution, and future in Chicana/o discourse by a social power structure captivated by the male Chicano. For example, the boy reminds the presumed Anglo or African American cook and the Central American woman of each one's dead son. In a paternalistic way, the cook is attracted to the boy for what he represents to him in memoriam of his dead son, and not for the boy's potential that he will grow up to look like the ethnic clientele he dismisses and from whom he derogatorily disassociates. In relationship to the cook, the boy can represent assimilation to an American hegemony. If the boy continues to be perceived as Mexican American or even Latino, the metaphorical question arises, where does this boy belong—the US hegemony, an imagined Latino community, a Chicana/o history and discourse, or a Central American imaginary since all are shown to covet his symbolic life? Meanwhile, the Mexican American Latina girl is as silent and marginal as the nameless Central American woman.

Viramontes creates a parallelism where both women are negated not because of cultural differences to each other, but because of their gender, and because in the eyes of the American cook and police, they are dismissible Latinas. The overdetermined combination of *Latinidad*, gender (as symbolized by *La Llorona*), and immigration emerge from, and reproduce, the desocialization and depersonalization that Patterson describes involving various transitional phases of sequential negation. As rendered in the story through the dismissive way in which both the washerwoman and Sonya are treated, gender constitutes the base level through which other social negations are built upon and compounded. However, "Lost in this Chicana translation are significant figures of Central American resistance such as the Siguanaba/Segua, who have represented the desires, strength, and fighting spirit of Central American women for centuries"³ (Rodríguez 213). Therefore, the metaphor of *La Llorona* remains problematic since not all women

suffer the same type of struggles, oppressions or even cultural histories/herstories.

Central American "Ghosting" or Nonentity

According to Patterson, "The next phase [in social death] involves the introduction of the slave into the community of his master, but it involves the paradox of introducing him as a nonbeing" (38). For the nameless washerwoman, her nonentity is actually constructed through multiple sites of disarticulation. This section explores the depersonalization and desocialization processes involved through the dehumanizing that occurs when immigrants are termed illegal, as well as social and cultural denial in essentializing Latina gender. This type of gendered social negation is compounded through the conflicted homogenizing processes of national-ethnic identities.

Arias explains,

A Latino identity is often constructed through the abjection and erasure of the Central American-American. Members of this group are doubly marginalized and thereby invisibilized.... their invisible status, their non-recognition, generates a sense of nonbelonging, of nonbeing, a cruel invisibility that was first imposed on them in their countries of origin and has carried over to these latitudes. Whether we like it or not, the categories "Latin American" or "Latino" and "Central American" or "Central American-American" are not similarly constructed as intelligible identities. (186)

Both on a geopolitical and local level, these identifications give only partial stories even if they emerge from global and local inequalities and resistances. At the same time, Harlow proposes that the short story "makes the border between the United States and its Central American 'neighbors' a site of contestation" (152). This is a localized close reading of Chicana/o, Latina/o and (US) Central American contested relations.

The misspelled "cariboo" proclaims itself as a ghost story of nonbeing. Part of the fear underlying the narrative is an anxiety of appropriation, and/or belonging, of Central Americans taking and displacing a Chicana/o space or "community" according to Gordon Vailakis, and heightening fractures in *Latinidad* as signified by the

kidnapped children in the story whether they are read as Mexican or non-specific Latino. Displacement and surrogacy can also be understood through social death where the slave, “Alienated from all ‘rights’ or claims of birth” ceases “to belong in his own right to any legitimate social order.... He [is] truly a genealogical isolate. Formally isolated in his social relations with those who lived, he [is] also culturally isolated from the social heritage of his ancestors” (5).

The woman’s progeny is denied through her own son’s murder. Her memories and existence are revoked through her silenced narrative and murder. Textually, the character is denied the “social heritage of [her] ancestors.” She experiences layers of miscarriages of justice, or as Arias states in regards to Central Americans in the US, “Their nonidentity negates the possibility of an identity politics and, as a result, the possibility of justice” (189).³ Because of these multiple erasures and denials, the concepts of surrogacy and authenticity come into play, meaning that the Central American subject is shown not to exist unless it is through her failed attempt at Chicana/o surrogacy/identification. For example, her son’s castration illustrates why the short story has been analyzed in terms of family “imping[ing] on the borders of others as it attempts to reinstate its family” (Gordon Vailakis 101), and as a “new transnational family” (Saldivar 104) that ends in the Centraamericana’s murder and the assumption of the rightful return of the children to their legitimate parents.

Since the phallus is a symbol of power as a constituting force in discourse, the implication is that Central Americans seek power through the appropriation of Chicano discourses. Though the woman remains a victim throughout the narrative, her victimization creates an air of suspicion as when she bathes the boy and pays particular attention to his penis. Thus, her nonentity is deployed through the silencing of a Central American discourse of resistance that is symbolized as mistakenly sought through Chicana/o histories, narratives, and discourses. Moreover, the woman endangers the lives of the children. When the police shoot her, she refuses to let go of the boy’s hand. If the characters symbolize nationalized cultures, the incongruence arises of how could the Nicaraguan woman be the mother (even if imaginary) of

a Mexican/Latino boy? How can a Central American woman master a Latina/o or Chicana/o discourse? Rodríguez has written that “In a few literary and cinematic texts, Chicana/os symbolically absorb Central Americans into the larger political and cultural imaginary of the Latino family” (154). Countering Rodríguez’s observation, Viramontes sketches a usurping of the child into a Central American imaginary, while suggesting that the Mexican/Latino child (and its symbolic future) cannot be claimed by a Central American woman. How can the Central American woman’s complete obliteration from the story be reconciled when it nullifies her existence in a Chicana/o Latina/o presence or future? How does a nonbeing have a presence or future?

Closing, May the Dialog Continue

Patterson’s sociological and expansive study on the constituting mechanisms of enslavement as a form of social death explored the systemic ways in which slavery denied a people’s existence in society through material and symbolic negations. While this does not explore the overt, *de facto*, or *de jure* applications of social death, metaphorically, it offers a way to conceptualize how Central Americans may be socially negated in the United States as experiences especially compounded through gender and an undocumented status. American literature critics such as JanMohammed have also applied social death in reading how African American authors like Richard Wright “negated the negation” through writing and by portraying “negative protagonists.” JanMohammed states,

If hegemonic formation is so powerfully negating that it can even control one’s autonomous nervous system, one’s ability to breathe, then we must face the empirical “fact” that some, if not all, of us are indeed reduced, some, if not all, of the time, to experiencing ourselves, ideologically and physically if not ontologically, as brute, oppressed “facts.” Thus *sustained negation of the hegemony* may be necessary not only for the liberation of our minds but also of our *voices and bodies*. (266)

When it comes to the nameless washerwoman, she is killed without her showing a “sustained negation,” meaning a present and cognizant act of her actions as defiant or resistant to her oppressive situation.

She dies neither physically nor mentally liberated. Her voice is never released beyond the representation of her psychosis as a traumatized Central American. Lastly, her absence is manifested through her removal or deletion from the narrative.

Central American authors like Salvadoran Mario Bencastro and Guatemalan American Héctor Tobar have created literary characters that are marginalized, estranged, tormented, even self-aware of their traumas, and yet are purposely given voice. *Odyssey to the North* (Bencastro 1998), allows subjectivity and voice through the persistent use of quotation marks that represent the speaking subject's direct quote. In this way, the *Other* is not spoken for and therefore, silenced, i.e.,

A policeman who spoke Spanish stopped me and, when he found out I was undocumented, offered me a job as a maid [] but he never paid me a cent. He raped me many times and slept with me as if I were his wife. He threatened to kill me if I told anyone.... I lived a year and half in that life of slavery. (149-50)

By having the captive woman vocalize her story, Bencastro allows a representation of a subject in history rather than a subjected object however oppressed this particular woman is supposed to be. Though her social death is rendered, she articulates a consciousness of self-awareness that she could actually name the abuse and exploitation she had endured as a slave.

Tobar in *The Tattooed Soldier* (1998) also negates the negation by portraying the circumstance and people's resistance to it. Such an example is found when co-protagonist Antonio (who had fled Guatemala after his wife's murder) reflects about his own liminal condition, "But Los Angeles made him short. Made him stoop and it cast him out with its untouchables" (52-53). Though part of his indignation is that Antonio no longer belongs to a middle class social formation, he now speaks from his demoted and invisibilizing position. Even the most marginal representations have voice, as when Antonio recounts the first protest he ever attended in Guatemala: "The protestors were dark men with furrowed faces... They were the lowest caste of government workers, Guatemala's untouchables.... '¡Justicia!' they yelled. '¡Queremos representación!'" (93) 'Justice!' they yelled. 'We want representation!'. While the Guatemalan protestors may not have justice, Tobar allows them

the representation they yearn for, even if symbolically, by allowing them to scream it, demand it, in his novel. As Central American authors writing in the US, Bencastro and Tobar are part of a cultural aggregate that wants to insist on their presence. As JanMohammed theorized on Wright, Central American authors are invested in negating their social negations.

Moreover, critics like Saldívar recognize the utopian and transformative potential of Chicana literature. The short story promoted reflection on Central America's civil wars, and opened a dialogue. While most attention had been given previously to the crossing of national borders, especially through the bridge of *La Llorona*, this is a localized reading that could further an understanding of the social relations portrayed.

US Central American populations lack institutionalized forums of representation. They live under the *o* of Chicano and Latino discourses; their Americanized experience remains questioned and questionable in a Latin American context. Yet, these are also the sites of Central American inclusion and support. While the short story may enact a discursive sisterhood as many propose,⁴ it also shows various characters caught up by their plight, terrorized by the violence of a fragmentizing geopolitical state and anti-immigrant stance that prevents them from truly knowing each other unless the silences and misperceptions are broken and then, not recreated in the dialectics of a developing Latina/o discourse that now includes another articulating voice.

Notes

1 A verb used in street and daily speech to mean disappearing from people's knowledge, and social exchanges, this includes attempting to invisibilize oneself from institutions and the law.

2 On Chicana authored texts of Central Americans, Rodríguez states "Their anti-colonial struggles are not the same, nor entirely shared, and cannot be reconciled into one undifferentiated *transfronterista* solidarity narrative" (2008, 222).

3 For example, the woman will never receive justice for her murdered and castrated son. She is compelled to immigrate illicitly. She is conceived by the characters as a kidnapper and her story will never be known within the text.

These fictionalized negations represent her nonpresence/nonbeing.

4 Saldívar-Hull provides analysis especially in regards to “Cariboo Cafe” (144). See also her discussion of Demetria Martínez’s poem on the subject of two Salvadoran refugee women (171).

Works Cited

- Arias, Arturo. *Taking Their Word: Literature and the Signs of Central America*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2007: 201-18. Print.
- . “Central American-Americans: Invisibility, Power, and Representation in the US Latino World.” *Latino Studies Journal* 1(1), 2003. Print.
- . “Central American-Americans? Re-mapping Latino/Latin American subjectivities on both sides of the great divide.” *Explicación de Textos Literarios*. Farmington Hills: Gale Group, 1999. Print.
- Bencastro, Mario. *Odyssey to the North*. Trans. Susan Giersbach Rascón. Houston: Arte Público, 1998. Print.
- Bibler Coutin, Susan. *Nations of Emigrants*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2007. Print.
- Gordon Vailakis, Ivonne. 2000. “Wailing as a Mode of Blurring Boundaries in Helena María Viramontes’ “The Cariboo Café”” *Chicana Literary and Artistic Expressions*. Santa Barbara: U of Santa Barbara, Center For Chicano Studies Publication Series, 2000: 93-107. Print.
- Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1991:1-54 P rint.
- JanMohammed, Abdul R. “Negating the Negation as a Form of Affirmation in Minority Discourse: The Construction of Richard Wright as Subject” *Cultural Critique* 7 (Fall 1987). Print.
- Martinez, Demetria. *Mother Tongue*. New York: Ballantine, 1994. Print.
- Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death, A Comparative Study*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982. Print.
- Rodríguez, Ana Patricia. “The Fiction of Solidarity: Transfronteristas Feminisms and Anti Imperialists Struggles in Central American Transnational Narratives.” *Feminist Studies*, 34 nos. 1/2, (2008): 212, 213. Print.
- . “The War at Home: Latina/o Solidarity and Central American Immigration.” *Dividing the Isthmus, Central American Transnational Histories, Literatures, and Cultures*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2009: 154. Print.
- Saldívar, José David. *Border Matters, Remapping American Cultural Studies*.

Berkeley: U of California P, 1997. Print.

Saldívar-Hull, Sonia. 2000. *Feminism on the Border: Chicana Gender Politics and Literature*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2000. Print.

Sandoval, Anna M. "Forming Feminist Coalitions: The Internationalist Agenda of Helena María Viramontes." *Chicana Literary and Artistic Expressions*. Santa Barbara: U of Santa Barbara, Center For Chicano Studies Publication Series, 2000: 77-91. Print.

Tobar, Héctor. 1998. *The Tattooed Soldier*. New York: Penguin, 1998. Print.

Viramontes, Helena M. "Cariboo Café." *The Moths and Other Stories*. 1985. Second Edition. Houston: Arte Público, 1995. 65-79. Print.

Yarbo-Bejarano, Yvonne. "Foreword." *The Moths and Other Stories*. 1985. Second Edition. Houston: Arte Público, 1995: 9-21. Print.