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Exile, Intellectuals, and the Memory Wars

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◆ Introduction

Exile, Intellectuals, and the Memory Wars

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The present issue of *Hispanic Issues On Line Debates* addresses the interface of Latin American intellectuals' private and public dimensions as well as their roles within the context of post-authoritarian cultures and exile. Although the central figure in this discussion is Chilean author Ariel Dorfman, many of the points made in the four essays can be extrapolated to a number of figures who have lived through, and reflected on, the turbulent political scene of the last few decades in Latin America, from Diamela Eltit and Roberto Bolaño to Ricardo Piglia and Horacio Castellanos Moya, to name just a few. All of these authors have in common a strong interest in elucidating the darkest spots in the recent past of that part of the world, and a belief in the powers of literature to explore the human dimension of the conflicts that have shaped not only the history of those nations, but also, and perhaps most importantly, their present and future situations. The global appeal of their works surpasses the particularities of their own vital experiences and political agendas, which, needless to say, often inform their writing.

The present "Debate" is built as a polyphonic response to Hernán Vidal's essay, "Ariel Dorfman: The Residue of Hope After Public Personae Construction." Vidal analyzes three identity moments in Dorfman's career: the Shaman, the Lacan metaphor, and the Optimistic fatalist. These "public personae," constructed in the background of Dorfman's work, are informed not only by his professional capacity as author, but by his childhood, adolescence, adult political participation, and his experience as an exile. Vidal also situates Dorfman's personae construction in his consideration of the trajectory of Chilean history, relating it to a discussion of the "justness" of the Popular Unity's actions, the politics of the transition to democracy, and the marks of trauma that remain in Chilean society today. For Vidal, Dorfman is a representative case that problematizes how public personae

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construction underlies the (re)construction of an image of a larger Chilean social psyche.

Vidal's analysis contributes to recent discussions that have worked to reveal underlying tensions existent in the transition periods of post-authoritarian cultures via an examination of the roles of artists and intellectuals in the creation of such political contexts.¹ In bringing a critical lens to the consideration of Dorfman's personae construction, Vidal's analysis resists the tendency to nostalgically remember past resistances to authoritarian regimes, engaging in part the work of scholars such as Beatriz Sarlo, who in recent years have sought to question the manner in which intellectuals may be un-critically (or, for Sarlo, un-academically) examining the past from their specific locations and personal experiences.

In her commentary, Juliet Lynd argues that Vidal's critique ignores the emotional appeal of Dorfman's personal story, and she raises questions regarding the management of memory in post-Allende Chile by those who reflect on it from abroad, as Vidal and Dorfman do. Lynd points out that the two have more in common than meets the eye, as they are both intellectuals who have written extensively about Chilean affairs from afar and from progressive standpoints. One essential difference is that Vidal's work does not divulge the personal side of the equation, as he has opted to keep a purely academic profile. Along these lines, Lynd notes Vidal's lack of accommodation for literature, a kind of discourse that Dorfman has successfully used to raise awareness about the recent history of Chile and the implications of exile for individuals.

Joshua Lund and Dierdra Reber also consider Vidal's background to be relevant to the understanding of his position *vis à vis* Dorfman, especially if one takes into account that, in several aspects, they offer two views of the same vital experience, one that is haunted by the horrors, failures, and challenges of post-1973 Chile. In part, Vidal's critique is consequently self-directed, as Lund and Reber see the "Dorfman" that Vidal speaks about more in terms of a representative of a generation, than a specific individual. Lund and Reber try to move the discussion forward, surpassing what they see as intellectually stagnant memory debates to look into continued injustices in Latin America. Thus, they turn to cinema to illustrate the turn that cultural critics should be taking toward a renewed consideration of the social effects of global capitalism and, in so doing, offer an example of a productive line of inquiry to advance the memory debate connected to the violent past of the region.

Carlos Vargas-Salgado focuses on Dorfman's play *Death and the Maiden* and its reception in Chile and elsewhere to respond to Vidal's arguments. Vargas-Salgado sees the value of Dorfman's work in its ability to raise awareness about human rights issues and as a positive element working to bring a moral or "sentimental" education to the citizenry. Thus, regardless of the author's own (constructed) position, the play enjoys a semantic autonomy that makes it a text that supersedes the initial conditions

of its production. In every new rendering it speaks to audiences who listen to the performing characters, empathizing with or rejecting them in a way that is emotional, rather than rational. Thus the audience does not listen to the man who created those characters; a man whose personae are as complex and sometimes as contradictory as the world in which he happened to be born.

The responses to Vidal's essay coincide with Dorfman's trust in artistic creation in general, and in literature in particular, for the discussion of collective experiences, especially those of a traumatic nature. The commentators also value the emotional component inherent in debates surrounding human rights issues, an aspect that is necessarily bound to compelling stories whose "primary source" (direct experience, mediated memory, or an author's imagination) or motivation is eventually seen to be as irrelevant as the narrator's personal position within the social and political realms. These stories will keep sending different, and sometimes conflicting, messages whose meaning will be increasingly less dependent on their authors' intentions and contexts, as their future audiences relate them to their own experiences, preoccupations, and hopes.

Notes

1. Such an analysis forms the basis for a previous volume of *Hispanic Issues*, *Post-Authoritarian Cultures: Spain and Latin America's Southern Cone*.

Works Cited

- Martín-Estudillo, Luis and Roberto Ampuero. *Post-Authoritarian Cultures: Spain and Latin America's Southern Cone*. *Hispanic Issues* Vol. 35. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2008.
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