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Exile and Immigrant Bodies Reflect Disillusioned Dreams in Helena Maria Viramontes’s “The Cariboo Café”

Helena Maria Viramontes (b. 1954) is an American novelist and fiction writer, who is motivated and inspires the Chicana/o Movement. Viramontes manifests exile and immigrant bodies in “The Cariboo Café” to reflect the actions and consequences of the characters’ systemic reality. An individual’s systemic reality relies on an individual’s environment, which influences a person’s beliefs, values, and customs due to the consequences of the cultural environment. Viramontes’s narrative shows the effects of discrimination, misrepresentation, and the dismissal of exile and immigrant narratives, which she illustrates in “The Cariboo Café,” noting the chasm of exile and immigrant bodies existing in Anglo-dominant society. The structure of Viramontes’s “The Cariboo Café” is reflective of the disillusioned dreams that motivate exile and immigrant bodies to take the danger of migrating between countries as an undocumented person. For instance, the distorted narrative in “The Cariboo Café” is a nonlinear account, detailing three separate stories, which do align with one another, but only after the reader experiences and considers the cross-sections and gaps of Sonya’s and Macky’s separation from their parents, the cook’s bitter solitude, and the washerwoman’s grief. Scholars of Latin American folklore and myth consider “The Cariboo Café” as a contemporary retelling of La Llorona. In making the connection between Viramontes’s reflection of exile and immigrant bodies with the mythology of Latin America, the text shows an equivocal connection between the influence of indigenous culture and a modern understanding of Latinidad in an Anglo-American society. In the context of Anglo-American society, the exile and immigrant narrative is constantly attached to the experiences of Latina/o people, so Viramontes’s display of discrimination, institutional racism, and misrepresentation, is consequential to the social and literal death of Viramontes’s unnamed, washerwoman. Viramontes’s “The Cariboo Café” reveals the disillusionment growing in the United States, questioning the validity of the supposed American Dream, especially for incoming migrants looking to establish a new life for themselves and their families, even in the sight of loss.

To begin, Viramontes marks Sonya and Macky’s parents as “displaced,” recognizing the beginning of a shaky narrative, resulting in the children’s own anxiety when confronting society members with government power and authority. For example, the three rules the children follow demonstrates the children’s hesitance to ask authority members for help:

Rule one: never talk to strangers, not even the neighbor who paced up and down the

hallways talking to himself. Rule Two: the police, or “polie” as Sonya’s popi pronounced the word, was La Migra in disguise and thus should be avoided. Rule three: keep your key with you at all times—the four walls of the apartment were the only protection against the streets until Popi returned home” (65).

The fixation on rules in the beginning of “The Cariboo Café” is ironic to the unfolding chaos, since rules prove to be false. As for rule one, the authority of the rule is invalid because the four walls meant to protect the children of the mentally ill man who frightens them, is so close in proximity of their home that the children always feel in constant danger. With rule two, the mispronunciation of “police” points to the father’s inability to pronounce English to the standards of Anglo-American English, signifying a broken word. The mispronunciation of “police” or “polie,” represents the broken world the children are living in. The rule teaches the children to mistrust the authority that upholds social order. The significance of “polie” is a testament to the lacking quality of social order, where an individual is both afraid to recruit the help of a government institution and does not feel the need to practice the correct pronunciation of “police.” For Sonya, rule three is the most important, since she considers the key “a guardian saint,” so when she loses her symbol of protection, and is later stranded in the street outside the security of her Popi and four walls, Viramontes’s narrative strips the child of her protective symbol, and shows the consequences of loss, and the motivations that ensue because of that loss. In Deborah Owen Moore’s “La Llorna Dines at the Cariboo Café: Structure and Legend in the Work of Helena Maria Viramontes,” Moore speaks of “fragmentation,” where the violation of literary structure is also reflective of the interruption between the familial unit. Moore sees Sonya’s and Macky’s solution to arrive to Mrs. Avila’s house as a reconciliation to stability. Except, Sonya and Macky meet a “labyrinth of [Sonya’s] memory,” implying confusion, and furthering instability for the children (Virtamontes 66). Their inability to return to safety, dismantles the familial unit, and perpetuates generational displacement within the exile and immigrant narrative. Although generational displacement involves the entire familial unit, Viramontes does not place the blame on the parents, but rather the uncontrolled factions of society. For instance, the streets distort the children’s perception of their surroundings, which is representative of the children’s unpredictable environment: “colors of the street lights brighter as darkness descended, a stereo store blaring music from two huge, blasting speakers” (67). Furthermore, once Sonya recognizes, “men in black who get kids and send them to Tijuana,” arresting a black man in front of the stereo shop, the distrust instilled from her parents is proven (67). The pulsing imagery in the setting, to symbols losing stability, and to the forceful nature behind characters with authority, like the “men in black,” are all reasons for the children’s fear, which instill the fear Sonya’s and Macky’s parents have taught them.

Moving into the second section of Viramontes’s “The Cariboo Café,” the narratiion shifts from an omniscient third person point-of-view, to an unreliable first-person point-of-view from the Cariboo Café’s cook’s perspective. The jumpy, unsteady narration is fit for the unstable character. From the start of the cook’s narration, he speaks in past-tense, but then proceeds into present-tense in the following paragraph. His non-linear focus employs Moore’s theory of “fragmentation,” where story-bits are scattered throughout the same section, which is demonstrating the falling pieces of the cook’s own familial unit. Specifically, because the cook’s entire focus is on his late-son JoJo. Furthermore, the cook’s grief leads him to force his late-son’s persona into the café’s clientele: “Paulie is thirty-five, or six. JoJo’s age if he were still alive… Maybe why I let him hang out is ‘cause he’s JoJo’s age” (Viramontes 68). Viramontes switches from “is” to “were” back to “is,” representing the shift from present to past to present, reflecting the cook’s instability in arranging the timeline of his own life. The cook mingles the timelines incessantly, so he can reconstruct, or in a sense resurrect, his late-son, while never fully accepting his son’s death. In Lenke Nemeth’s "Haunted Borders, Nostalgia, and Narration: Cherríe Moraga's Giving up the Ghost: A Stage Play in Three Portraits and Helena María Viramontes's 'The Cariboo Café,'" Nemeth uses the term “nostalgia” from the Greek word, meaning “pain, grief, distress…homecoming,” for analyzing how each emotion affects the human experience. Nemeth claims the literary device is used to enter a character’s consciousness, urging the formation of “space,” or a physical reconstruction of memories. Although the cook is meant to recount his side of the incident which occurs after the washerwoman’s death at the hands of the police, he falls into tangents that include his late-son, his divorced wife, and even his clients who remind him of JoJo. Once the cook’s story aligns with the first section of the short-story, involving Sonya and Macky, the cook begins to do to Macky what he did to Paulie, mistaking young men for his son JoJo:

The boy’s a sweetheart. Short Order don’t look nothing like his mom. He’s got dried snot all over his dirty cheeks and his hair ain’t seen a comb for years. She can’t take care of herself, much less him or the doggie of a sister. But he’s a tough one, and I pinch his nose ‘cause he’s a real sweetheart like JoJo. You know, my boy (Viramontes 70).

The cook’s instable timeline shows an alteration between past and present. The short and didactic sentences reflect the amount of information the cook can attain and relay, exhibiting his presence in the past. The cook relentlessly manifests his own past with the people who pass through the café, which becomes problematic for his own sanity, but even more problematic for Sonya, Macky, and the washerwoman, since it is the cook’s emotions that lead to the actions that destroy the children’s innocence and the washerwoman’s life. Nemeth argues, it is the reconstruction of memories and experiences which further distort reality. The cook’s guilt from losing his son in the Vietnam war, to losing his wife Nell, and even after their son’s death, all are incidents that betray his perception of the past and present, displacing himself inside the Cariboo Café, which leads him to contemplate calling the police officers on the washerwoman and two kids (Viramontes 70). Viramontes displays distrust in social order, even in the cook who believes his intentions for wanting to call the police on the washerwoman for holding the two children: “cops ain’t exactly my friends” (70). “The Cariboo Café” highlights the jurisdiction over exile and immigrant bodies. The cook’s mental instability, and his desire to recreate JoJo through Macky, pushes the cook to, not only dismantle the washerwoman’s false recreation of her and her son Geraldo, but also implies that their situations are identical to the “illegals running out of the factory to hide, like roaches,” who the cook turns in to La Migra (Viramontes 71). La Migra, a creation of Anglo-American social order, means to alienate and reject exile and immigrant bodies, invalidating their existence in the United States. From the cook’s envious disposition, his actions force the ripple of systemic consequences, generating the loss of Sonya, Macky, and the washerwoman, much like the loss of Nell and JoJo. Viramontes writes the text in pieces to reflect the shattering familial unit, while the characters attempt to reassemble their past. Nemeth’s perspective on nostalgia as a literary device displays nostalgia as a hopeless impression. “The Cariboo Café” embodies broken speech patterns, contorted paragraphs, and distorted memories to reflect the characters within the text. The cook’s intention is to recreate his past, but in his attempt to do so, he ruins the lives of the children, the washerwoman, and the immigrants running into his bathroom. Viramontes writes characters who share the same situational displacement, yet their differences in cultural perspective leads characters to take actions that further disenfranchise individuals already marginalized in society.

Although Viramontes creates characters with a similar situation of displacement in their environment, the Anglo-American cook takes on a privileged role, where he dictates for himself the authority in deciding who is and isn’t respectable enough for his café. For instance, when he recognizes JoJo in Macky, he overlooks the washerwoman, who the cook believes “can’t take of herself,” as well as Macky’s “doggie of a sister.” The cook negates their identity because of their womanhood, disregarding them with degrading thoughts (Viramontes 70). Then, he negates the washerwoman for her Latinidad when he says, “I hear the lady saying something in Spanish. Right off I know she’s illegal, which explains why she looks like a weirdo” (Viramontes 70). In aligning a spanish-speaking woman with “illegal,” the cook is relying on a misperception of Latinidad that claims all people migrating from Latin America are illegal, meaning they do not belong in the United States. In Karina Oliva Alvarado, “The Boo of Viramontes’s Café: retelling ghost stories, Central American Representing Social Death,” Alvarado utilizes Jose David Salidvar’s literary term “transfrontera contact zone,” meaning one’s perception of another’s culture is defined through physical, moving symbols, which are no longer represented by fixed points such as the U.S.-Mexican border. The cook’s first sight of the washerwoman is of her wearing a “shawl,” or in this case, the moving symbol the cook uses to mark the washerwoman as an “illegal” and “weirdo” (Viramontes 69). Looking back on Nemeth’s perspective, the “shawl” works as a symbol of nostalgia, since she is not changing her appearance to mold herself into the fashion of an Anglo-American woman, but continues to embody the cultural clothing of her home. The washerwoman’s “shawl” identifies a woman who is nameless, and reinforces her desire to reconstruct a piece of herself she left behind, since the “shawl” is what she brings to the U.S. from her past home. Viramontes’s cook’s first-person perspective displays the manifestation of prejudice, and the consequential harm of degrading thoughts.

Moving into Viramontes’s third section of “The Cariboo Café,” Viramontes stays in the first-person point-of-view, but with a shift in perspective. In the third section, the internal voice is that of the washerwoman’s, and it is of her in her home country. The washerwoman is living her story in present-tense, but it is a story already past from the second section’s visit to the Cariboo Café. The washerwoman’s story begins in an unnamed country, where she is looking for her lost son, who she looks for through “turns, sorting out the arms from the legs, heads from the torsos” (Viramontes 72). The washerwoman’s physical disfigurement is a violent parallel to the washerwoman’s mental dislocation, as well as the distortion that occurs later in her life when she is in the U.S., which is the story the readers already know by the third section. Moore takes the allusion of La Llorna from Mexican folklore to demonstrate the grief in a fragmented family unit. The washerwoman’s search for Geraldo is her first step to reconcile her family, but even the social order, taken over by the Contras, yields the washerwoman from reconstructing her life (Viramontes 73). Alvarado questions Viramontes for leaving the Contras and country unmarked, and by using Patricia Rodriguez’s term “undifferentiated,” meaning the perpetual lack of specificity of Central American countries, raises a question about the erasure of history and narratives. Viramontes’s style reinforces her point, because in using the unmarked nationalities of Sonya, Macky, and the washerwoman, Viramontes is highlighting a literal erasure of the characters’ nationality and identity, but is also considering the significance in how transcendent the exile and immigrant narrative is throughout Latin America. For instance, in the washerwoman’s country, the washerwoman doesn’t concern herself over the specific politics of the Contras because they cause her harm all the same: “I don’t understand why nature has been so cruel as to prevent them from feeling warmth” (Viramontes 73). Viramontes leaves the washerwoman’s national identity ambiguous to foreshadow her erasure within two countries, asserting the danger exile and immigrant bodies live through when moving from war torn countries, to countries that promise the illusion of dreams, hopes, and desires. Ultimately, the washerwoman’s need to internally think, “these four walls are no longer my home; the earth beneath it, no longer my home,” forces the reader to make a full-circle connection between the washerwoman and Sonya’s and Macky’s disillusion to their three rules and four walls (Viramontes 74). Viramontes’s “The Cariboo Café” illustrates the erasure of identity, revealing oppression as a succession of uniformity, considering that the washerwoman’s desire to reconstruct her past life is represented through her internal and external dialogue, and is ignored and degraded by the men around her. Viramontes’s narrative structure is nonlinear for the purpose of showing the nonsensical results behind an individual’s perceptions and actions, as well as the environment an individual resides in, or is taken.

In looking at the climatic ending of “The Cariboo Café,” Viramontes shifts the reader a couple of scenes leading up to the foreshadowed disaster of events. The washerwoman is now in the United States, having left her unnamed country due to the political turmoil and danger she was getting herself into for questioning the Contras’s authority regarding her son. The washerwoman’s desire to reconstruct her past leads to her irrationality, which is present in both the text’s sign and signifier:

Why would God play such a cruel joke, if he isn’t my son? I jumped the curb, dashed into the street, but the street is becoming wider and wider. I’ve lost him and can’t lose him again and to hell with the screeching tires and the horns and the headlights barely touching my hips. I can’t take my eyes off him because, you see, they are swift and cunning and can take your life with a snap of a finger. But God is a just man and His mistakes can be undone (Viramontes 76).

The washerwoman jumps into the street for Macky, replacing Macky’s face for her late-son Geraldo. In thinking about the washerwoman’s actions, Nemeth’s argument comes into consideration, being that the recollection of memories take on physical manifestations, which foreshadow dangerous and instable results. The washerwoman’s unpredictable actions follow through the turbulent use of conjunctions, overwhelming the paragraph with “and,” attempting to follow the erratic behavior she exhibits when running into the street, stretching her arms as to reach out for a false recreation of home. The plosive “h” sound follows her scattered movements, which the reader sees in “him,” “hell,” “horns,” “headlights,” and “hips,” producing exasperation, and forcing the reader alike to gasp for air, much like the washerwoman does in her endeavor to reproduce Geraldo’s existence in the United States. Moore calling the Mexican folklore La Llorona into comparison of the washerwoman is interesting, since La Llorona is a dead being, who haunts the streets looking for her children, refusing to rest in a grave, and challenging the very thoughts the washerwoman holds: “God is just a man and His mistakes can be undone.” In this moment, the washerwoman is asserting herself into the scene, where she is very much alive to the reader, but the absence of anyone else’s response tells the reader of the washerwoman’s social death. The comparison between the washerwoman and her embodiment of La Llorona foreshadows the washerwoman’s fate in the United States.

Reaching the climatic end of “The Cariboo Café,” Viramontes takes the reader back to the Cariboo Café with Sonya, Macky, and the washerwoman. In this scene, the cook approves of the washerwoman’s appearance, who is much suitable when wearing “one thick braid,” “earrings [hanging] like baskets of golden pears,” and displaying a “white, clean fingernail” (Viramontes 77). Contact zones prove to be powerful in leading or avoiding confrontation, especially when the perception a person projects onto an individual is the ground for confrontation. It is her appearance, or more like her desire to mold herself into the Anglo-American normative that causes the cook to feel guilty for turning her in to the authorities: “children gotta be with their parents, family gotta be together,” the cook justifies after thinking over his actions (Viramontes 77). The complex emotions that Viramontes raises is heightened by the shifting between the washerwoman’s first-person point-of-view to an omniscient third-person point-of-view. The third-person point-of-view sets out to settle the truth of the scene, where the emotions are not taken into consideration, but the facts of what the cook does, and what his actions result in. The cook’s desire to dismantle the woman’s false recreation of her family is an indication of his own false recreation, developing a tug-of-war between who gets to see their children in Sonya and Macky. Looking back to Alvarado’s essay, Alvarado points out Susan Bibler-Coutin’s claim: “‘those who do not legally exist are made to not exist socially as well,” referring to recurring term used through my point on “social [and literal] death.” Physical displacement occurs twice in the washerwoman’s narrative. She does not exist in her native country because of the Contras’s threats, nor does she exist in the United States because of her undocumented status. The cook’s jealousy, which results from his own loss and grief, takes away the washerwoman’s coping mechanism to her loss, grief, and displacement in the United States. It is the cook’s action, along with the systemic inequalities against exile and immigrant bodies that refuse to understand the washerwoman’s desire to have Macky and Sony, as well as her desire to defend her recreation of the past, that lead her from a social to a literal death: “I am blinded by the liquid darkness. But I hold onto his hand. That I can feel, you see, I’ll never let go. Because we are going home. My son and I” (Viramontes 79).

Ultimately, the result of the washerwoman’s fall comes down to the prejudices of others, as well as the institutional forces funded by government that lead to her social and literal death. The authorities in “The Cariboo Café,” who people trust to uphold social order, intentionally harm people who do not fit the Anglo-American normative. Viramontes’s choice in keeping Sonya’s, Macky’s, their parents’, and the washerwoman’s national identity unknown, is a result of refusing to give one Latina/o group the privilege of dominating the exile and immigrant narrative. Rather, in keeping the characters’ national identity unnamed, the reader understands people’s contact zones such as the washerwoman’s “shawl,” or her “Spansih,” or even an individual’s brownness, can tag that individual under the exile and immigrant narrative. Latinidad shares a close relationship with the exile and immigrant narrative, and not one heritage is exclusive to the narrative, so it is only fair that Viramontes illustrates a narrative that each heritage group has experienced in their migration from a Latin American country to the United States. Furthermore, the inspection of nostalgia as a literary tool demonstrates the motivation and desire behind putting one’s self in jeopardy, highlighting the humanistic qualities behind the exile and immigrant narrative. Overall, Helena Maria Viramontes’s “The Cariboo Café” is a testament to the human experience within the exile and immigrant narrative, testifying the desire to survive and live under a country willing to socially and literally destroy a person’s well-being.

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