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Review / Reseña

Julie Shayne, *They Used To Call Us Witches: Chilean Exiles, Culture and Feminism*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2009.

Exile Home: Chilean Women, Culture and Community in Vancouver

Joan Simalchik

University of Toronto—Mississauga

During a 1981 Toronto concert, Horacio Durán, long time member of the musical ensemble, Inti Illimani, told the audience that Chileans had taken the record for having the world's shortest index fingers from the Spanish people. He explained that this condition was a result of pounding a table with that finger saying emphatically "this year we go home." He would know: both his group and Quilapayún, two of the most famous members of Chile's New Song Movement, were said to be on a perpetual concert circuit. Caught in the midst of a good will tour in Europe at the time of the September 11, 1973 coup d'état, they were refused reentry into their country

by the newly formed military junta. Both continued on solidarity tours until they were able to return for Chile's transition to democracy in 1989.

The groups are emblematic of the exile dilemma. After extended periods of time, the question of 'where is home?' provokes difficult rumination. Inti Illimani relocated to Chile, while most members of Quilapayún remained in France, their country of exile. Some went back and forth.

Exile is a particularly pernicious state of migration. Neither immigrant nor refugee proper, exiles live in an in-between world where they refuse to unpack their suitcases and hold out hope that they will be able to return to their country as soon as possible. They are not immigrants planning a new life who migrate by choice. Nor are they refugees forced to flee who then resettle in a country where they find asylum. Yet, despite, and perhaps because of, the temporal nature of the sojourn, interactions between exiles and the larger dominant society forge new identities and force cultural change.

Julie Shayne takes up the issue, opening a new dimension to the story in her *They Used To Call Us Witches: Chilean Exiles, Culture and Feminism*. Taking a close look at the experiences of twenty-five Chilean activist women exiled in a Canadian city, Shayne applies gender analysis to her study of their lives. Rather than take a typical view of exile as a passive state of entropy, Shayne clearly and emphatically reveals the agency and drive that propelled this group's solidarity activities. Operating out of emotional and political response to their loss of country, family, culture and the political project of Allende's Popular Unity government, these women formed a critical part of the response to the ongoing repression of the Pinochet regime. The author maintains that rather than allowing their fate to immobilize them, the exiles rebounded by channeling their "outrage," "moral shocks" and "anger" into political opposition to the dictatorship.

Shayne begins her text with a succinct history of Chilean politics and women's organizing while weaving into the chronology examples of the crucial role that culture played throughout the Popular Unity period and beyond. She pays particular attention to women's own contributions, including the birth and afterlife of the *arpilleras*, testimonial tapestries

produced by women impacted politically and economically by the dictatorship. This section provides the reader with a good framework to comprehend the women's experience and is generally accurate. (Readers will find a few factual errors. For example, Víctor Jara was executed in Estadio Chile, not, as noted in the text, in Santiago's National Stadium; it is the former now renamed Estadio Víctor Jara while the National Stadium remains as such.)

The author continues with a chapter introducing the women to the reader in brief biographical sketches entitled "Testimonies" and provides a chart depicting their names (or pseudonyms), date they left Chile, first stop after Chile, political affiliation at the time of departure, arrival date in Vancouver and age at the time of the interview. The chart graphically portrays both the similarity and diversity of the women's lived experience before and after leaving their country.

In Shayne's next two chapters, one wishes that she expanded her Canadian contacts beyond one key player in only one of the two then extant solidarity groups. "The Chilean Solidarity Movement in Trans-national Perspective" and "The Chilean Solidarity Movement in Vancouver," are hampered by the lack of access to the records of the national solidarity organization, the Canadian Committee for Solidarity with Democratic Chile (founded the summer before September's coup, thus its name) and its local Vancouver affiliate. She is equally at a loss for information that could have been gleaned in interviews from their members, especially those in the labour movement who played a significant role in boycotts and high profile support. While she ably navigates the intricate labyrinth of exile politics, ironically, these omissions ensure that she inadvertently replicates the movement's same sectarian divisions which she so fully describes in the text.

Shayne makes a case for the transnational nature of the Chilean solidarity movement but here too stronger examples of international and Canadian solidarity are needed. Two significant events that would have enhanced her argument are not discussed. The 1977 Canadian Inquiry into Human Rights in Chile held in Toronto marked the first time women members of the Association of Relatives of the Detained and Disappeared

left Chile to testify and the evidence they gave there provided documentation for the United Nations condemnation of the military regime. And with a poster designed by Joan Miró, the 1978 World Conference of Solidarity with Chile hosted in Madrid by the first post-Franco government, brought together thousands of prominent artists, politicians, and activists. The Canadian delegation included a future Manitoba Premier, the British Colombian President of the Carpenters' Union and Quebec poets. Both events demonstrated just how well Chilean exiles, especially those in Canada, managed to mobilize national support and then to forge transnational links, and they would have deepened Shayne's....

Shayne is on firmer ground with her group of interviewees. Here the heart of the story is effectively drawn. In chapters entitled "Gender, Emotions, and Culture in the Chilean Solidarity Movement" and "Exile and Feminism", Shayne proves herself to be an active and empathetic listener. She captures the activist spirit of the times and its urgency through the exiles' own revelations. While details of Latin American women's organizing are amply supplied, it is the women's own remembrances that articulate the significance of the movement. Cecilia Tagle recalled:

Women I think in general in my group that I worked with, were very well organized. The level of organization we had, Gosh! Unbelievable! *Un-be-lieve-able!* I do not know if we would ever do it again but we organized to send clothes to Chile once and we had trucks coming from Alberta, you know those trailer trucks full of clothes. We had the underground parking lot full of clothes and we had [arranged] for free, two containers, in those days Canadian Pacific airline... So we had, Oh my God! So much clothes!

In the section, "Division of Labour in the Solidarity Movement", Shayne discovered that no "single position emerged about the roles and status of Chilean women in the solidarity movement... Categorical conclusions aside, there was an implied consensus that women were more often found performing the emotional and cultural labor of the movement; or, as was the case inside Latin America, the seemingly less political tasks." The women did not hold fond memories of the hours spent in food preparation, especially making the ubiquitous *empanada*, nor the propensity for male *compañeros* to dominate meetings. Magaly Varas

vividly recalled the extra work intrinsic to women's double day: "We had to do the cooking and leave everything ready for our husband and then take the children with us to rehearsal. And clean the house; everything before, so, do our thing at home and then we could [go]." Given that the 1970s witnessed the burgeoning of the second wave of feminism in North America, clearly male privilege was not the exclusive purview of Latin Americans. It would have been helpful if Shayne had widened the context to note that these same problems were being simultaneously experienced in the Canadian corner of the shared space of the solidarity movement.

Shayne did not find consensus about the term feminism among the interviewees either: some were firm adherents while still others objected to its "elitism." But she compellingly depicts how this particular group of exiled activists was impacted, personally and politically, by their solidarity mobilization. She notes that almost "none of them are married to the men with whom they left... Several have remarried (and remain married to) Canadians, while others remarried and divorced again." Yet, the women recognized the intrinsic value of working together, and in the process, creating a familiar cultural community that eased their exiled lives.

The women's political evolution is given much deserved prominence. No longer exiles *per se* (the transition government of President Patricio Alwyn opened an Office for the Return of Chileans abroad), the women applied their activist skills to the women's movement. Conferences in Solidarity with Latin American Women had led the women who attended them to debate openly broader questions of gender and they became empowered to organize accordingly. After nearly two decades of solidarity organizing, a propensity to organize on gender lines emerged, whether this was explicitly seen as feminist or not.

Indeed, the book's title comes from the bilingual magazine, *Aquelarre: A Magazine for Latin American Women*. Published from 1989 until 1998 by women exiles in Vancouver, the title is derived from the Chilean term 'illegal gathering of witches' and the quote found in each issue of the magazine: "They used to call us witches. What do they call us now? Arpilleristas, weavers, union leaders, women in exile, political prisoners, mothers of the disappeared, artists..." Shayne includes interviews with

women members of the publishing collective as well as numerous graphics, cover pages, and cartoons. The analysis of *Aguelarre's* content and the collective's political rationale is captured eloquently and history is richer for Shayne having recorded it.

Her last chapter is aptly named: "Gender and Permanence". Shayne analyzes the unending state of virtual exile while documenting the impact that Chileans and Chilean women had on the fabric of Vancouver cultural and political life. She concludes: "The Vancouver of September 10, 1973, was very different from what is thirty-six years later, and that is in great part due to Chilean women exiles." Her summary echoes Canadian (and Chilean) University of British Columbia graduate, Lake Sagaris, who moved to Chile in 1981. Her series of poetic reflections, *Exile Home*, explores the question of where one can locate "home." The diasporic dilemma is not easily resolved, but as Shayne's text so profoundly portrays, not only is the exile herself impacted by this condition, so too is the community where she has lived, loved and worked.

Crossing borders implies more than the physical act: migration is more of a process than an event. The women portrayed in this study emerge as active players in the evolution of their own lives in-between the countries of their birth and exile. Their reflections enable the reader to glean a sense of the lives they carved out in the spaces and the culture they maintained and transformed. After forty years, whether they identify as Chilean-Canadians or Canadian-Chileans, or neither, their solidarity efforts are shown to have successfully spanned the continents.

They Used to Call Us Witches is a welcome and necessary addition to the emergent field of diasporic studies.