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## LITERATURE



Hanna Błauciak

ADAM MICKIEWICZ UNIVERSITY, POZNAŃ

HANBLAI@ST.AMU.EDU.PL

[HTTPS://ORCID.ORG/0009-0004-4127-4734](https://orcid.org/0009-0004-4127-4734)

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### **Latina/o Canadian Literature: The Issues of Migratory Mourning and Bilingualism in Guillermo Verdecchia's *Fronteras Americanas: American Borders* (1993) and Carmen Rodríguez's *and a body to remember with* (1997)**

**Abstract.** Canada comprises a wide variety of people of multifarious ethnic and cultural heritages with immigrants constituting 23% of the entire population (Statistics Canada 2022). Among those groups, Latina/o Canadians are a small but vibrant community whose artistic output is often overlooked. This paper provides a brief overview of the history and characteristics of Latina/o presence and literary output in Canada as well as discusses two Latina/o Canadian texts, namely *and a body to remember with* (1997), a short story collection by Chilean-Canadian author, Carmen Rodríguez, and *Fronteras Americanas: American Borders* (1993) by Argentinian-Canadian playwright, Guillermo Verdecchia. The analysis is focused on the discussion of the characters' migratory mourning, as defined by Joseba Achotegui (2019), which is involved in the formation of immigrants' hybrid identities as they continually reevaluate their relationship with the host and home country. Additionally, this paper touches upon the textual representations of military trauma that has impacted generations of Latina/o immigrants fleeing dictatorships in the 1970s and 1980s (Hazelton 2007). Finally, this paper investigates the ways in which the Spanish language is employed in the texts. This paper argues that bilingualism underscores Rodríguez's and Verdecchia's hybridity and decolonial approach as they undermine the notion of America as a predominantly English-speaking continent dominated by the imperial US.

**Keywords:** Latina/o Canadian diaspora, Latinidad, migratory grief, hybridity, decolonization

## Introduction

Canada is often considered a country that successfully accommodates a wide variety of ethnic groups by embracing diversity as a distinguishing characteristic of the nation. The implementation of the points-based system in 1967, which encouraged the immigration of skilled workers regardless of their race or nationality, was soon followed by the enactment of the 1988 Multiculturalism Act that ingrained into Canadian law the commitment to promote and maintain a multicultural society. Although approximately 70% of Canadians report Canadian, British, or French origins, the Great White North is also home to smaller, though no less active, cultural groups, such as 900,495 Latina/o Canadians (Statistics Canada 2022). Given that Latina/o Canadians' texts are under-researched in Canadian literary studies, the aim of this paper is to give an introduction into the specificities of Canadian *Latinidad* and Latina/o<sup>1</sup> Canadian writing. The general introductory remarks are followed by an analysis of *and a body to remember with*<sup>2</sup> (1997), a short story collection by Chilean-Canadian author, Carmen Rodríguez, and *Fronteras Americanas: American Borders* (1993)<sup>3</sup> by Argentinian-Canadian playwright, Guillermo Verdecchia. This paper's original contribution consists of the analysis of the selected literary texts through the perspective of migratory mourning (Achotegui 2019), particularly in the case of Carmen Rodríguez's short story collection that has received scant critical attention. Furthermore, this paper's originality lies in the focus on the texts' bilingualism as an expression of hybridity and a countermeasure to othering practices.

### 1. The Characteristics of Latina/o Canadian Diaspora

Although some Latinas/os came to Canada for economic reasons, the migration wave of the 1970s and 1980s comprised largely of political refugees fleeing military dictatorships. This experience is noticeably reflected in their writings, which exhibit themes such as the trauma resulting from totalitarian regimes, political activism, disrupted familial relationships, the idealization of the homeland, the cultural and linguistic alienation of exile, and adaptation to the new reality, among others (Hazelton 1994, 2007). Another crucial feature in understanding the works of Latina/o Canadians is multilingualism: almost 80% report Spanish as their native language (Statistics Canada 2022). Latina/o Canadians' bilingualism, or trilingualism in the case of some Québécois Latina/o Cana-

<sup>1</sup> This paper employs the 'Latina/o' form following Etcheverry (2015) and Verdecchia (2006) in order to increase the visibility of Latinas. For the debate around the use of other gender-inclusive forms, such as 'Latinx' or 'Latin@', see Torres (2018) and Vidal-Ortiz and Martínez (2018).

<sup>2</sup> The explanation for Rodríguez's choice to have the titles of both the collection and individual stories written in lowercase is provided in section 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Fronteras Americanas: American Borders* was first published in 1993, but for this paper, my point of reference was the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition published in 2012. However, the original date of publication is retained whenever the title of the play first appears in a given section.

dians (cf. Armony 2015, 21), would seemingly fit in with Canada's multiculturalism and official bilingualism, especially given the fact that both French and Spanish belong to the same language family. In fact, Latina/o Canadian literature has its roots in Chilean-Québécois writing. Monica Escobar (2000, 209–10) explains that many Chileans chose to localize themselves in Francophone Québec since they resented English recognized as the imperial language of the U.S., and they readily identified with the Québec separatist movement. Therefore, in the 70s and 80s, the Chilean-Québécois community became a prominent group that organized numerous poetry readings, established small presses, and went on to produce a widely studied and anthologized body of works (Hazelton 1994, 2007). Nevertheless, Latina/o Canadians' works often remain on the literary periphery due to little interest in translated fiction and the domination of French-English or English-French domestic translation on the market (Erregue-Sacchi 2021). Thus, the majority of writers must resort to self-publishing and their works remain largely unknown outside of the Latina/o Canadian community (Etcheverry 2015, 48). Exclusion from the Anglophone and Francophone mainstream as well as the desire to maintain ties with the homeland (thus uphold one's established position and participation in the home country's literary landscape) generated a parallel universe of Spanish-language Latina/o Canadian literature, which is nonetheless perceived as 'foreign' despite it being produced from within Canada (Hazelton 2007, 22–23). Since (presumably) white Canadians are mainly interested not in domestic immigrant writing but rather in texts originating from Latin America itself, Latina/o writing is frequently tokenized, i.e., texts recognized as exotic fare better than those texts not perceived as such (Erregue-Sacchi 2021; Hazelton 2007, 22–23). Luciana Erregue-Sacchi (2021) criticizes the Canadian audience for reducing Latina/o writing to magical realism only and expressing little interest in individualistic and innovative texts. Such trends exacerbate the marginalization of Latina/o Canadians who have long struggled to become visible in the Canadian cultural landscape, particularly in the field of literature (Etcheverry 2015, 59–60).

Latinas/os in Canada are represented by the Canadian Hispanic Congress and Hispanic Canadian Heritage Council, which was founded in 2008 with the aim to promote Latin American arts and culture. Since the passing of the 2018 Latin American Heritage Month Act that recognized the contribution of the Latina/o community to Canadian society as well as encouraged the sharing and commemorating of Latin American cultures, the Council has organized multiple events for the October celebrations, such as conferences, galas, parades, or film festivals, among others.

## 2. Migratory Mourning

If one of the prominent themes in Latina/o Canadian writing is migration and identity, then the concept of migratory mourning allows us to better understand the difficulties faced by the characters in Rodríguez's and Verdecchia's texts. The primary tension in migratory grief derives from the paradox of having to abandon external ties with the

native country: that is, those established in the physical space, while also maintaining an internal connection to the homeland (Achotegui 2019; Podolsky Schneller 1981). Indeed, migrants' mourning is that "of separation rather than loss" since their lost object never disappears completely (Achotegui 2019, 255). Undermining traditional Western models of grief that emphasize closure and the acceptance of loss, Debora Podolsky Schneller (1981, 123) found that her research subjects had not completed the process of grieving by the end of the study. Further, Zoë Wool (2020) observes that Freudian models of grief tend to pathologize non-normative affective responses to loss. Instead, she proposes a theory of open grief that would eschew universalism and question the "traumatic nature" of unresolved grief (Wool 2020, 45).

Similarly, Sarah Ahmed (2010, 139–141) observes that migratory mourning is often wrongly pathologized as immigrants' attachments are considered a hindrance to their successful integration into the nation. Criticizing homogenizing pressures and the traditional models of grief that impose on migrants the necessity to detach from the homeland, scholars tend to emphasize the positive value of persistent attachment. In this view, remaining connected to the lost objects involves the hope to retrieve what has been lost, though often in restricted ways, as well as the hope to find though always as a changed person (Achotegui 2019; Ahmed 2010, 153; Butler 2004, 21). Since the internal ties with the country of origin (such as the attachment to the cultural and behavioral patterns supported in the home country or the preoccupation with the home country's political situation) are retained, migratory mourning has no definite end. Migratory grief is recurrent and intergenerational as the transformation of the self is never settled conclusively and has to be resolved not only by first-generation immigrants but also by their children and grandchildren (Achotegui 2019, 259; Garza-Guerrero 1974, 425–27; Podolsky Schneller 1981, 123). The interaction with foreign cultures and the perpetual re-evaluation of one's relation to both the home and host country mean that the immigrant's identity is always in a state of lively development (Achotegui 255–56; Garza-Guerrero 426–27).

In conclusion, living with migratory grief means that the attachments to the past remain an active part of the migrant's identity that influence their present. In other words, it entails a restructuring of the relations constitutive to one's identity, which in turn fuels the development of a hybrid identity that defies easy categorization and which may be channeled into a force of creativity and connection, rather than that of destruction and opposition (Achotegui 2019, 256; Butler 2004, 22; Garza-Guerrero 1974, 425–27).

### **3. Migratory Mourning in Guillermo Verdecchia's *Fronteras Americanas: American Borders***

*Fronteras Americanas: American Borders* (1993) is a semi-autobiographical play revolving around two characters: Argentinian-Canadian Verdecchia and his Chicano alter ego — Wideload. Guillermo Verdecchia's family immigrated from Argentina when he was 2 years old and so he spent his formative years in Canada.

Since there is still a tendency to racialize Latinas/os, they are subject to “exclusion and segregation” (Foucault 2003, 61) in North America due to their deviation from the majoritarian white Anglo-Saxon normativity. Additionally, they are separated from their country of origin where they would normally become rooted within national and historical continuity while growing up and so they frequently grapple with a sense of unbelonging. Indeed, Guillermo Verdecchia felt alienated and vulnerable in Canada; therefore, he wrote *Fronteras Americanas* to “make sense of [his] attachment to and identification with Argentina” (Verdecchia 2006, 1). Similarly to the author, Verdecchia (the character) feels simultaneously unmoored from and “implicated” (Verdecchia 2012, 47) in the Argentinian land and his *Latinidad*. In the beginning, such ethno-cultural ambiguity locates him on the periphery of both the Canadian and Latina/o community, the exclusion symbolized by the “border wound,” which subjects him to anxiety and depression (Verdecchia 2012, 48; Etcheverry 2015, 46). Seeking relief, Verdecchia travels across the American continent in search of his roots. This, however, does not bring the desired resolution of claiming unassailable belonging in Latin America: Verdecchia discovers himself a North American tourist who is confronted with the privileges that come with living in Canada (such as safety, political stability, and economic opportunities) and the ramifications of military regimes in Latin American countries as he witnesses a man being shot dead near his hotel (cf. Verdecchia 2012, 18).

Back in Canada, Verdecchia goes to see *El Brujo* (a shaman) who urges him to converge the past with the present and situate his personal life within the context latina/o history to establish a connection with his *Latinidad* (Ramírez 2010, 274–83). As Verdecchia is a “1.75 immigrant” (Rumbaut 2011, 1167), his internal ties to the homeland are inherited through family history, but his *Latinidad* is influenced by the stereotypical pop cultural representations constructed by Anglophone North Americans. For him, Argentina remains a fantastical concept: it appears in his dream as a tourist’s paradise of awe-inspiring landscapes, lavish greenery, and “emerald-green parrots” (Verdecchia 2012, 29). In this view, the lost homeland of the “1.75 immigrant” (Rumbaut 1167) is not so much banished to the world of fantasy, like in the case of first-generation immigrants. Rather, it is retrieved from the field of the fictitious and confronted with tangible reality as the second generation revisits the home country to experience it for themselves from a new cultural standpoint. Only then can Verdecchia process his migratory grief and construct his unique *Latinidad* and Canadianness by rejecting the rigid patterns of belonging to embrace the hybridity and fluidity of his identity formed by the interweaving of multiple cultures.

#### **4. Bilingualism in Guillermo Verdecchia’s *Fronteras Americanas: American Borders***

Both of the texts selected for analysis in this paper are illustrative of the pressure to publish in English in order to enter mainstream Canadian literature. Hugh Hazelton (2007, 22) suggests that *Fronteras Americanas: American Borders*’ critical acclaim

(the play was awarded the 1993 Governor General's Literary Award for English-language drama) could be partly attributed to the fact that it was written in English and with the English-speaking audience in mind. Nonetheless, Guillermo Verdecchia employs Spanish words and phrases with no translation provided to the audience. For Mayte Gómez (1995), the playwright's use of a language marginalized in the majority culture is a means of reclaiming power in the process of decolonization since it subverts the notion of America as a predominantly English-speaking continent dominated by the imperial U.S.

Guillermo Verdecchia challenges the existing pressures to assimilate into the white Anglo-Saxon majority and interrogates the image of the Latino in pop culture to expose othering practices originating in the U.S. media. A.F. Nothof (1999) observes that the stereotypical depictions of the Latino (such as the illegal immigrant, the lover, or the mafioso) are used "in order to establish a distance and a difference from them." This is achieved through humor, which nevertheless remains a double-edged sword. Take, for example, Wideload's stereotypically heavy Spanish accent, i.e., the addition of /e/ to <sp> clusters, the substitution of /ð/ with /d/, or the usage of word-final devoicing, e.g., *wif*, *lof*.

The "adorable mistakes" (Verdecchia 2012, 25) evoke affinity, but also designate Wideload as an other located outside of the Anglophone center, consequently debasing him as an uneducated immigrant. Therefore, Guillermo Verdecchia runs the risk of not being taken seriously; yet, he must amuse the audience since the only way for Latinos/as to obtain visibility is to entertain: "Of course, it is possible dat it doesn't really matter what I say. Because it's all been kind of funny dis evening. Dat has been my mistake. I have wanted you to like me so I've been a funny guy" (Verdecchia 2012, 54). Still, Wideload manages to use bilingualism to his advantage: by speaking in Spanish, he others the (presumably non-Spanish speaking) Anglophone audience (Gómez 1995; Etcheverry 2015, 167).

## **5. Migratory Mourning in Carmen Rodríguez's and a body to remember with**

In contrast to *Fronteras Americanas* (1993), Carmen Rodríguez's *and a body to remember with* (1997) focuses on the deeply painful experience of first-generation Latina refugees whose selves were fractured by severe PTSD resulting from Pinochet's regime, abruptly torn external ties with the homeland, and stifled interculturalization. The short story collection may be read as a linguistic externalization of trauma as practically every protagonist is overwhelmed by painful recollections of the past. For example, in "hand-made times," the direct experience of violence is superimposed on the narrator's childhood memories, revealing the vulnerability of civilians who were forced to defend themselves against well-trained soldiers: "I only know how to hold children and books. I have small, soft hands. (...) I wonder if I'll be able to pull the trigger" (Rodríguez 1997, 75). The nar-

rator of “3-D” commits suicide having noticed her torturer in Vancouver. “trespass” tells the story of a woman working for the resistance movement who lives on the run deprived of food, material comforts, and social relationships. The narration often takes the form of a one-sided dialogue addressed to an absent or deceased friend or family member as these characters are trying to learn “to speak again” (Rodríguez 1997, 61).

Rodríguez does not shy away from the complexity and variety of responses to loss and trauma, including those that would be considered unsuccessful. In this context, Yolanda’s aborted child takes on the symbolic meaning of repressed traumatic memories and loss (Pascual 2012, 66; Stos 2007, 153–5). The protagonist of “bodily yearnings” immigrates to Canada where she tries to move forward. In an attempt to become rooted in the new land and fill the void left by Chile, she marries a white Canadian named John McDonald. However, the ghosts of the past attend her wedding and haunt her marriage, stunting her new life. Yolanda’s womb is the site of intimate memories that “cross borders, travel through entire continents,” (Rodríguez 1997, 122–23) yet always remain her own, individual burden. The protagonist’s pain renders unspeakable in the sense that John is incapable of fully comprehending and empathizing with her experience — for him, Chile is just “the narrow strip of land” (Rodríguez 1997, 122) on the map, irrelevant to his privileged life in Canada. Yolanda establishes emotional ties with the new land, but the depth of her suffering and loss is isolating; her whole being is immobilized back in Chile (Stos 2007, 155). In the case of Yolanda, clinging to John is clearly just an escape from unprocessed grief. Ultimately, she realizes that her lost object(s) can never be fully replaced in Canada — the attachment to the past and the homeland prove too strong, the pain of uprootedness unbearable, so she buys a one-way ticket to Chile. Going back, however, exposes hyphenated individuals’ sense of displacement in both the home and host country.

The nostalgia for the fantastical, idealized homeland and the intense yearning for the unattainable past is also found in the short story entitled “in the company of words” whose narrator indulges in the memories of her childhood in Valparaíso; the name of the city being a not-so-subtle implication that Chile is a forever-lost paradise (Valparaíso derives from *valle*, valley, and *paraíso*, paradise). Indeed, when the protagonists of “accented living” and “the labyrinths of love” revisit Latin America, they discover their imaginary homelands inaccessible, swept away by the current of the relentless passage of time. The narrator of “accented living” searches for “those scents, voices, flavours, textures, and images that [her] memory insisted on calling ‘home’” (Rodríguez 1997, 101), yet they appear to be mere fantasies. Oma’s gray hair signifies the years of separation that changed the country, the migrants, and their relationships with family and the land. Since trauma is located within a specific place, going back to Chile brings about the resurfacing of “old wounds” (Rodríguez 1997, 101), but also enables the exile to separate the traumatic past from the present and, consequently, heal and regulate the contemporary ties with the homeland (cf. Balaev 2008, 160–61).

Olivia M. Espín (1987) argues that the migratory grief of Latinas may be additionally exacerbated by the clash between gender stereotypes prevalent in Latin American coun-

tries and the liberal approach of North American societies that provide more social and economic opportunities for women. Establishing the self in a new country is, therefore, impeded by the tension arising from differing gender roles, the separation from parental figures and subsequent inability to resolve generational conflict, language barriers, and the pressure to assimilate and abandon native cultural norms (Espín 1987). Breaking gender stereotypes is the source of conflict for the Ramírez family from “black hole” — once Estela no longer complies with gendered social norms (where the man provides for the family and the woman is a dutiful housewife), she is reproached by her husband and mother who both expect her to quit the job and stay at home (cf. Rodríguez 1997, 23–28). The Chilean cultural and behavioral patterns are not supported by other Chileans which, on the one hand, enables Latinas to be more independent but on the other, imposes loneliness. Indeed, the deviation from traditional cultural practices is perceived as a direct threat to the nation-building project: Silvia, the narrator of “breaking the ice” is afraid of condemnation due to her multiple marriages and abortion (cf. Rodríguez 1997, 116) since such life choices are considered a betrayal of Chilean national values shaped by Christianity and conservative culture, whereby abortion entailed stigmatization as it “reeked of secrecy and evil” (Rodríguez 1997, 60).

Isolation affects not only those who immigrated to Canada but also the older generation who stayed in Chile, as it becomes apparent in “the labyrinths of love.” The narrator’s father died alone; her mother is broken by both the physical illness and the suffering resulting from the ruptured continuity of the family and the nation: “But the pain is older and deeper than the cancer. Pain. Twenty years without her children and grandchildren. It hurts to know that they grew up so far away from their country” (Rodríguez 1997, 143). It is not without reason that “the labyrinths of love” is one of the last stories in the collection. According to Carol Stos (2007, 152–53), the story represents the re-incorporation of the self into the native culture. This is made possible because the narrator comes to accept the closure of the past and manages to establish new ties with the mother(land) from the contemporary perspective of a Chilean-Canadian.

## 6. Bilingualism in Carmen Rodríguez’s *and a body to remember with*

Rodríguez’s *and a body to remember with*, which remains relatively unknown outside of the Latina/o Canadian diaspora, was originally written in Spanish and then self-translated into English by the author, only to be published in both versions almost simultaneously in Vancouver and Santiago. Thence, the short story collection itself is the embodiment of the hybridization of its author as the very process of its creation involved interculturalization. In the Foreword, Carmen Rodríguez describes how she embarked on the journey of self-translation, which unexpectedly turned into a reciprocal exchange between the Spanish and English text. She would go back and forth between the two versions, transferring the ideas sparked by one language onto the other. “In many ways, this process mirrors my hyphenated existence,” she says, and goes on



to affirm her transnational belonging to both Chile and Canada: “My heart trespasses borders and stretches over a whole continent to find its home at the two extremes of the Americas: in Chile and in Canada” (Rodríguez 1997, 14).

The strong connection between translation and transplantation has been noted by Nieves Pascual (2012) who suggests that both processes revolve around the desire to accommodate difference in the process of becoming same. Exact sameness is, however, impossible as the target text is not a literal copy but a result of the interrelationship between two cultures. This aspect explains the discrepancies between *and a body to remember with* and *De Cuerpo Entero* as both texts are infused with otherness derived from the other culture (Stos 2007, 146). The first prominent difference is the capitalization choice: the Spanish version capitalizes each letter of the titles, while the English titles are written exclusively in lowercase. By applying Anglophone capitalization norms in the Spanish language and vice versa, Rodríguez ‘foreignizes’ her work for both the Chilean and Canadian audience. Likewise, the English text retains verbatim quotations of Spanish phrases, songs, and food names, thus revealing itself as a product of interculturalization (Montoya 2008, 40–43). Stos (2007) argues that the stories are organized differently since Chilean readers are more likely to read the text through the lens of survival despite the dictatorship while Canadian readers are more likely to resonate with the themes of immigration and defining Canadianness. Lastly, Stos (2007, 142) claims that the act of self-translation grants Rodríguez the opportunity to localize herself in both Chile and Canada as well as affirm her identity as a hyphenated, “translated being” (Rushdie 1992, 17) that has departed from the clash of two cultures and is becoming a unique self “with an accent all [her] own ” (Rodríguez 1997, 105).

## Conclusions

Since many Latina/o Canadians migrated north as political refugees, the experience(s) of coping with trauma, uprootedness, and alienation feature prominently in their writing. Whereas Carmen Rodríguez primarily describes the first generation and includes examples of non-adaptive responses to trauma and displacement, Guillermo Verdecchia’s play is a positive affirmation of hybridity of the second generation. In both *and a body to remember with* (1997) and *Fronteras Americanas: American Borders* (1993), the act of revisiting Latin America commonly exacerbates the confusion related to displacement as transplanted individuals re-confront their traumas as well as come to realize the transformation of their home country and their ambiguous status as both insiders and outsiders in their homeland. For Rodríguez’s and Verdecchia’s characters, the process of migratory mourning is impeded by the burden of dictatorship trauma, cultural clashes, especially those regarding culturally-prescribed gender roles, and othering practices in Canada where non-white, non-Anglophone Canadians are stereotyped and excluded from the society historically dominated by those of Anglo-Saxon and French origins.

Finally, both authors employ the Spanish language as a means of self-definition in the process of decolonization and a way of challenging the superiority of English in the American continent. The use of Spanish also reveals the hybrid identities of the writers and their characters who are influenced and embedded in multiple cultures that dynamically shape their individual selves and remodel their national attachments.

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