

**“I DON’T GET OUT WITHOUT A FIGHT”: EXPLORING
THE LIFE STORIES OF CHILEAN EXILES**

by

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ABSTRACT

This project draws upon interviews with members of the Chilean exile community in Winnipeg, focusing on the life stories of José and Verónica—a couple exiled in 1976. José’s narrative of pre-exile life in Chile is typical of the dominant Chilean exile narrative. His story establishes his credibility as a political refugee, concentrating on Chilean politics and the seriousness of his political activity. Verónica, however, tells a very different account of life in Chile. Her narrative is characterized by teenage hijinks, detachment from Chile’s socialist project, and excitement about moving to Canada. Her divergence from the dominant exile narrative is best understood through an exploration of her life as a young woman in Chile and her more recent Canadian experiences. Both are essential components to the way she remembers and narrates her life story. Read against José’s contrasting narrative, Verónica’s story sheds light on a profoundly different exile experience.

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“I DON’T GET OUT WITHOUT A FIGHT...”

One of the most interesting aspects of this essay on the Chilean exile experience is that, in the early stages of my research, I did not think Verónica's remembrances would be included.¹ I believed this because her account and feelings about life leading to exile diverged so substantially from that of other Chileans.² Such divergences are thrown into particularly strong relief when contrasting the narratives of her ex-husband, José, with those of Verónica. Captured in the remembered feelings of fleeing Chile in 1976, José was crying as the plane took off "because he was so attached to his country" whereas Verónica was excited: "me, I was happy and hopeful and everything—that's the natural person in me. I have this adventure type in me that I like things that are different, so I was happy."³ Such an unusual remembrance of flight was confusing and at first I did not know how to reconcile her story with all the other accounts that more closely resembled José's reaction. I saw her story as an anomaly—one that did not fit into the exile narrative I sought to tell.

I began to see Verónica's stories differently, however, in light of recent studies on Chilean gender relations.⁴ Heidi Tinsman's exploration of the Chilean

¹ Pseudonyms are used for Verónica and her ex-husband José.

² All interviews were conducted in Winnipeg, Canada, where Chileans fleeing the Pinochet regime began to arrive in 1975 and by 1982 numbered approximately 1,350 members. Stuart D. Johnson and Cornelia B. Johnson, "Institutional Origins in the Chilean Refugee Community in Winnipeg," *Prairie Forum* 7, no. 2 (1982): 229.

³ Verónica Moya, interview by author, tape recording, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 10 February 2003.

agrarian reform of the 1960s and early 70s in particular made me reconsider Verónica's remembrances. Tinsman argues that the political and social reforms undertaken from 1964 through 1973, while generally bettering women's economic standing, still promoted the male-headed household as the cornerstone of the new society. In effect, Chilean social reforms affirmed men's authority over women.⁵ Such an analysis highlighted aspects of Verónica's stories that I had glossed over in my first reading. I realized that her differing remembrances in part spoke to her position as a married woman who was marginalized from the exciting leftist political project that swept much of the country. I began to think of Verónica as the main protagonist in a revised project. She represented, I believed, a voice that I could rescue from obscurity.

The task, though, proved more nuanced than simply rescuing an unheard voice from the past. Indeed, oral historians such as Daniel James caution against the "naïve realism" of simply taking at face value stories about the past.⁶ Rather, the oral historian must be aware that life stories are essentially just that:

⁴ The most influential studies have been Thomas Miller Klubock, *Contested Communities: Class, Gender, and Politics in Chile's El Teniente Copper Mine, 1904-1951* (Durham N.C.; London: Duke University Press, 1998); Heidi Tinsman, *Partners in Conflict: the Politics of Gender, Sexuality, and Labor in the Chilean Agrarian Reform, 1950-1973* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002). Other influential studies that do not focus on Chile include Ann Farnsworth-Alvear, *Dulcinea in the Factory: Myths, Morals, Men, and Women in Colombia's Industrial Experiment, 1905-1960* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000); John D. French and Daniel James, eds., *The Gendered Worlds of Latin American Women Workers: from Household and Factory to the Union Hall and Ballot Box* (Durham, N.C.; London: Duke University Press, 1997); Daniel James, *Doña María's Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

⁵ Tinsman's study covers reforms undertaken both by the governing Christian Democratic Party (PDC) from 1964 through 1970 and the Popular Unity Coalition (UP) from 1970 through 1973. Tinsman, *Partners in Conflict: the Politics of Gender, Sexuality, and Labor in the Chilean Agrarian Reform, 1950-1973*.

⁶ Daniel James, "Listening in the Cold: The Practice of Oral History in an Argentine Meatpacking Community," in *Doña María's Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 123.

stories about one's life. The teller reconstructs the past in a selective way that both legitimizes her life to the audience and provides meaning for her.⁷ Life stories, then, are born out of the present as much as out of the past—out the interviewee's self-perceptions, the rapport developed between interviewer and interviewee, cultural constraints, and social norms.⁸ As James eloquently writes,

if oral testimony is indeed a window onto the subjective in history—the cultural, social, and ideological universe of historical actors—then it must be said that the view it affords is not a transparent one that simply reflects thoughts, feelings as they really were/are. At the very least the image is bent, the glass of the window unclear.⁹

Analyzing life stories, then, obliges one to use a different set of analytical tools than that of a traditional history. The oral historian must be aware, as Alessandro Portelli suggests, that the exciting possibilities of oral history consist “in the fact that ‘wrong’ statements are still psychologically ‘true’ and that this truth may be equally important as factually reliable accounts.”¹⁰ In exploring Verónica's life story, therefore, I am not as concerned as much with hard facts in the empirical sense nor is my goal to verify if what Verónica told me necessarily

⁷ James, "Listening in the Cold: The Practice of Oral History in an Argentine Meatpacking Community," 123.

⁸ For an anthology that explores the idea that the oral history interview is “interactively constructed,” see Eva M. McMahan and Kim Lacy Rogers, eds., *Interactive Oral History Interviewing* (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1994). See, also, Ronald J. Grele and Studs Terkel, *Envelopes of Sound: the Art of Oral History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Praeger, 1991); James, "Listening in the Cold: The Practice of Oral History in an Argentine Meatpacking Community."; Eva M. McMahan, *Elite Oral History Discourse: a Study of Cooperation and Coherence, Studies in Rhetoric and Communication* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989); Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1991).

⁹ James, "Listening in the Cold: The Practice of Oral History in an Argentine Meatpacking Community," 124.

¹⁰ Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," 51.

happened exactly so. Rather, I am more interested in what her stories suggest about the meaning of her past: what she wanted to do, what she believed she was doing, and what she now believed happened.¹¹ In the story that follows I document Verónica's narratives of life leading to exile, contrasting her stories with those of her ex-husband, José. Such contrast highlights not only a very different experience leading to exile, but also the constantly evolving process of memory and identity formation—both how one's past shapes the present but, as importantly, how the present shapes one's past. Verónica's story, as are all life stories, is a complicated remembering of a complicated life.

Verónica was born into a large, "very Catholic" family in the small town of Curepto, located west of the city of Talca in the southern province of the same name. Her family lived comfortably in the early years of Verónica's childhood, supported by a hardworking father who in the 1950s owned a successful furniture store. When Verónica was still a young child, though, her father's business foundered. Thinking of future employment options and her older siblings' educational opportunities, Verónica's parents moved to San Fernando, a larger city of about 40,000 people in the province of Colchagua, north of Curepto but south of Chile's capital, Santiago.¹²

¹¹ Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," 50.

Verónica was considered a very special child because she was the first daughter born after eight boys. “I occupy a very special place in the family system because my mother really wanted a little girl and then I came.” Her parents thus lavished attention on her:

I remember being a real neat little girl and my mother was very preoccupied about how she dressed me and I remember the jewellery man coming to my place and my mother bought me gold earrings and everything...I was sort of refined, like compared to the other girls in the neighbourhood.¹³

With such adoration came overbearing and at times stifling strictness. Such severity eventually led to tense relations between Verónica and her mother.

My mother especially, she was fearful of losing me. I don't know and it wasn't the right parenting for sure because I had some problems later on because they were very, very strict with me. For example, I had to be, like [my mother] used to get up early in the morning to make sure my nails were clean and everything was ironed and clean for me to go to school in the morning. I had to be perfect. I had to be perfect. If she sent me to make the beds of all these boys and if I didn't make the beds the way she wanted, she'd mess them all up and I'd have to do it again because she said she wanted to teach me the right way. So yah, I recognize that it wasn't the right kind of parenting. When my mother died, you know, I was just so heartbroken because I never told her that I loved her...and then I forgave myself by saying well she never taught me; she never taught me. She was so busy trying to teach me the right way.¹⁴

¹² José provided this population estimate. His narrative in this essay is taken from José Valenzuela, interview by author, tape recording, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 20 August 2004. The population of San Fernando in 1970 was 42,324. Andrew Marshall, ed., *The 1970 South American handbook*, 46 ed. (Bath, Eng. Chicago, Ill.: Trade & Travel Publications Ltd. Distributed in the U.S. and Canada by Rand McNally & Company, 1970), 300.

¹³ Moya, interview, 19 August 2004.

¹⁴ Moya, interview, 19 August 2004.

That Verónica was treated differently from her older brothers perhaps goes without saying but this was also the case compared to her younger sisters. To accentuate such difference, Verónica juxtaposes her teenage experiences to that of her sister, who travelled without a chaperone all over Chile as the only female in a musical group. Her sister's extended period away from her parents was not an issue. Verónica, on the other hand, remembers being slapped by her mother for even talking to a boy at their front door. She exclaims, "I didn't go anywhere without my father!"¹⁵

In the highly politicized world of 1960s Chile, Verónica's family supported the Christian Democratic Party (PDC)—a progressive yet fundamentally anti-Marxist Party that held power for much of the decade.¹⁶ Her mother especially was friendly with many of the community's PDC leaders. It was because of these strong political connections that PDC members approached Verónica's parents to see if she was able to attend a three-month youth leadership camp away from San Fernando. Verónica was sure she would not be allowed to attend but her mother argued in her favour. "My father didn't want to let me go but my mother knew these politicians and they [told her] that I was going to be safe and all that and finally they let me go to this program."

¹⁵ Moya, interview, 19 August 2004.

¹⁶ The PDC formed in 1957. Tapping into the sentiments of a large portion of the population—much of the middle and working classes—the party held power from 1964 through 1970 on a progressive platform that sought to counter the brutal excesses of Chilean capitalism while fundamentally opposing Marxist revolution. The PDC proposed a "third way" termed a "Revolution in Liberty." Providing a structural critique of capitalism and moving to some extent towards collective ideals, the PDC still essentially privileged individual experience and development as the true impetus for social change. See, for example, Simon Collier and William F. Sater, *A History of Chile, 1808-1994* (Cambridge, England; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 303-29; Kathleen B. Fischer, *Political Ideology and Educational Reform in Chile, 1964-1976* (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center University of California, 1979), 11-58.

The youth camp was part of a Christian Democratic program called “Popular Promotion” which sought to create space in the public political realm for those who had been traditionally marginalized, such as women, peasants, and youth.¹⁷ It was through the Popular Promotion program that Verónica moved out from under her parents’ watch and first tasted independence. She comes alive speaking about the camp:

And it was study, study, study, all day and we had the occasional outing with them, the teachers, that were teaching us many things about community development, how you start developing a community, and how you cooperate with other groups, and we were doing plays and all kinds of things—and it was so really, really nice, and it helped me to become more outgoing because I was a little bit shy and I don’t know if you want to put this [laughter] oh my God, I have beautiful stories about that training! We used to [laughter] get in a little group with the guys. I remember we were about three girls and three guys or something. [The teachers] were taking us on outings because remember in Chile you have to be twenty-one to run your own show and I was about seventeen, eighteen, so those teachers, they have to be accountable for us if something happens. So we were watched really, really good, but we found a way; we found a way. One time we wanted to go dancing. We wanted to go dancing and the guys, we talked with a few guys, and then we started talking through the window; they were on the third floor and we were on the second. All women in the second—the guys couldn’t come to our floor. So we made plans to go out at night, to sneak out....I don’t know how they got down, but [the guys] went out through the window and then they start calling us to go with them, maybe four or six of us....and we tied up the sheets and we went down and the guys waited for us and helped us and everything. And we went down and danced and everything and had a good time. The dances are open to five o’clock in the morning so we were planning to be home for breakfast. We have to be home for breakfast because they were counting and so we went and guess what? We run into the teachers at the dance! [laughter] We run into the teachers at the dance and some of them, they were young, young guys, and we met and everything and they saw us and holy crap, what do we do? Well, they saw us already

¹⁷ Lisa Baldez, *Why Women Protest: Women's Movements in Chile* (Cambridge, UK; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 39.

so let's go and talk to them: "well you guys want to have a good time so we want to have a good time too. You guys are supervising us everywhere so we want to be alone and we're not doing anything wrong. We just want to dance!" You know and we were not much into drinking or nothing at that age. We were good kids, very political and everything, so one of the teachers said "ok, I am going to talk the other [teachers] into pretending that we have never run into each other." And so he talked to the other ones and he came back to tell us "ok, guys have a good time, just be home, make sure you get home for breakfast." And that's it. Then they stayed for a little bit more and then we stayed there [laughter]. We went to the beach after the dancing and somehow we made it and we walked into the doors for the breakfast; we walked through the doors with everyone and nobody noticed [laughter].... You know, if a hundred people go into a dining hall for breakfast who is going to notice? So we [were] sitting there and oh my God we had such a hard time to stop from laughing you know when we were looking at the teachers and looking at each other. But we had a good time!¹⁸

After the camp, Verónica returned to San Fernando to organize about thirty of the neighbourhood's Christian Democratic youth to successfully petition the city for a community centre. Verónica recalls: "sure enough I was the head. I was the leader. Nobody wanted to take the leadership, the girls or the guys. We support you [they said] but they didn't want to take the responsibility...and I said ok fine. So I [ran] the group for about four years." While Verónica's organized political involvement as a community leader was clearly quite serious, her remembrances of both life at the camp and her later involvement in the community focus not on her leadership position or the political nature of the activities but instead on teenage hijinks and the joy of escaping the grip of very strict parents. When I asked what the community centre was for, for instance, Verónica remembers that it was a place "where we could have meetings [but] we

¹⁸ Moya, interview, 19 August 2004.

were thinking about fun, we were...somehow we were doing politics and meetings and all these things but for us it was just...we want a ping pong table and we took a radio and we were playing music and dancing and everything.” The youth’s parents would monitor the community centre, asking them to leave the door open. They complied but, as Verónica remembers, “we had the door open and our parents drove by whenever they wanted to but we had hiding places you know, we had hiding places for us. Oh we had so much fun!”¹⁹

Verónica nostalgically portrays her life from the time she became involved with her community until her marriage as some of the best times of her life. Steve J. Stern suggests that those whose lives have been interrupted by great trauma often create “formative moments of remembrance” from before the disaster that wield decisive influence on one’s life construction or “memory-identity trajectory.”²⁰ Such formative moments from Verónica’s youth are clear in how she understands her place in the world today. She, for instance, speaks of the “old me” that resurfaced recently in Canada while she studied at the University of Manitoba, clearly referring to the outspoken young adult who led her community. She recounted a conversation with a professor, for example, who pointed out that she was much more passionate about community issues than her fellow “Canadian” students. She remembers telling the professor, “consciousness-raising started in South America!”²¹

¹⁹ Moya, interview, 19 August 2004.

²⁰ Steve J. Stern, *Remembering Pinochet's Chile: On the Eve of London 1998* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 48-49, 186 (see footnote 16).

²¹ Moya, interview, 19 August 2004.

The stories Verónica tells about her youth—while similar in that they are broadly about community activism—do not coincide with the dominant exile memories of life in 1960s Chile. The predominant narrative establishes an exile's credibility—that he or she resolutely and seriously fought for social justice in Chile.²² José, for example, recounts his teenage years as a time in which he solidified his position as a bona fide revolutionary. He first joined the Socialist Party in middle school but soon realized that its members were “full of hot air.” He was especially disillusioned with the party's lax educational standards and its willingness to compromise its political position. He then became a member of the Communist Party. Though its educational program was mandatory and more rigorous, José again became cynical of party method and, at nineteen, jumped at the chance to join the militant *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria* (MIR or the Movement of the Revolutionary Left). Stories of youthful horseplay are entirely absent. Another example from the period after the military coup of 11 September 1973 comes from an article published in *The Vancouver Courier*,

²² Verónica's characterization of her political activity is similar to that of other Latin American women in that it does not violate the discourse for 'proper' female behaviour. Doña María, a union activist from Argentina, speaks, for example, of her union activity in “maternalist terms.” Both Verónica and Doña María's self-representations are quite different from those offered by politically-active men, who tell stories highlighting “the most valued aspects of a discourse of masculinity,” tending “to tell stories about their aggressive defence of workers in ‘battles.’” John D. French and Daniel James, “Oral History, Identity Formation, and Working-Class Mobilization,” in *The Gendered Worlds of Latin American Women Workers: from Household and Factory to the Union Hall and Ballot Box*, ed. John D. French and Daniel James (Durham, N.C.; London: Duke University Press, 1997), 306-07. For more on Doña María, see, James, *Doña María's Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity*; Daniel James, “Tales Told Out of the Borderlands': Doña Maria's Story, Oral History, and Issues of Gender,” in *The Gendered Worlds of Latin American Women Workers: from Household and Factory to the Union Hall and Ballot Box*, ed. John D. French and Daniel James (Durham, N.C.; London: Duke University Press, 1997).

entitled "Legacy of Pain." Marq Miquel Helsen tells the story of Eduardo Cruz, a Chilean-Canadian today living in Vancouver. After the coup, Cruz immediately "took to the streets to defend his country's fragile democracy" armed "with nothing more than his voice and his fists."²³ In a similar narrative construction to that of José, Cruz highlights aspects of his past that illustrate his loyalty to his country and his willingness to die for his political beliefs.²⁴

The past is especially relevant to Cruz's present-day identity as both a political refugee and an activist fighting for justice for atrocities committed under the Pinochet dictatorship.²⁵ He is very much involved with the exile organization *El Comité de Expresos de Vancouver* and is writing a book about his experiences in Chile. Cruz's current project exhibits his deep sense of

²³ Marc Miquel Helsen, "Legacy of Pain," *Vancouver Courier*, Wednesday, March 9 2005, 1.

²⁴ Loyalty to Chile and the seriousness of one's political activities in Chile is often highlighted in exile narratives and is what I have termed the dominant exile narrative. See, for example, Cecilia Aguilera, interview by author, tape recording, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 18 August 2004; José Astorga, interview by author, tape recording, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 21 February 2003; Hugo Torres, interview by author, tape recording, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 6 March 2003; Leandro Silva, interview by author, tape recording, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 11 February 2003; Teruel Carrasco, interview by author, tape recording, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 27 August 2004. Such conviction is also documented in the secondary literature. See, for example, Monica Escobar, "Exile and National Identity: Chilean Women in Canada" (PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 2000), 160-61, 241; Gabriel García Márquez and Miguel Littín, *Clandestine in Chile: the Adventures of Miguel Littín* (New York: H. Holt, 1987); Thomas C. Wright and Rody Oñate, *Flight from Chile: Voices of Exile*, 1st ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 70-91, 149-70.

²⁵ Pinochet held power from 1973 until 1990. For a concise detailing of the crimes committed under the Pinochet regime, see Stern, *Remembering Pinochet's Chile: On the Eve of London 1998*, xxii, 88-102. For more extensive detail, see, for example, Collier and Sater, *A History of Chile, 1808-1994*, 359-82; Pamela Constable and Arturo Valenzuela, *A Nation of Enemies: Chile under Pinochet* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991); Mark Ensalaco, *Chile under Pinochet: Recovering the Truth* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Lois Hecht Oppenheim, *Politics in Chile: Democracy, Authoritarianism, and the Search for Development* (Boulder, Colo.; Oxford: Westview Press, 1999), 111-85; Jacobo Timerman, *Chile: Death in the South* (New York: Knopf: Distributed by Random House, 1987); Patricia Verdugo, Paul E. Sigmund, and Marcelo Montecino, *Chile, Pinochet, and the Caravan of Death* (Coral Gables, Fla.: North-South Center Press, 2001).

responsibility to not forget the past or his *compañeros* who were murdered. He will continue the struggle to make sure his friends did not die in vain:

That's what motivates me to go on living and writing about the lives of my friends [...] I keep on writing to keep them alive so that they exist as something more than a name or a photograph. They were a part of history and nobody knows who they were, what their dreams were, what kind of a society they wanted, or what they were fighting for.²⁶

The connection between past and present is unambiguous and extremely powerful. Such a narrative of unjust tragedy aptly illustrates what oral historians refer to as the "key pattern of the narrative structure," reproducing "throughout the narrative a recognizable matrix of behaviour that imposes a coherence on the speaker's life experience, the coherence of self."²⁷ Cruz's narrative allows him, and many other Chilean exiles as individuals, to claim the high moral ground in a struggle that ended in such brutality. It validates, as much as possible, Cruz's "legacy of pain," the death of his *compañeros*, the torture and imprisonment, the life in exile.

The collective narrative in the organized community (and most of the exiles I have spoken with have been involved in some capacity with the organized community) functions similarly. It ought to be understood as what Alistair Thomson terms a "particular public" or a group of people with a shared past that create meaning of experiences or remembrances through active

²⁶ Helsen, "Legacy of Pain," 4.

²⁷ Marie-Francoise Chanfrault-Duchet, "Narrative Structures, Social Models, and Symbolic Representation in the Life Story," in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, ed. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 80. Quoted in James, *Doña María's Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity*, 160.

relationships.²⁸ Thomson suggests that, though each individual member plays an active role in creating how the past is remembered, social acceptance and affirmation of the particular group are “especially influential, and potentially repressive, in the construction of meaning and identity.”²⁹ Many Chilean organizations in Canada—the Chilean Association in Winnipeg included—have had the very serious political function of publicizing the tragedy of Chile, seeking explicitly to heighten international condemnation of the junta. It is hardly surprising, then, that such a narrative of unjust tragedy is deep-rooted and a key component to many Chilean-Canadian’s current identities, fifteen years after Pinochet stepped down as President.³⁰

Verónica’s story and its divergences from the dominant Chilean-exile narrative therefore provide a window into how memory is mediated by the present. How she makes sense of the past—what she chooses to recall and relate—is not as influenced by the narratives being produced within the organized community because she is not and has never been active in the Chilean community. Perhaps in part because of her disconnect from the larger community she does not today consider herself a political refugee and this

²⁸ Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend* (Melbourne; New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 9.

²⁹ Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend*, 9.

³⁰ The narrative of unjust tragedy is found internationally. One Chilean psychologist, who studied exiles in Great Britain, suggests that “[t]he exile lives in a world of the past, in a permanent state of bereavement.” Liliana Muñoz, “Grief and Loss in Exile” (MA thesis, Bristol University, 1980). Quoted in Constable and Valenzuela, *A Nation of Enemies: Chile under Pinochet*, 150. See also a website devoted to Chileans in exile, Estela Aguirre, Sonia Chamorro, and Carmen Correa, “Exilio Chileno,” (November 2004, <<http://chile.exilio.free.fr/index.htm>> Accessed 10 May 2005).

possible self-identification is not used to validate her being in Canada. There is less at stake in the way Verónica remembers early political life in Chile for her present identity—both in terms of group identification and as an individual Chilean-Canadian.

That her identity does not largely rest on the seriousness of her past life in organized politics but instead focuses on her fun-loving, rebellious nature also sheds light onto how the gendered world of politics was navigated and made sense of by a teenage girl and a middle age woman remembering her youth. Verónica participated politically because it was both a legitimate way out from under her parents and because many of her friends in the community participated. It was, according to Verónica, about a good time, “something I did as a teenager, like more for fun and stuff. That was mostly my thing, but then I became very, without even thinking, I became very political because I still am.”³¹ Significant in her narrative is what Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack term the “meta-statement” in which the interviewee spontaneously comments on her own thoughts or stories, thereby alerting the researcher to how individual identity and memory are shaped by larger community and cultural values.³² Verónica is clearly sensing and commenting on a tension in her own narrative in which she characterizes herself as both a serious political actor and a mischievous teenager.³³ That she concentrates on stories about sneaking away from camp to

³¹ Moya, interview, 19 August 2004.

³² Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack, “Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analyses,” in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, ed. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 21-22.

go dancing suggests that she and the larger community viewed her role in organized politics, regardless of lived experience, as fundamentally non-threatening. Teenage girls should be active within their local communities but serious Chilean party politics was still principally the domain of men.³⁴

Such an analysis is given weight by the fact that Verónica easily gave up organized political activity upon her marriage to José in 1970, the same year that Salvador Allende—the first and only Marxist president democratically elected in the Western Hemisphere—came to power in Chile.³⁵ During our early interviews, Verónica always insisted that she simply was not politically involved after marriage. During a recent meeting, I pushed her for a reason for her political disengagement. “I discontinued all that involvement the minute I got married” she recalls, “because um...because...it’s not cool over there when a married woman is...sort of like, you marry, you stop life.”³⁶ Her life, however, stopped only in that she withdrew from her involvement with the PDC. Beyond this, she continued to work fulltime, soon gave birth to a son, and with her husband bought a new house. To be sure, there was little time for much else. This was

³³ Such “meta-statements” also illustrate the constructed nature of the oral history interview. As French and James point out, such comments problematize the narrator “by revealing that her own story is an interpretation of her experience rather than a direct expression of it.” Verónica, then, speaks from the position of both historical actor and historian, offering an interpretation of the past. French and James, “Oral History, Identity Formation, and Working-Class Mobilization,” 300.

³⁴ Baldez, *Why Women Protest: Women’s Movements in Chile*, 40.

³⁵ President Allende led an ideologically broad coalition known as Popular Unity. For a concise outline of Popular Unity coalition, see Ensalaco, *Chile under Pinochet: Recovering the Truth*, 5-12. For more detailed accounts, see Collier and Sater, *A History of Chile, 1808-1994*, 330-52; Ricardo Israel Zipper, *Politics and ideology in Allende’s Chile* (Tempe: Center for Latin American Studies Arizona State University, 1989); Paul E. Sigmund, *The Overthrow of Allende and the Politics of Chile, 1964-1976* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977), 77-188.

³⁶ Moya, interview, 19 August 2004.

especially true given that the majority of the household and parenting duties were left to her. She remembers, José “felt like the provider....He felt like he had to be out working and bringing the money home and that’s it.”³⁷ She continues. “He wasn’t a very good husband. He was very young and he was involved in his own thing. You know he disappeared for a weekend sometimes to go motorcycle racing...and he was very involved in politics. I was always alone with my son.”³⁸ The sexual division of labour, which left Verónica with the domestic duties, a newborn child, and a fulltime job, rendered any other time-consuming activities inconceivable.

Though Verónica undoubtedly spent many of her waking hours on such exhaustive activities, her narrative contains little detail of her life under Allende. Rather, she focuses almost entirely on her ex-husband’s political involvement. To some extent, Verónica has surely internalized aspects of the dominant narrative, exemplified by Eduardo Cruz, which privileges the actions of certain members of the exile community. Activities such as child rearing are considered mundane in the larger communal narrative, holding little public significance in comparison to political activities.³⁹ One fieldwork experience is particularly telling in this regard. In the summer of 2004, I went to the house of a Chilean-Winnipegger who was very interested in speaking with me and who also gives

³⁷ Moya, interview, 10 February 2003.

³⁸ Moya, interview, 19 August 2004.

³⁹ Thomson makes a similar point in speaking about his grandmother’s experiences during the First World War in Australia. Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend*, 5.

presentations to local high schools on his life experiences. As we sat in his living room, he spoke of his life in Chile and his political beliefs, while his wife, who came with him to Winnipeg in 1975, served us drinks and snacks. What struck me during our talk was the fact that his wife was not mentioned in the context of fleeing Chile, nor did he, his daughter who introduced us, or evidently his wife, ever consider that I might be interested in her experiences as an exile. This tacit assumption was so strong that I felt uncomfortable even broaching the subject and, though I was very interested in speaking with her, did not request an interview.⁴⁰

Aside from the influence of the dominant narrative working to trivialize certain experiences, we must also consider my position as researcher and my stated research aims when examining how and why Verónica related aspects of her life story in the way she did. Though we quickly moved away from only exploring the exile experience, organized politics in some capacity was always central to our talks about Chile. Verónica, then, constructed her narrative in part around themes that interested me. With that said, however, it also seemed most reasonable for Verónica to highlight José's political involvement. Regardless of how I framed our talks or what activities she was involved in, José's involvement has had a profound influence on her life trajectory. In this sense, José's politics

⁴⁰ Others have documented similar occurrences. Alessandro Portelli, for instance, details the surprised look of some of his male informants when he also requested interviews with the man's wife and child. Portelli concludes that a formal interview is "status-loaded time," where the historian can upset an "implicit hierarchy" in the family. Alessandro Portelli, "The Time of My Life': Functions of Time in Oral History," in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1991), 62.

become an essential component to Verónica's life story, as they drastically and traumatically altered her life and led to her coming to Canada.

José was consumed by the Chilean political struggle as a young man. Apart from being a member of the MIR, he was also a regional representative for the union at the hospital at which both he and Verónica worked. José's stake in politics suggests a second explanation for Verónica withdrawing from party politics after marriage. Verónica, being a Christian Democrat, fundamentally disagreed with her husband's militant political approach. José remembers, "many, many times she criticized me, what I was doing, and what I was getting involved in." And yet, she did not do so openly by continuing her involvement with the PDC and told me she never even considered it.

Certainly social pressures were a central factor in her not publicly opposing her husband.⁴¹ Verónica spoke indirectly to such pressure.⁴² After her

⁴¹ Much of the recent literature on gender relations in Latin America explores how powerful expectations from the community drastically limit one's identity and activities. French and James, for instance, suggest that working class women across Latin America were judged in relation to domestic duties. "Whether she resisted housework or embraced it, she would still find herself defined from the outside as either a good or a bad housewife/woman." French and James, "Oral History, Identity Formation, and Working-Class Mobilization," 301. For further reading on the power of gender discourses to shape identity, see Farnsworth-Alvear, *Dulcinea in the Factory: Myths, Morals, Men, and Women in Colombia's Industrial Experiment, 1905-1960*; Klubock, *Contested Communities: Class, Gender, and Politics in Chile's El Teniente Copper Mine, 1904-1951*; Deborah Levenson-Estrada, "The Loneliness of Working-Class Feminism: Women in the 'Male World' of Labor Unions, Guatemala City, 1970s," in *The Gendered Worlds of Latin American Women Workers: from Household and Factory to the Union Hall and Ballot Box*, ed. John D. French and Daniel James (Durham, N.C.; London: Duke University Press, 1997); Tinsman, *Partners in Conflict: the Politics of Gender, Sexuality, and Labor in the Chilean Agrarian Reform, 1950-1973*; Theresa Veccia, "My Duty as a Woman': Gender Ideology, Work, and Working Class Women's Lives in São Paulo, Brazil, 1900-1950," in *The Gendered Worlds of Latin American Women Workers: from Household and Factory to the Union Hall and Ballot Box*, ed. John D. French and Daniel James (Durham, N.C.; London: Duke University Press, 1997).

first child was born and Verónica was breastfeeding, José demanded that she stop eating certain types of food that he believed would make the baby gassy. Verónica, being a nurse in a paediatric ward, steadfastly refused, telling me that such belief was not founded in science but in folklore passed on from José's grandmother. He became enraged and, when Verónica left the house, changed the lock on the door. Verónica later returned with her child to find she was locked out of her house with her husband nowhere to be found. She went to her parents' house and after some time, when he still refused to cooperate, pressed charges. The judge, however, was hardly sympathetic, telling Verónica in effect to quit being difficult, return home, and obey her husband. The policeman who accompanied her to the house told José, as Verónica remembers, "you can do anything you want to your wife but you have to let her in the house because she has to [feed] the baby."⁴³

Verónica spoke of a subtler example when she and José were still dating. He came to her with a cut hand resulting from a fight. When she asked what had happened he told her that he punched a guy for saying that Verónica was a member of the PDC and dating a politician from that party, both of which were

⁴² Teruel Carrasco, a Chilean-Winnipegger, also spoke to such pressure. Teruel told me a story of when he first arrived in Winnipeg and became acquainted with the only other Latino family in the city. One time he went to visit the oldest son of the family, Javier, who "grew up here in Canada so he was Canadian but his mother was from Bolivia." Teruel remembers: "[Javier] married a Canadian and we were astonished because when we came...we went to visit Javier and he was alone at home...'where's your wife?' [Teruel asked]. 'Ah, my wife went with her friends camping' [said Javier]. 'And she left you here alone?' 'Oh yah it was a woman's thing.' That was totally something that in our culture would not happen!" I asked Teruel why a group of women would not go camping in Chile. "It's just that...women don't go alone...At that time my wife would never get together with a bunch of woman and leave me alone at home and go camping. That's *unthinkable*! Why? ...um, that's a good question." Teruel Carrasco, interview, 27 August 2004.

⁴³ Moya, interview, 25 August 2004

true before she met José. Verónica explains José's jealous temper: "and I said 'but that's not a reason to punch him, that was a long time ago, before I met you.' But I think he hated the Christian Democratic [Party] also. So all those things got together. Yah, he was an aggressive man, José."⁴⁴ In such a climate it is no wonder that Verónica did not consider openly countering her husband's hard-line political position.

Apart from his radical politics, José also rebelled against many Chilean traditional social norms, a fact that was clearly attractive to Verónica when they first met. She remembers that her parents were extremely strict with her suitors, who all catered to them, except José: "And José was the rebel. He said this is not right: I'm dating you; I'm not dating them. He rebelled and they hated him. They hated him since day one!" This, of course, did not stop their courtship and her parents attempted to supervise their every move. Verónica remembers with a laugh how José ridiculed her parents:

We went dancing and my father went with us and one time we were playing a trick with [laughter] that was my ex-husband, that was José. I told him the way my parents were and he used to wear a poncho. And he...yah we were quite young and then it was this huge dance and I said to my father "I want to go to the dance and my friend is going to meet me there and we are going to go dance." And he said, "oh I'm coming to." My mother and father said that they were coming to the dance! [laughter] And José bought them a bottle of wine and got them a table far away from the dance floor [laughter]...he was so happy; he said "I got your parents some wine" he said "they are going to be just sitting there all night happy and everything." Forget it! [laughter] Forget it! ...We saw my father—he's sitting at a table far away from the dance floor—so we [go] dancing and have a good time and when it was a slow dance there was my father...trying to find me [laughter] and [José] said,

⁴⁴ Moya, interview, 19 August 2004.

he said, "hey watch, I'm going to play a trick on them." He said, "I'm going to cover you with the poncho" and he covered me with the poncho and we were dancing, dancing and I was covered with the poncho and my father was just going crazy...he was tall, so he could see every one on the dance floor and he couldn't find me cause I was covered with the poncho [laughter].

Such blatant disregard for norms was not at all funny to her family when José and Verónica decided to get married by a justice of the peace and not the Church. Her mother refused to attend the ceremony, even though Verónica asked her to be the witness. "I was over twenty-one, otherwise I would have needed consent but I didn't need consent so I said that's it: I got married!" After the civil ceremony, Verónica showed her marriage license to her mother who threw it to the ground in anger.⁴⁵

Unquestionably, then, José fit the strong and rebellious profile of a young MIRista, who, as Florencia Mallon suggests, "countered both upper class and leftist morality as forms of social control," instead promoting "a heroic, resistant, and romantic subjectivity that was especially attractive to the younger generation of all classes."⁴⁶ The MIR was similar to other clandestine political parties throughout Latin America during this period in that it challenged the existing Communist and Socialist parties, seeing their gradual approach to revolution as "a formula for timidity."⁴⁷ Cecilia Aguilera, a MIRista who today lives in Winnipeg, explained why the MIR was so attractive to her: "I personally thought [the

⁴⁵ Moya, interview, 19 August 2004.

⁴⁶ Florencia E. Mallon, "Barbudos, Warriors, and Rotos: The M.I.R, Masculinity, and Power in the Chilean Agrarian Reform, 1965-74," in *Changing Men and Masculinities in Latin America*, ed. Matthew C. Gutmann (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 182.

⁴⁷ Ensalaco, *Chile under Pinochet: Recovering the Truth*, 8.

socialist and communist parties were] passive...I needed something more radical ...the MIR at that time was all that I was looking for...it was more exciting.”⁴⁸

José spoke in a similar tone when explaining his disillusionment with the compromising Communist and Socialist parties. He realized that the bourgeoisie was never going to give up power and the only way for real revolution was to “do it like Cuba did it.” The MIR was the obvious choice, as the party trained to be capable of armed struggle and actively promoted such conflict, encouraging workers to not be cowardly and, as Heidi Tinsman suggests, “take revolutionary action into their own hands,” in effect defining “new standards of working-class male heroism.”⁴⁹

José undoubtedly felt like a hero at that time. He, along with his *compañeros*, were preparing for what he believed was the inevitable revolution while he was a top executive in an ever-more-powerful union. Verónica spoke of how much power the union, and by extension José, held in its organizing capabilities:

I remember one time there was a strike in the hospital and all of a sudden we [almost] had a national strike because we had all the support. We had truckers; we had big buses; we had everyone supporting us so we had almost a national strike and it lasted a long, long time.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Aguilera, interview, 18 August 2004.

⁴⁹ Tinsman, *Partners in Conflict: the Politics of Gender, Sexuality, and Labor in the Chilean Agrarian Reform, 1950-1973*, 58, 232.

⁵⁰ Moya, interview, 10 February 2003.

Political and social solidarity in this era was strong. Cecilia explained what this solidarity meant in her everyday life:

you had all the party, you have all the *compañeros* behind [you], no matter what...and I went to so many places [where] I would never have known [anyone] and you feel like you have somebody there; you have family there because just to say...let's say if you were walking and somebody says to you '*buenos días compañera.*' That was a great feeling! It was like...here, these are my people; I belong here. I didn't even talk to some family relatives that were not with Allende's government and I didn't even care to spend time with them. My duty was to be with the government. Stay with my own people and the working class.⁵¹

Cecilia's reference to her two families, the party—which was growing increasingly stronger—and her blood family—which was fractured by political ideology—is symbolic of the country under Allende.

Indeed, political moderates were all but gone by late 1972, two years into Allende's presidency.⁵² Political positions hardened as the country spiralled into economic turmoil, characterized by inflation, rationing, and black markets.⁵³ Strong political ties became crucial to obtain even essential products. José's status as a community leader rose exponentially during this time, as he became a provider within the community because of his exclusive political connections. He was put in charge of distributing government-issued food, he remembers, "because I was part of the union, but I was [also] well known being a leftist. The Socialists—they knew me. The Communists—they knew me. So I was in

⁵¹ Aguilera, interview, 18 August 2004.

⁵² Oppenheim, *Politics in Chile: Democracy, Authoritarianism, and the Search for Development*, 94-96.

⁵³ Collier and Sater, *A History of Chile, 1808-1994*, 352-58; Stern, *Remembering Pinochet's Chile: On the Eve of London 1998*, 20-27.

charge to bring all the groceries.” At a time when most people had to wait hours in queue to get cooking oil and milk, José exclaims, “at home it was like a store!”

Even in such volatile circumstances, José never doubted the righteousness of Chile’s Marxist political project. He remembers how exciting the Allende years were: “you get drunk with the energy, with the changes, with the opportunity because once and for all you see the purchasing power of the proletariat.” In explaining his devotion to the revolution, he told me that, on three separate occasions, party leaders offered him an opportunity to attend university, once in Chile and twice to study in both East Germany and Russia. He remembers turning them down: “my loyalty’s with the revolution; once we win the revolution, I can go and study; it’s not a problem...so for me to make that kind of decision, I truly believed in the change and the dream because that’s what it was: a dream to change society, for a better society.” Other leftists speak with equal fervour about the dream. One Chilean exile, who wrote a dissertation on the subject, claims that for many it was “like a religious experience. Participating in that political project was to transcend beyond earthly concerns.”⁵⁴ Another participant sums up the excitement of the era: “we were the generation that thought we had the world in our hands; we were building a new country.”⁵⁵

Such enthusiasm is absent from Verónica’s narrative of that period. When I asked her if she thought the Allende years were an exciting time, she replied “no, no, that was very bad for me...like for my marriage and everything because

⁵⁴ Escobar, “Exile and National Identity: Chilean Women in Canada”, 127.

⁵⁵ Constable and Valenzuela, *A Nation of Enemies: Chile under Pinochet*, 27.

José was very involved in politics.” She still remembers supporting President Allende, however, “because he was doing so good for middle class people.”

Verónica continues:

Middle class people were going to university. There [were] loans; there [were] scholarships, like here, you know, and even I was thinking to go back and get my bachelors in nursing....Everybody could go and get a university education when Allende was in power. And farmers, he got things for farmers too. They could own the land and before farmers would never own the land.⁵⁶

As life became more chaotic in late 1972 and 1973, Verónica recalls that her support did not waver.

Everyone was wondering what was going on but we knew the game and we knew...José was explaining things to me, that this is some [right wing] strategy to make people believe that Allende is doing all these horrible things, you know, that he's not doing good. We can't get food, we can't get nothing! So we knew that those were strategies to crush our government...[the right] started to make people believe that Allende wasn't good so civilians don't fight. So if you believe that this president, oh my God, we don't have no food, nothing, so then you don't get involved! But people knew better. People in Chile are really politically aware. They get it. They get what is going on. They get the game.

Verónica sided with the left, believing that the Chilean right was sabotaging the Allende government.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Verónica did not attend university for her training as a nurse but received it at the hospital.

⁵⁷ This was indeed one of the many challenges Allende faced. For a general overview of the literature analyzing the many forces that led to the military coup, see the review essay, Arturo Valenzuela and J. Samuel Valenzuela, "Visions of Chile," *Latin American Research Review* 10, no. 3 (1975). For more recent analyses, see Oppenheim, *Politics in Chile: Democracy, Authoritarianism, and the Search for Development*, 87-111; Stern, *Remembering Pinochet's Chile: On the Eve of London 1998*, 21-27.

That she remembers fully supporting the Allende government surprised me in light of other aspects of her narrative. I knew she had been involved in the PDC, which by 1972 had allied with the right-wing National Party, and that she did not agree with her ex-husband's revolutionary politics.⁵⁸ Indeed, she had told me previously that, throughout the Allende years, "I was still with my own way of thinking—New Democratic—because I was raised in a very Catholic family. I never changed my view."⁵⁹ Because of such conflicting feelings I pressed her on her remembrances, asking again, "so even when you were standing in lines and things like that you were still in support of the Allende government?" Her response was quite different:

I remember being sort of puzzled. There was a part of me that wanted to believe [that Allende was destroying the economy] but I knew all the other good things that were happening so I was sort of puzzled...and because I was such a [Christian] Democratic thinker...I remember my neighbour came and asked "did you see the news?" She was crying and everything. "They killed Allende" and all that and I remember being like, so what? You know being very unemotional about what was happening because I was puzzled. I didn't believe that completely—that Allende was doing bad—but I thought he was not doing very good for the economy but I knew there was very good things happening, like the scholarships happening and the farmers and all that, many good things happening.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Oppenheim, *Politics in Chile: Democracy, Authoritarianism, and the Search for Development*, 95.

⁵⁹ Verónica often refers to the Christian Democratic Party of Chile as the New Democratic Party, a Canadian left-leaning political party. Moya, interview, 10 February 2003.

⁶⁰ Moya, interview, 19 August 2004.

Feelings of bewilderment and indifference illustrate that, for Verónica, a historical perspective has not resolved the complexities in her analysis of the Allende years.

The violent nature of the military coup and the cultural transformation that took place under the ensuing dictatorship surely only makes such an analysis more complicated. No one would have guessed on 10 September 1973 that the repression would be so fierce.⁶¹ John Dinges, agreeing with a multitude of observers, states that there “is no way to exaggerate the atmosphere of terror that the military imposed on Chile after September 11, 1973.”⁶² The country was transformed practically over night, with virtually no resistance from the left. Peter Winn succinctly sums up the consequences of the military’s actions in the months after the coup: “five decades of mass politics had been erased in less than five months.”⁶³ The result was outward peace and quiet, guaranteed by the quickly assembled apparatuses of a modern police state.⁶⁴ Thomas Miller Klubock chronicles the long-term effects of the dictatorship on Chilean communities: “The combination of state terror and economic ‘shock therapy’ led to the fragmentation of these community ties, political networks, and workplace cultures.”⁶⁵ The Chilean customs, then, that Verónica associates with the best

⁶¹ Stern, *Remembering Pinochet's Chile: On the Eve of London 1998*, xxii, 88-102.

⁶² John Dinges, *The Condor Years: How Pinochet and his Allies Brought Terrorism to Three Continents* (New York: The New Press, 2004), 44.

⁶³ Peter Winn, *Weavers of Revolution: the Yarur Workers and Chile's Road to Socialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 249.

⁶⁴ Collier and Sater, *A History of Chile, 1808-1994*, 360.

days of her life—notably grassroots community activism—were all but destroyed. Verónica’s responses about the Allende government ought to be read in light of Chile’s contemporary history. With the benefit of hindsight, Verónica is perhaps today more sympathetic to the Allende government than she was in the months leading up to the coup.

Life, too, is messy and confusing and this should not be understated. It is rare that a person has the conviction or the confidence to follow an undeviating line of thought. Most are not so self-assured. As a left-leaning liberal, Verónica liked much of what Allende was doing. At the same time, she was clearly made nervous by the heightened instability in the country, which was only compounded by the fact that she had a newborn child and a husband who was often absent from daily life because of his political responsibilities. Indeed, leftist political theory explaining why the economy was in ruins did not rectify the fact that Verónica’s life had become much worse since Allende took power in 1970. Her simultaneous remembrances of both support and indifference for the Allende government, then, illustrate how political ideology was complicated by Verónica’s evermore-stressful and difficult daily existence.

Life as both Verónica and José knew it was destroyed on 11 September 1973. José was immediately fired from the hospital and arrested soon thereafter. His arrest verifies his commanding position in the leftist movement. “So when

⁶⁵ Thomas Miller Klubock, "Class, Community, and Neoliberalism in Chile: Copper Workers and the Labor Movement During the Military Dictatorship and Restoration of Democracy," in *Victims of the Chilean Miracle: Workers and Neoliberalism in the Pinochet Era, 1973-2002*, ed. Peter Winn (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 210.

they took me the first time,” José told me, people said “you know who they took?” ‘they took José’ ‘oh really, oh shit!’ So everybody knew! They took me in one place and handcuffed me in the jeep, up there, with the bar up there, [motions upward to illustrate how he was handcuffed in an upright position] and they took me through downtown, to show me to everybody.” Even though José was imprisoned, his immediate family was docile and refused to get involved in a situation that they believed was brought on by his own foolishness. José recalls:

After September 11th there was a division. My mother was the only one who didn’t say nothing. But the rest of the family...I don’t know why...they were not, and then...but the majority of the people in Chile really...when Pinochet took over, it seemed like all society just closed up like that, that everything was quiet, quiet. Nobody wanted to do anything or say anything. Nobody wanted to get involved because you see what happened to the people so they were just afraid.

It is in recounting this horrific time that Verónica returns in her narratives to focus on her personal involvement: “It’s awful...oh my God. There are scars and every time you pick at them they bleed because the things that happen to you. So it’s awful even now with divorce because I was part of it!”⁶⁶ She inserts herself forcefully into the story of José’s imprisonment. She did not turn her back on her loved ones as so many others had:

I even fought with his father you know. When he was in jail I tried to borrow a Thermos from his father...and I said “lend me the thermos so I can bring coffee to José.” He was in jail and everything and [his father] said “no, I am not lending you the Thermos, just leave him over there because he brought this up himself. He got involved in all these politics so just leave him alone in there.” And I said, “I can’t; I can’t! He needs us now...so maybe

⁶⁶ Moya, interview, 10 February 2003.

later he is going to learn his lesson not to get involved but now he needs us. He is cold; he doesn't have no coffee, no food, nothing. So he needs us!" So to me even though our relationship was very bad... but that's the time that...if the family's not there who is going to help him. So I fought with his father and said you need to let me help him, but he wouldn't lend me the Thermos anyway.⁶⁷

Verónica understood her position as one that called for her to be loyal to her husband. She refused to abandon José in his time of need.

Verónica did more than bring coffee to her cold and hungry husband. She also played a very active role in facilitating his eventual release from custody:

I always feel that I saved his life practically. I did save his life! As I said, he would never acknowledge that because he's too proud, because they call me to ask me if he had guns in the house and they wanted to know all the names from the people in his party. I knew. I knew the people, but I didn't say anything. I said "look my husband and I are from very different political [parties] and we never talk politics and I never see any meetings in my home or anything like that because we don't agree politically so we keep it very separate." But I knew; I knew all the people and the party and everything. But I knew if I say they might kill him. They interview me and poom they let him out.⁶⁸

Verónica strategically played the role of the unknowing wife, leading to her husband's release from prison.

Verónica did everything in her power to save José's life. Still, at a time in which the Chilean military was disappearing leftists with abandon and many ex-prisoners remember release as somewhat arbitrary, it is compelling that Verónica so adamantly draws a direct causal relationship between her actions and her

⁶⁷ Moya, interview, 10 February 2003.

⁶⁸ Moya, interview, 10 February 2003.

husband's release from prison.⁶⁹ Such stark conclusions speak perhaps to the mental anguish and the lasting trauma of those directly affected by the political imprisonments.⁷⁰ At a time in which her life was so drastically altered by forces outside her control, Verónica today confidently remembers how her actions shaped the eventual outcome. Such certainties impose coherence on her past, possibly making more bearable remembrances of a period that was so uncertain and so vicious.

Verónica and José's trouble living under the military dictatorship did not end with José's release from prison. The state condemned José to house arrest and immediately blacklisted him so he could not work in his profession. Though Verónica maintained her position at the hospital, José's movement was limited to a certain radius around his house. He had to eke out a living wage in any way that he could. José remembers: "I could not walk outside that radius, so I took the old clothes I had or my parents [and] I went and tried to exchange clothes for potatoes, chickens, or ducks, whatever." Such a difficult time was no doubt compounded by the fact that José had held such a commanding position in the community before the coup: a man who once was in charge of distributing

⁶⁹ Many of those who survived prison claim that there was no reason for them to be released while others were not. See, for instance, Sergio Buschman's remembrances in Wright and Oñate, *Flight from Chile: Voices of Exile*, 20-23. Eduardo Cruz's remembrances are similar. See Helsen, "Legacy of Pain," 1.

⁷⁰ Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," 51.

staples to the rest of the community had been reduced to bartering his family's old clothes for food.⁷¹

Even though José complied with the orders of his house arrest, the military continued to harass him, culminating in a vicious attack. As Verónica explains:

He wasn't doing politics but the military thought that he was doing politics so one day they beat him up...I was working in the paediatric ward when they told me that my husband was in the emergency room and he was beat up with a rifle. They say "come! come! Because your husband is in the emergency room!" And I went to see him and he was really beat up.

José was badly injured but the doctors would not examine him because of his political affiliations.

Verónica used her influence so that José could gain medical assistance:

I fought with the doctors to send him for the x-ray and it was sort of like everything was connected. The doctors didn't want to do nothing for him. And I said to the doctor, you know they were my friends because I was working with them all the time, the surgeons, they were my friends, and I said "you have to, you have to send him for the x-ray." I said, "he can't walk!" "Verónica, [one of the doctors said] I am going to send your husband for an x-ray for you—for you, not for him."...So he said "I am going to do it for you" and I said "yes, you better do it!" And that's how, because I fought with one of his doctors, they send him [for an] x-ray. My ex-husband he didn't know and he would never appreciate this. He doesn't have the ability to appreciate the things I did for him. But I know I did it and that's all that counts. Or maybe he does appreciate it but he's too

⁷¹ Teruel Carrasco, who was also imprisoned after the coup, spoke of how the psychological stress of prison coupled with the realization that all he had ever worked for was destroyed nearly killed him. He fell into a dark depression, drinking heavily: "I became suicidal...because I didn't see any future; I didn't see anything...ok, this is the end. In a way it was the end, at that particular point and time. So what I thought...what's the purpose of all of this, there is nothing else to do, everything's lost...so I proposed to my wife: let's give Valiums to our kids—they were little—let's open the gas and lets finish this. I wanted to die. I just wanted to die." Carrasco, interview, 27 August 2004.

proud as a man....He was in the hospital for about two weeks and I made sure that he had good care. I fought and I didn't take it, no way! I fought and I kept right on track.⁷²

There is a certain degree of anger in Verónica's narrative that could be read as post-divorce hostility, fermenting over the years in Canada.⁷³ We should not discount Verónica's position out of hand, however. Her comments concerning her ex-husband's ungratefulness also point to her frustration in playing an important but almost entirely ignored role in this much-chronicled period of Chilean history. Verónica's tribulations, triumphs, and sacrifices are absent from the dominant narratives even though her actions were extremely courageous, especially when placed against the backdrop of acquiescent Chile following the coup. Aspects of Verónica's story, then, work to insert her position forcefully into this traditional narrative and to seek rightful recognition for her role in the period after the coup. Her importance is clear, whether it was when she kept her husband alive with food in prison, strategically role-played to facilitate his release, or used her hospital connections and sheer determination to make sure her husband received proper medical treatment.

After José was released from the hospital, he decided that he could no longer live in Chile and should seek asylum outside of the country. José

⁷² Moya, interview, 10 February 2003.

⁷³ Verónica has since read this analysis and stated that in no way does she have hostility towards her ex-husband. Verónica Moya, interview by author, video recording, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 7 January 2005.

remembers: "at that point I didn't have no choice. By then I was well aware that I had to leave." José did not, however, understand the move as permanent:

I thought it would be a short period of time, maybe two or three years at the most, because the government is going to change and things are going to change. So it wasn't really something that I thought was going to be permanent.

Perhaps because José believed that exile would be short-lived, he asked Verónica if she wanted to stay behind:

I asked my ex-wife do you want come with me now or do you want to stay here and I can ask for you later? And she said "no, no, no, we go together right away," so we sold whatever we could sell and we came here.

José planned continuously to gauge the political climate in Chile so to return to San Fernando as soon as possible. Verónica, however, remembers the move in starkly different terms:

I said, oh my God! I have my new house and I have a fridge and a stove, everything new. I had everything, you know, and I had a job and all that. I was scared and people are telling me "you are going to have something better over there, you know, so don't worry—a fridge is a fridge and that's it."

Rather than a short period spent in exile, Verónica clearly conceived of the move as permanent. The decision rested on factors absent in José's remembrances, namely the family's standard of living in Canada. Once she was convinced that she and José could re-establish themselves, possibly even raise their standard of living in Canada, Verónica became excited about the adventure. "So then I was very...I was happy, you know, I love adventures, eh, and I was young and how

people say 'young and foolish.' You're not as scared of anything!" Verónica remembers.⁷⁴

Her excitement continued to build. On the day they left, Verónica was "happy to be in the plane," whereas José was devastated. Verónica remembers that as they left Chilean soil José broke down:

He had like a handkerchief, a cloth handkerchief, and he was crying and everything. And he never cried but he was crying, you know, because he was very political and he was very close to his country and everything, so he felt it in the heart.

It didn't take long in Canada for José to realize that Pinochet was only solidifying his position of power and had no intention of relinquishing his tight grip on Chile.⁷⁵ José has never returned.

Verónica travelled to Chile in 1982 for a few months, returning to Canada with the feeling that she no longer "fit" in her country of birth. She has since thought substantially about what it means both to be a Chilean-Canadian and a minority in Canada. During our talks, Verónica was always keen to speak of her recent past in Winnipeg, once even suggesting that I change the focus of my project to analyse her employment experience at a clinic in the late 1990s. Indeed, her experience at the clinic was never far from the surface of our interviews. She regularly evoked or retold this story, with it surfacing during

⁷⁴ Moya, interview, 19 August 2004.

⁷⁵ José's realization came from an analysis of news sources in Canada that he could not access in Chile.

conversations as disparate as her mother's involvement in the Catholic Church to Verónica's earliest days in Canada.⁷⁶ Such an underlying focus on a single period, as others suggest, is a "recognizable form of narrative construction" and points to the "key pattern" or "central core of meaning" in Verónica's life story.⁷⁷

The story of the clinic, in a similar construction to many of her stories told about life in Chile, begins by Verónica detailing how the odds for success were not in her favour. She spent the latter part of the 1970s and the 1980s working as a nurse's aid in Winnipeg, struggling through a divorce, learning English, and raising two children. By the early 1990s, she felt established enough to enroll at the University of Manitoba in the Faculty of Social Work. She enjoyed university immensely and, in speaking of this period, makes various references to feeling fulfilled again as she once felt in Chile. "I was just thrilled because the old me is coming back!" Verónica exclaims.⁷⁸ She continues, "you know when I went to university I was so happy and so grateful for being in this country, that I had this opportunity to develop my potential." Verónica especially liked a course on political analysis:

I felt so enlightened and so happy because I can be involved in politics again and I can understand a little bit, you know, and at the

⁷⁶ During an interview, the speaker, regardless of the themes or periods of interest to the interviewer, "will often forcibly reintroduce the time and events in which *they* are interested in." Portelli, "The Time of My Life': Functions of Time in Oral History," 63. For examples, see Moya, interview, 19 August 2004; Moya, interview, 10 February 2003.

⁷⁷ Quotes one and two from Daniel James, "The Case of María Roldán and the Señora with Money is Very Clear, It's a Fable': Stories, Anecdotes, and Other Performances in Doña María's Testimony," in *Doña María's Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 161. Quote three from Portelli, "The Time of My Life': Functions of Time in Oral History," 65.

⁷⁸ Moya, interview, 10 February 2003.

university we did political analysis of policies. Which perspective did this policy come from? Oh I know, I said, this is right wing for sure! The professors just loved me. I taught students how to pass that course....Yep, I taught many students to make it in that course because they couldn't get past a C and I got an A+ in that course. The professor said, "it is so enlightening to teach you because you are right in there!"

Near the end of her degree, Verónica became involved in politics outside of the classroom, participating in the election campaign of a local New Democratic Party city councillor. Her passion for community politics is evident in how animated she becomes while telling stories from this period. She once phoned a local politician, for instance, challenging him: "I heard your presentation and you are not telling me nothing! What are you going to do for the school?"

Her organized political work diminished after graduation when she was hired as a counsellor at a woman's clinic to develop a support program for teenage girls in abusive relationships. Her program was successful early on and Verónica gained highly coveted media exposure. Articles about the program she developed were printed in the city's major daily newspaper, *The Winnipeg Free Press*, and in the United Way newsletter. Such achievement did not go unnoticed by her colleagues. Verónica soon realized that other counsellors were upset that, she, the most recent hire—and, as she pointed out, the only minority counsellor on staff—had received such attention. One of her colleagues became very upset.

And that's when that woman went crazy. And she [asked] how come I have so much media attention and nobody else [has] it? And I said, "come on" I said, "we all got the information. The only difference is that I thought it was a good opportunity and I followed

it...and I didn't stop until I got in. That's the difference. If you had done the same thing your program would have got in."

The conflict continued. In a meeting not long after, the issue of media exposure was brought up again. Verónica remembers that the same woman exploded. "See, see! How do we feel? How do we feel?' she said 'that we don't know what to do with teens but a freak from another culture knows what to do with teens!'"⁷⁹

Thereafter the environment at the clinic changed for Verónica. "These counsellors they totally ignored me. When we were in our meetings—team meetings—they pretended that I didn't exist. It was so hurtful...so hurtful." She went to great length to work through differences openly but was met with strong opposition on all fronts. The problems were never resolved. Verónica finally called for direct mediation with the woman who had made the comments. The director turned her down. Verónica breaks down at this point in her story. Extremely disheartened with her work situation, she sought counselling, ending up on sick leave for three months. She then quit her job. Through counselling, Verónica realized that the real issue at the clinic was institutionalized discrimination. She could not forgive the fact that the director first did nothing about the poisoned work environment and then later denied that some of the most hurtful comments were made. This highlighted, for Verónica, the scale of the problem because even the director "didn't have the bones to stand up [for me] so where does the poison come from? Right from the top!" The sense of betrayal is palpable in her narrative. She had worked through years of struggle

⁷⁹ Verónica Moya, interview by author, tape recording, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 19 August 2004.

and hardship and finally acquired her dream job. She was finally in a position to “develop her potential” in Canada, only to be forced to resign, completely demoralized: “after that experience at the clinic, I just...it’s like...it’s like I have become so bitter, so bitter because of that.”⁸⁰

Though overt discrimination was a factor in Verónica’s resignation, her analysis of the experience at the clinic is more complex. For Verónica, it had as much to do with what she terms “cultural clash,” where subtle cultural differences worked to hinder everyday relations. She illustrates such differences citing a “very big fight” she had with a surgeon when she was a nurse in Chile. Such conflict, Verónica remembers, was common. Neither she nor the surgeon was afraid to confront their diverging opinions, in the end leading to a successful resolution. To emphasize this point, Verónica points out that later she organized a committee to oppose the same surgeon being transferred from the ward. Through their resolution, they had established mutual respect and a positive working relationship.⁸¹ As Verónica told me, “I have had many conflicts in my life and conflict doesn’t scare me because I know I can resolve it.”⁸²

It is in her story about the clinic that the “key pattern” most clearly emerges: she is a defiant fighter who prevails over adversity. In this sense, her narrative connects the past to the present in a meaningful way, imposing “a

⁸⁰ Currently Verónica works as an “intervention worker” and is searching for a position as a social worker. Moya, interview, 19 August 2004.

⁸¹ Moya, interview, 19 August 2004.

⁸² Moya, interview, 19 August 2004.

coherence on the speaker's life experience, the coherence of self."⁸³ Her stories together overwhelmingly illustrate that, though she has faced many struggles, her motivation and talent have almost exclusively led to success. She led the youth of her community; she worked well with her team of doctors and nurses at the hospital; she strategically role-played to save José's life; she used her good reputation and sheer determination to get José treatment at the hospital; she overcame an assortment of obstacles facing her in Canada to thrive at university, eventually gaining employment she desired. Verónica, in short, is a strong and successful woman.

It is this "core of meaning" in her life story, too, that functions as such an effective political critique of Canadian society, highlighting the systemic racism and cultural insensitivity she faced at the clinic. This experience placed against the backdrop of her other life stories makes it exceedingly clear that her inability to resolve such a conflict was unusual—that with any cooperation she could have again succeeded. In all the stories Verónica tells, then, it was as a minority at the workplace in Winnipeg that was too difficult to endure. Such a tragic tale is preeminent and is essential context for her life story.

As disillusioned as Verónica is about her recent past, she nonetheless remains optimistic about the future. Here, too, she uses stories about her past to gain inner strength and provide meaning for her present. I realized as much when I gave her an early draft of this essay and heard her response. She called

⁸³ Chanfrault-Duchet, "Narrative Structures, Social Models, and Symbolic Representation in the Life Story," 80. Quoted in James, *Doña María's Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity*, 160.

me after reading the essay extremely excited, telling me that she had hardly slept the night before. Verónica told me that, through my retelling of her stories, she realized in effect that her life in Chile proved that she is a defiant fighter and a survivor. Verónica immediately linked her experiences from Chile in an empowering way to the emotional consequences she still deals with from her recent experience at the clinic. The clinic is but one of many times Verónica has seen her life come undone and, as she reasoned on the phone, she has triumphed over far worse strife before. Indeed, it is clear that Verónica builds a strong current identity from her past struggles. Acknowledging that, I should be careful not to take too much credit for unwittingly re-pointing out something that Verónica already knew about herself. The last words in this essay are hers, spoken long before she ever read any of my work:

The way I see myself also, like the way my life is, like I saw my parents struggling, from being third-world economically and them very poor and then bouncing back again, I have a feeling I have some of that too. Like I have gone through hell and back and somehow I will build my life again, you know, and this time it has taken a long time but my children are very proud of me because I was depressed when I quit the job and everything and then I got another job and then I got this [new condominium] you know. They see me escalating. Even my friends they say to me “Oh my God, the way you were in 2000 and look at you now!”...You know, here I am trying to rebuild my life again. It’s like I’m an expert, building my life, and I get the feeling that something good is going to happen to me. I don’t know what, but there is something, something is going to change for me...*It always has so why is it not going to this time.*⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Moya, interview, 19 August 2004.

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