

Dorfman, Rodrigo, *Generation Exile: The Lives I Leave Behind*, Houston, Arte Publico Press, 2023. Pp. xi+194. Illustrations and Filmography. \$22.95.

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Rodrigo Dorfman's *Generation Exile: The Lives I Leave Behind*, is a poignant memoir of loss, hope, further loss, activism, loss, more hope, loss, disillusionment, and eventually acceptance. The memoir builds on his 2010 documentary film of the same title. Loss, whether it is loss of innocence, loss of family, or loss of faith is one of the over riding themes of Dorfman's life. Even the book's introduction is titled "The Art of Loss." How many stories begin that way? Could human identity be more about what has been accomplished, what has been lost, or coping with both?

Generation Exile is organized into four books, each corresponding with significant periods and events in Dorfman's life, usually a period when he or his family relocated due to politics, targeted repression, or like many refugees, just looking for a better life. The books are further broken down into personalized essays that weave his experience almost seamlessly into broader themes and events. As a refugee himself, he brings a personalized perspective to the debate concerning diaspora, refugees, and even undocumented migrants in the United States. It is the latter that is the subject of many of his documentary films

Born into a self-identified leftist revolutionary family with a history of political activism, Dorfman calls himself a creation of Joseph McCarthy, who had accused his grandfather, who worked at the United Nations, of being a communist agent. Later in Chile, as Allende supporters, young Rodrigo would discover the pain, confusion, and anger of a stateless refugee existence. Finding himself in an almost homeless limbo, his family's journey would take him to locations in Europe, the United States, Latin America (including back to Chile) and finally permanent settlement in the United States.

Dorfman writes quite lyrically and descriptively, which allows readers to feel his emotional state as he describes the events that shaped his journey. For example, in describing a confrontation with law enforcement, Dorfman wrote "When the cop put a gun to my head, I should have known it was over. It was past midnight on a hot summer night and I was wearing nothing but my pajama pants and my reckless anger." (p. 85) He also uses his experiences in Chile to relate to the current political climate in the United States and explain his attitudes concerning 21st century events. Dorfman made a parallel between his journey and those in the "Occupy Wall Street" movement's eventual disillusionment: "There is nothing quite like the pain of ultimate loss. The burning always continues beneath the surface. I remember filming the Occupy Wall Street movement many years later and recognizing the outrage in the eyes and the voices of thousands of young millennials across the United States who woke up one morning to realize that the country they believed in didn't exist anymore and their American Dream was dead and gone." (p. 96)

Naturally, the main focus of his narrative is his own experience of personal loss and eventual self-discovery. Loss, for Dorfman, occurred at seemingly every turn and juncture. As he notes, loss was so pervasive that "[He] perfected the art of shameless self-pity." (p. 50) Each time there was an opportunity (or sometimes negative

circumstance) for his family, he would have to move, deal with new loss, new isolation, and the challenge of learning a new language and culture. This followed him until, by the end of 1990 he knew that his “Chilean Dream” was over (p. 95). He had made his return to a post-Pinochet Chile only to find that if he “stayed in Chile another day, [he] was going to wind up in jail or possibly killed. . . . [he] had taken the blinders off to face the terrible tragic truth that [he] had been so consumed with the myth of eternal return.” (p. 96) By this point, his life’s goal and focus evaporated leaving him searching for his purpose and place in the world.

By the end of his memoir and the narrative of his search for his place in the world, Dorfman, concludes that sharing his, and other migrants’ narratives has given him his place and purpose in the world and the United States. It was his chosen career that gave him this insight “to understand, as a documentary filmmaker, that creating the necessary space for someone to fully express themselves as a human being is the gold standard of our art and craft” (P. 181). As he put more simply, “storytelling is belonging” (p. 182). While *Generation Exile* covers mainly Dorfman’s experience, it does demonstrate the physical and emotional upheaval that refugees go through globally and more often than not, silently with no voice.

Generation Exile has a great potential to contribute to the studies of refugee experience, historical memory, personal discovery, and the impact of Pinochet on Chile. It could translate well to multiple college classes from a first year common read to senior seminars. Dorfman’s global and personal journey is both insightful and poignant. With that being said, depending on the political climate of the institution, community, and state, an instructor should be ready for some push back. Rodrigo Dorfman is definitely an unabashed leftist. His commentary is filtered through that lens without apology, reservation, or conciliation. It is an excellent starting point for conversations about the refugee experience, Chilean/Latin American politics, and the role and place of the United States during the Cold War and in current international events.