Introductory Remarks

Drawn around every continent and country, each city and state, are the invisible borders and boundaries that separate people and place by race, society, class and culture. These lines have been superimposed onto landscapes and populations, constructing imaginary frames around
people that isolate, separate and differentiate one group from the next. Their presence creates a
distinction between insider and outsider, foreign and familiar, self and other, establishing
particular customs and manners for those within to use to distinguish themselves from those
without. Borders can help an individual to define oneself, to separate oneself from others, and to
connect with those held within the same frame. However, boundaries can also limit personal
voice and identity by creating an enclosed space where certain rules and conventions are
enforced and must be followed for survival. When individuals are motivated to cross new
frontiers, the constraints and restrictions that once limited them may be left behind as they move
into new spaces with varying structural frames and defining borders.

The crossing of boundaries does not entail just a simple exchange of one perimeter for
another, but instead sets the individual out onto a road of great change and transformation.
Borders are not simply lines that mark the end of one country and the beginning of the next, but
instead designate the site where different possibilities begin to present themselves, offering the
prospect of change for the individual. At this ridgeline between the end of one space and the
beginning of a new place, the individual starts to find room to shift their identity, voice or sense
of internal power. A person becomes an inhabitant of the borderland, a world that exists in
between two cultures or societies, without enforced frames or edges and defined by constant
transitions and movement, modification and re-formation.

In the crossing of boundaries and the traversing of frontiers, individuals are almost never
immediately accepted into the cultural and social frames that structure this new place. Instead,
they find themselves in a different space that is neither completely inside nor outside the new
territory. Anzaldúa defines her borderland between the U.S. and Mexico, as “una herida abierta”
(an open wound) that will never close, never heal to be a stable, habitable land (Anzaldúa 25). It is a place where

the lifebloods of two worlds merg[e] to form a third country—a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transitions. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. Los atravesados live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal.’ (Anzaldúa 25)

The borderland is its own nation with its own group of residents. The inhabitants float between two worlds, no longer grounded in the land they left, yet still an outsider in the place they have come to inhabit. They are neither part of “us” nor part of “them,” but instead are the “other,” the ones who have given up their designated home space to live on the ridge separating two distinct frontiers. This is an “undetermined place” because it appears different to every individual inhabitant depending on their own emotions and the preexisting relationship between their homeland and the new country. Anzaldúa describes the borderland simultaneously as a physical and psychological space created by a “dividing line” and “emotional residue.” Borderland inhabitants are often physically and emotionally separated from the dominate culture, denied acceptance within society due to their corporal difference, the distinct memories and past experiences that they carry with them.

As Anzaldúa makes clear, the borderland has no borders of its own. It is a “vague” space, a third country born out of the mix of old and new lands, where change and transformation are happening constantly. Those that live in this land must accept being marked as different, alien, “forbidden,” and abnormal. They will never fully become a part of the world they skirt, while at the same time, the changes that they endure in this new space make them
unfit to return to the place where they once belonged. Forever caught between two terrains, they must either learn to survive in the borderland by cultivating power and voice out of the emptiness, or risk being lost to uncertainty.

The act of relocating over geographical boundaries and dividing lines is a singular phenomenon, but the experience can affect individuals in different ways. This paper will focus specifically on two different female versions of border crossing, exploring how two fictional works can address the same issues and experiences in widely divergent ways. The woman’s migration is of particular interest because of the way in which the experience provides her with the opportunity to step outside culturally structured frames and reevaluate the rules she has been given by society. This border crossing is portrayed within the novels through a variety of tropes, narrative strategies and nontraditional voices, as each story creates different constructions of a similar movement. Questions arise as to how the story of a simple migration is transformed into something greater and more complex by the undefined, unconventional spaces that these women move towards. Borderland inhabitants belong neither here nor there; they are seen as trespassers into new territory and transgressors against their own homes. They push the limits of safety, security and familiarity, leaving behind what they know for what they can only imagine. In between two cultures, two societies, and two homelands, border inhabitants are left to piece together their own frame, hoping to transform the unknown and unfamiliar into something habitable and homelike.

The first of the two novels portrays a Barbadian family whose parents were forced to abandon their homeland because of economic and social struggles. Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl Brownstones* is narrated by the Boyce family’s youngest daughter Selina and follows her as she grows from a child into a mature young adult. Although the story is told through her
daughter’s eyes, the presence of Selina’s mother Silla invades every aspect of the novel and
looms larger than that of any of the other characters. Her importance within the story becomes
apparent as her words appear as epigraphs and are separated from the text to emphasize the
power of her speech and declarations. Within her family, Silla has to shoulder most of the
burden of crossing through the borderland and immigrating into a new land. It is her story that
shows the hardships that the woman migrant faces, the challenges she has to overcome and the
way in which she is re-figured within a new society.

The second text tells not of a voluntary relocation over boundaries, but of one spurred by
fear and violence. Realidad nacional desde la cama, written by Luisa Valenzuela, is about a
woman who has just returned to her country after years of living in exile. She comes back
hoping to find her native land as she remembered it before the political dictatorship, but begins
to realize that her home has become completely foreign to her. Feeling like a complete stranger
within this land, she retreats temporarily into a country club where she hopes to be able to make
sense of the current reality of her country. It is here where she tries to establish a borderland and
marl off a safe space for herself within a turbulent nation.

Marshall’s and Valenzuela’s texts both deal with the idea of border crossing yet choose to
portray the struggle in two distinct manners. Marshall’s novel depicts the story of migration in a
traditional, realistic fashion. It is a semi-autobiographical tale that deals with issues that many
migrants to the U.S. confront, such as the struggle between despair and hope, questions of
assimilation and the battle to overcome racism. Valenzuela’s text is also based on her own
experiences of relocation and exile, but the story itself is surreal and fantastic. Her text is like
one long dream, or nightmare, one that is full of irony and layers of symbolism. Walking the
line between reality and illusion, Valenzuela focuses specifically on the image of the female
exile and the way she is received and treated by a patriarchal society. Despite their differences, both novels deal with the conflicted, unpredictable spaces in which each protagonist is located. The women find themselves between two different places, occupying a borderland shaped by the new physical, psychological and narrative spaces that the characters claim. As both of these protagonists abandon homeland and native soil, the stories are transfigured, unsettled and disrupted by the particular position in which each character is located. The two novels use very different narrative approaches to describe these shared feelings of disorientation, conflict, and struggle. As the women move across the borderland they discover themselves in an unfamiliar state, a place full of so many possibilities and uncertainties that it is unnerving.
Brown Girl Brownstones

Paula Marshall is a renowned author who uses many of her personal experiences and actual memories as basis for her novel. Similar to the family she describes within her book, Marshall’s parents migrated from Barbados to the United States during World War I. They left voluntarily like many other families, but during this time period, there was really no other option for black Barbadians. The conditions in Barbados for the natives were terrible, having improved only slightly since their emancipation from slavery in 1834. In 1922, there were about 15,000 whites and 180,000 blacks living on the island, yet almost all the land was still in the hands of British estate owners (Harlow 135). Given no other means of survival, blacks were forced to work on plantations for insignificant wages and many had to steal and loot to keep from starving. Poor blacks were denied voting rights, access to land and the ability to own a house. Workers had few options and could either die of hunger, be exploited for their labor by plantation owners or leave their homeland. Migration came to be seen as the only way for blacks to improve their state of living and soon large numbers of people were abandoning the island. Between 1911 and 1921 Barbados’ population fell by 15,671 people, many of whom went to Panama, Cuba, Brazil or the United States (Beckles 143). Those who stayed faced greater discrimination and abuse. It took till 1950 for all Barbadians to be given the right to vote and until 1965 for the country’s independence from England to be finally granted. Although the blacks’ situation began to improve on the island, it was too late for the thousands of Barbadians who had already abandoned their homeland. Almost all the country’s emigrants chose to continue with their lives abroad rather than return to an uncertain future.

Born in the United States, Marshall grew up in Brooklyn, living along side other migrant Barbadian families. Within the warm confines of her mother’s kitchen, she learned about her
family’s roots and the history of her country from the stories recounted by the neighborhood’s women. *Brown Girl Brownstones* grows out of Marshall’s experience and works its way up from her memories. The novel tells the story of a Barbadian immigrant family struggling to create a new life in New York City just at the start of World War II. The mother, Silla Boyce, is depicted as the family’s center of strength and her determination to survive and succeed in the U.S. dominates her personality. Silla sits on the edge of two worlds, rejecting all memory of home and severing her ties to the country she left behind even before she becomes a part of the new society that surrounds her\(^1\). She is an independent entity, unbound from the roles and identity imposed on her by her homeland. The borderland space she occupies is situated between Bajan and American cultures, outside of both countries' controlling frames. Since she does not belong inside either of the countries’ social or cultural boundaries, Silla is not forced to comply with either nations’ image of the female. She does not have to limit herself to the role of mother, caretaker, or obedient wife. Instead, the dreams for freedom and independence that she harbored in Barbados begin to surface, shaping her body into an unfamiliar form.

Border crossing in *Brown Girl Brownstones* is represented in a variety of ways, including as a means of escape or a chance to start over, and as event that brings on new struggles of acceptance, survival and success. Marshall describes the Bajan immigrants as the new migration wave into the U.S.: “the West Indians slowly edged their way in. Like a dark sea

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\(^1\) The one connection that remains between Silla and Barbados are the other Barbadian immigrants she associates with in the U.S. However, when the neighborhood women gather in her kitchen, Silla makes her distance from this world clear. As the women reminisce about Barbados, Silla breaks up their conversation, reminding them that in the U.S. “at least you make head-way. Look how Roosevelt come and give relief and jobs. Who was the first Bajan bought a house? You Ira…Give credit where it due…You’s an ungrateful whelp” (Marshall 70). Silla does not fit in with these women who remind her of her Bajan roots. Instead she searches out another group of immigrants who have the same ambitious goals and dreams to push ahead, joining the Association of Barbadian Homeowners and Businessmen.
nudging its way onto a white beach and staining the sand, they came. The West Indians, especially the Barbadians who had never owned anything perhaps but a few poor acres in a poor land” (Marshall 4). Marshall describes the West Indian migration as it might appear to those already situated on the white shores, pointing to the discrimination and unfair judgment that welcome the immigrants. The West Indians are not invited into the U.S.; but instead “edge their way in,” as if they have to sneak onto the shores, slowly, quietly slipping into the new land. Marshall describes their movement using borderland language, placing the migrants on the “edge” between one land and another. This border crossing is portrayed from an outsider’s perspective, one who sees the arrival of the migrants as a growing stain an their pure land. The Bajans seep into the new surroundings, discoloring the white beach and the white world. Their skin tone casts a shadow on the new land before them, seeming to dirty and pollute a once clean, white nation. The Barbadians’ color keeps them from being fully accepted into the U.S. and they are forced to accept an in-between space, outside the West Indies but not truly inside or a part of the U.S. It is as if the Barbadians bring their own borderland with them since it is their blackness that forever marks them as different. Arriving at a time when racism and discrimination was the norm in society, the Bajans' skin color causes them to be segregated into unwanted spaces and kept on the outer edge of American culture.

Within the Boyd family, the two parents, Deighton and Silla, confront the borderland and the struggle to survive in a new space in distinct manners. Unlike his wife, Deighton remembers his childhood in Barbados fondly, describing it as a happy and carefree time. All his memories of the island are positive and he longs to make it big in the U.S. so that he may move back to his homeland as a rich man. To his daughter Selina he describes Barbados as “‘poor-poor but sweet enough. That’s why I go back’” (Marshall 11). He remembers his past fondly, telling Selina
about Saturdays when “‘we boys coming up, we would…play cricket…and go up Kensington Field to play football…I would walk ‘bout town like I was a full-full man. All up Broad Street and Swan Street like I did own the damn place’” (Marshall 10). Deighton has his head turned towards home; his dreams and goals aimed at returning to the place where he felt like a “full-full” man. He has little interest, and even less hope, in crossing the expansive frontier that stretches out before him and separates him from entering U.S. society. Deighton feels that he lacks something that the white men have, something that will keep him on the fringe and lost in the borderland forever. He prefers to hold onto his past as comfort and protection rather than to head off into the unpredictable space that this new land offers.

On his walks through the neighborhood, Deighton often stops and watches the men drinking in the neighborhood bars. Standing at a distance, he observes that “even though they were sporting like boys, there was no question that they were truly men; they could so easily prove it by flashing a knife or smashing out with their fists” (Marshall 38). Hovering on the edge of this world of ‘true men,’ Deighton feels himself to be a complete outsider, an incompetent male. Deighton could feel like a “full-full man” in is homeland, but believes he can never be on of America’s “true men.” The true man has real power, demonstrated here with a knife or fist, while the full-full man just acts like he has control. In Barbados, Deighton was able to act as if he had some sort of authority and command in life, where as in the U.S., he is kept on the border and given no space among the white men. He realizes his outsider status weakens him, and wonders what happens to “those, then, to whom these proofs of manhood were alien? Who must find other, more sanctioned, ways?” (Marshall 38). In this new land, Deighton lacks the tools necessary to allow him to prove his manhood and affirm his power and self-worth. He cannot act like he belongs since his black skin and Bajan accent immediately mark him as
different. The white man’s ways are “alien” to him because Deighton does not share their history or experiences. Deighton finds himself within a conflicting emotional space and unsure of where he wants to stand. He looks back at Barbados and his childhood memories to achieve a sense of security, but wishes he could find assurance and acceptance within this white society. Terrified by uncertainty, failure, and defeat, Deighton shrinks back from the space designated to the “true man” within the U.S. and looks to return to Barbados where he can feel like a “full-full man” again.

The frustration and rejection Deighton confronts living on the edge of the white American society lead him to create a fantastic dream of making a fortune and showing the world how strong a man he really is. Instead of taking on jobs that he knows he can accomplish, Deighton insists on setting the most impossible of goals. When he finishes an accounting class, he is resolute on going to “the three places offering the best salary” (Marshall 82). When Silla argues that he should simply apply to a small African-American business where he would at least have a chance, Deighton retorts:

I ain looking for nothing small…Tha’s the trouble with wunna colored people. Wunna is satisfied with next skin to nothing. Please Mr. White-man, gimma little bit…Please Mr. White-man, lemma buy one these old houses you don want no more. No, I ain with wunna. It got to be something big for me ‘cause I got big plans or nothing a-tall. That’s the way a man does do things. (Marshall 83)

Deighton feels his manhood challenged by the fact he must live in the borderland, forever subsisting on what is cast off by the dominant American culture. He does not want to be a “wunna,” a man who wants what ever might bring him even a step closer to the inner circle of white society. The “wunna” man is ruled by the white man and willingly accepts his leftovers, taking the second best of everything, as long as it makes him feel less of an outsider. Deighton refuses to take up this role, willing only to accept “something big for me ‘cause I got big plans or
nothing a-tall.” It is all or nothing for Deighton, he wants to be a “true man” and fully accepted as an equal, not a mere second.

Deighton rejects the idea of settling for anything but the best and will only accept a job that a white man would accept as well. By setting his standards always too high, he can perpetually blame someone else for his failures, never having to face up to his own shortcomings. Whenever he is rejected from one job, he simply has to move on to a new occupation to maintain his hopes of being accepted into the inside group. He looks down upon the “wunna” men because Deighton fears either being trapped as one of them or worse, being rejected admission even to their group. Deighton feels he can gain nothing by living between Barbadian and American society, but instead stands to lose everything, including his manhood. Unlike Silla, his only goal is to belong to the dominant society and become one of “them” instead of living as the “other,” the outsider. He is not interested in creating his own space where he might survive on his own, but instead insists on trying to belong to a group that does not want him. For Deighton, this is the only way he can truly prove his worth. By never trying to establish himself in the U.S., Deighton can always escape back into his past life and the safety of a world he already understands and knows.

Deighton’s wife Silla has the opposite outlook on her life as a border inhabitant. Unlike Deighton, Silla keeps only the worst memories of her childhood, choosing to remember Barbados as a place of great pain and suffering, not fun and enjoyment. In one of the few times she speaks of Barbados, Silla recounts to her daughter the horrible treatment she endured as a child. She explains that she was part of the Third Class, “a set of little children picking grass in a cane field from the time God sun rise in his heaven till it set. With some woman called a Driver to wash yuh tail in licks if yuh dare look up. Yes, working harder than a man at the age of
ten’” (Marshall 45). Marshall chooses to uses Silla’s voice to communicate the pain and suffering the Barbadians endured in their country. It is the female who describes her native land as an uninhabitable, unsafe place, separating herself from the image of home. Deighton continues to connect himself with Barbados, choosing to portray the country in a positive light. Silla does not consider Barbados a place fit to live and wants to leave that life behind forever. Unlike her husband, who as a male did not endure the same oppression, Silla is always looking forward, striving towards the new opportunities that her migration has opened up for her.

In her conversations with other Barbadian women, Silla is constantly trying to put Barbados into perspective with life in the U.S. She reminds the women that to live in Barbados is “‘to know that you are gon to be poor all yuh life, no matter how hard you work. You does stop trying after a time…you does give up. You does kind of die inside’” (Marshall 70). For Silla, the memories of her childhood are sad, destructive and even poisonous. In Silla’s mind, living in Barbados wears down one’s ambitions, dreams and hopes for the future. For the woman, the homeland represents a destructive force in her life, not a supportive, comforting place. Silla has no memories of feeling like a “full-full” woman in Barbados, but instead like a powerless, hopeless person. She has to move outside the limiting boundaries of her homeland to be able to change her situation and take control of her own life.

The difference between Deighton’s and Silla’s regard for their new home is exemplified in the level of comfort and assurance they experience in the white world that surrounds them. Deighton confronts his fears everywhere he turns, even within his own house. He describes pausing “uneasily at the kitchen door, shaken as always by the stark light there, the antiseptic white furniture and enameled white walls. The room seemed a strange unfeeling world which continually challenged him to deal with it, to impose himself somehow on its whiteness”
(Marshall 22). For Deighton, the white man’s society is surrounded by a border that seems impossible to cross. He fears entering a world dominated by white, one that challenges him to impress himself upon it. He sees no way of surviving within this space and shrinks from it, retreating backwards towards the land he came from instead of forwards towards an unknown future. He sits closer to the edge of his past life than to the edge of the new world offered to him, not interested in trying to take part in his surrounding. He never sets goals he can reach, never attempts to balance himself within the white world. Instead he waits just at the door to this unknown space, a safe distance from the difficulties that lie over the threshold.

Rather than looking backwards for support as Deighton does, Silla maintains herself comfortably in the space left open for her between two cultures and two worlds. As Deighton watches from the kitchen door, too scared to enter the white room, Silla stands “easily amid the whiteness, at the sink, in the relaxed, unself-conscious pose of someone alone…the resolute mouth, the broad nose, the bold yet well-molded contours of the bones under her deeply browned skin” (Marshall 22). Silla does not feel the same need to impose her blackness or her culture onto the white society that surrounds her. She does not try to blend in with a world so distinct from her, but instead sits inside of it, framed within her own space. Silla stands “amid the whiteness,” surrounded by it, but not overcome by the need to be a part of it as is Deighton. She maintains her own being, “the resolute mouth,” “the broad nose,” and “her deeply browned skin,” features that set her apart from the inhabitants of the land she borders. Deighton feels he cannot maintain his sense of self within the U.S. He longs to be a part of this white room, this white man’s society but sees no way in. Silla however, does not have the same outlook as Deighton and experiences her migration is a different manner. She accepts the in-between world she has come to occupy, she is “relaxed,” “unself-conscious” and completely comfortable. Silla
resides in an undefined space that is dominated neither by Barbadian nor American society but by her alone. In the borderland she inhabits, Silla is not pulled down as her husband is, but lifted up into a place she can govern as her own.

Not only does Deighton recognizes the different space that Silla occupies, but her daughter Selina also sees that her mother stands within her own borders. Selina is present at the time Silla formulates a plan to sell her husband’s one prospect of returning to Barbados: a tiny plot of land given to him by his sister. Silla wants the money from the land so that she can finally buy a house within the U.S. Standing in her kitchen, surrounded by other Barbadian women of the neighborhood, Silla announces that

‘I gon show the world that Silla ain nice!’ With that she raised her arms, her body reared, and while she stood there pledging her whole self while others sat struck silent, the day changed. The early winter sunset stained the sky…Shadows were there also, spreading their long tentacles as the sun thinned. Silla, the barred sunlight and shade on her face, was imprisoned within this contradiction of dark and light. Indeed, like all men, she embodied it. (Marshall 76)

Silla stands on her own, within a space that is framed differently from those around her. The women sit at the table “struck silent,” while Silla towers over them, her body “reared” with such power that she causes the mood of the day to change. She has come to dominate this place, taking advantage of what ever opportunity she encounters, happy to show others, even her husband and children, that she “ain nice” if it means getting her way. Where Silla stands there is room for no one else; she pushes out even her own family in order to make the most of what space she can gain control over. Marshall’s description recalls Anzaldúa’s depiction of the borderland as a place made of “the lifebloods of two worlds” that “merg[e] to form a third country.” This “third country” describes the place that Silla inhabits, positioned between “sunlight and shade,” “dark and light,” between the two worlds of white and black. Silla is not
dominated by either of the lands bordering her, but instead stands within her own space and is controlled by her own rules.

In *Brown Girl Brownstones*, the borderland is an open space where the inhabitant has to have the strength to stand alone and the desire to make it into a livable place. Deighton lacks the force to survive in this uncontrollable space and wants too much to be a part of some *thing* and be accepted by *someone*. He feels the need to be on the inside, to pass over the boundary that separates him from the exclusive circle of the white man. Silla however, does not long to be accepted by anyone and strives only to create a better life for herself and her family, no matter what the cost. She severs her ties with her homeland, denying herself any positive memories and any reason to look back. In an effort to rid herself of the final reminder of her past, she manages to sell Deighton’s land, his last connection with Barbados, and tries to use it to support a new future. By taking away his last prospect of returning home, Silla destroys Deighton’s dreams in hopes that he will turn towards the space she wishes to occupy. However, her actions only widen the gap between her and her husband, leaving her alone to make the best of her situation as a borderland inhabitant.
Realidad nacional desde la cama

Marshall’s novel focuses on the migrant as the borderland inhabitant, but in Valenzuela’s text, the protagonist’s movement is framed in terms of exile. Just as Marshall builds on her own memories, Valenzuela’s own experiences as an exile help her to shape the novel. Although no specific location is ever given in Realidad nacional desde la cama, the role the military plays within the novel, the issues of exile that arise in the text, and the fact that Valenzuela’s homeland was a place of great instability, all suggest that the nameless nation is in fact Argentina. Argentina is a country with a long history of political, economic and social unrest; circumstances that caused many people to search for safety elsewhere. Since the beginning of the early 1900s, the nation has undergone long periods of unstable democracy. The 1929 Depression, continuing economic problems and the discontent of the middle class helped spur on the first of many military coups within Argentina that would eventually cripple the nation.

After the first governmental failing, the country constantly fluctuated between dictatorship and democratic state as different men took power. Elected president in 1946, Juan Domingo Perón maintained some aspect of democracy, while restricting many basic freedoms, such as the right of expression, assembly, and strike, and tightly restricted education, mass media and the judiciary system (Vanden 408). Perón was finally thrown out of power in 1955, but only after months of rioting, thousands of deaths and a military upset. For the next years, control changed hands again and again, as revolt followed bloody revolt. Between 1955 and 1976 Argentina was subjected to a succession of democratic and military rule and saw a total of seven different leaders, with the country coming full circle to elect Perón again. Not one of the men in power succeeded in dealing with the issues of inflation and the ever increasing cost of living, the failing job market, or the continual political tensions; problems simply continued to mount.
The country’s persistent downward spiral resulted in terrorist activities, hundreds of deaths, and a huge increase in inflation. During the particularly harsh military dictatorship of 1976, between 10,000 and 30,000 people ‘disappeared’ while thousands of others were murdered out right, raped or mutilated as the military tried to rid the country of anyone who opposed their power (Vanden 409). Not until 1983 did the country see another democratic election, but by this time Argentina’s economy was virtually destroyed. Some people who had left during the worst times returned, but many chose to remain in exile rather than come home to an unknown future.

Argentina’s governmental and economical problems have been forever present in the life of Luisa Valenzuela. Born in 1938, she has seen her country deteriorate into a political nightmare. Valenzuela began her writing career as a journalist working for different newspapers, including La Nación and El Mundo. In 1958 she left Argentina to spend time in France where Valenzuela published her first novel *Hay que sonreir*. In 1961 she returned to her country and continued to write at home until the 1970’s when political unrest forced her into exile. During her time abroad, Valenzuela lived in Mexico, Spain and the U.S. and continued to write and publish her work. She eventually returned to Argentina but still travels all over the world, giving talks and interviews about her books and her experience as an exile (Resnik).

Valenzuela’s novel *Realidad nacional desde la cama* is the surreal story of a woman, named the Señora, who returns to her country after ten years in exile. Having fled to the U.S. to escape an oppressive government, she decides to come home, believing that the country is again safe. Expecting to find her homeland as she left it, the Señora is shocked to discover that the place is no longer as she remembered it and instead feels like a complete foreigner on her native soil. In an attempt to acclimate to the country’s transformation, she goes into a second exile,

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2 Señora means both “Mrs.” and “woman” in Spanish.
hiding out in a country club somewhere far from the city and from all the memories that her homecoming has brought back to her.

The borderland that the Señora occupies is very different from the one that Silla inhabits. The place she comes to is not on the edge of a new country, but is within the boundaries of her own homeland. The physical space she moves into is an unknown country club, which lies just outside her home city. The club is situated “a escasos metros de lo que podría ser definido como la frontera…el manicurado césped del club se da de brucés contra una fea alambrada, vasta…pretende aislarla de un campo yermo donde brotan construcciones de cartón y lata” (Valenzuela 22)\(^3\). The club lies within the borderland, at the “frontera” (frontier), between the wasteland of her country and the new military dictatorship. The Señora does not recognize the world beyond the fence and wishes not to believe that it is the new reality of her homeland. Instead of moving back into her city, the Señora has come to this club, a middle ground between reality and her idealistic vision of the country. The Señora hopes that the chain-link fence, the manicured lawns and the comfortable club will serve to protect her from the unrecognizable territory of cardboard houses and great poverty. The club becomes for the Señora a threshold into a strange, unfamiliar place that she is not ready to accept as home.

The Señora comes to the country club “en busca de refugio, para ir viendo despacito, para contestarse sempiternas preguntas. Se internó como en un hospital…En busca de refugio” (Valenzuela 8)\(^4\). The club is like “hospital”, where the Señora is separated and sequestered from

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\(^3\) “barely yards away from what might be designated the frontier…the club’s manicured lawns come headlong up against the vast, ugly chain-link fence…intended to separate her from a wasteland on which the only thing that grows are houses made out of cardboard tin…On this side of the fence, the military gentlemen are practicing their weapons training” (Valenzuela trans. 20).

\(^4\) “In search of refuge, so that she could gradually begin to understand, to answer certain sempiternal questions. She went into [the club] the way one goes into a hospital…In search of refuge” (Valenzuela, trans. 2).
what is going on in the outside world. Valenzuela’s description suggests the idea that something is sick within this novel, connecting an ill feeling to the club. Her female protagonist points out the fact that there is something uncomfortable about her country, explaining how “le cuesta reintegrarse a esta realidad tan otra, tan distinta de la que dejó atrás en otra época. Yace en la cama y tal vez recompone el pensamiento, tal vez revive y reconstruye como puede” (Valenzuela 9). The Señora comes back to her native land only to feel like a total stranger in a place “tan otra, tan distinta” (so other/alien, so different). Valenzuela turns the Señora into an outsider while within a space where she should be considered an insider. A woman, the supposed embodiment of home and domesticity, becomes an alien figure within her country. Just like Silla, the Señora has to move to an alternative space, one that sits between the country that she once belonged to and the place that it has changed into. Valenzuela creates the borderland in order to provide the Señora with a place where she can contemplate her situation and align her memories with the reality that surrounds her.

The Señora believes that the club will serve as a safe space, a “refugio” (refuge) located within a strange, unfamiliar world. She withdraws herself from her new surroundings, hoping that the club will somehow cure her of the ill feeling of not belonging, of being a complete outsider within her own home. The Señora believes she has entered a space that will serve as a protective bubble, defending her both physically and emotionally from the changes that her country is undergoing. However, Valenzuela positions the supposedly secure club right between two disruptive groups. The Señora come to the club “sin sospechar la superposición de planes,

5 “She finds it hard to fit into this new reality which is so alien, so different, from the one she left behind. She lies in bed and perhaps recomposes her thoughts, relives and reconstructs as best she can” (Valenzuela, trans. 3).
Valenzuela hints at the complexity of the space that the Señora occupies, suggesting that it is not as stable and safe as the Señora may think. The club is only a part of a bigger picture, temporarily within its own plane of reality, but not secure in this position. From the beginning, Valenzuela creates a sense of instability surrounding the club, suggesting that this borderland may collapse at any moment.

The Señora retreats as deep into this in-between world as she possibly can, choosing to stay in bed instead of trying to meet other guests or use any of the club’s facilities. She hides here in hopes that she will not have to confront a world in which she feels so out of place. After arriving to her bedroom the Señora is glad to “meterse lo más rápido posible en la cama…se tapó la cabeza con la sábana y jugó a que estaba en una carpa en medio del desierto” (Valenzuela 10). The Señora wants to use her bed as an escape, a place where she does not have to confront the reality of her new situation. If she stays within the sheets, the Señora does not have to engage with anyone and can continue to ignore the unsettling images of poverty and destruction within her homeland. The room becomes a symbolic space of refuge and protection, a place where the Señora can use her imagination as a shield from the outside world. Her bedroom is so self-contained that within it, “el tiempo es otro tiempo…está detenido y no guarda relación alguna con la febril actividad de las insinuadas sombras” (Valenzuela 23). This space hovers on the edge of a restless reality and for the time being, the Señora is able to remain separated from this world. Time stands still within her room, allowing the Señora to gather her memories and catch her past up with the present situation.

\[\text{Valenzuela trans. 1}\]

\[\text{Valenzuela trans. 4}\]
In the beginning, the borderland acts as a protective area for the Señora, which serves as a landing into an unfamiliar world. It is an imagined, psychological space where the Señora’s mind struggles to make sense of the two worlds she is faced with: her memories of her country as she left it and the actuality of the nation to which she has returned. Her border crossing is represented as a withdrawal from an uncertain reality, the struggle for a balance between the familiar and the alien, and the fight to regain her memory. The mental images the Señora retains of how her country used to be separates her from how it appears now and keeps her at the edge of the nation’s boundary. The Señora comes to the country club to revisit her memories and try to place them in order. She both “quiere y no quiere hurgar un poco más en la memoria, quisiera querer hurgar un poco más, y sobre todo descubrir por qué quisiera hurgar y qué busca en su propia mente” (Valenzuela 14)9. The Señora is unsure whether to examine the past because it would mean increasing her separation from the new world to which she has come. By trying to recover lost images of her country and compare them to what she is experiencing now, the Señora will push herself further into the borderland between nation-past and nation-present. She has a strong desire to know, to remember, to see clearly for herself what changes have occurred, yet at the same time, she has a desire to forget, to fall back into the frame that once surrounded her and not try to forge out on her own into this unknown land.

From the protected space of her room, the Señora tries to evaluate the world that sits just outside her windows and past the fence. Her maid María works against this desire and attempts to keep her focused on life at the club, which should be “una vida fácil, placentera como dice la

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8 “time follows a different rhythm…time has stopped and bears no relation whatsoever to the feverish activity of the shadows outside” (Valenzuela trans. 21).
9 “both wants and doesn’t want to do a little more rummaging around in her memory, she’d like to want to do a little more rummaging and above all to find out why she wants to rummage and what she is looking for in her own mind” (Valenzuela, trans. 10).
publicidad del clú. No como del otro lado de la alambrada, que es un horror. El país está del otro lado. En fin. Lo que llaman la realidad” (Valenzuela 31). The Señora has yet to enter into the true heart of her country and instead hides herself in a place just on the edge of reality, bordering the land to which she thought she was returning. María describes the nation as being “del otro lado” (on the other side) suggesting that this side of the border, where the club is, is an undefined space. It is neither located within the country nor without, an imaginary place where the unsettling changes of the outside world have yet to enter. The space seems to be constructed as part of the Señora’s psyche, with no physical attachments to the terrain it sits on. Her room becomes a model for the mind, a physical place created to hold her memories, thoughts and emotions. The Señora makes no effort to get out of bed and leave this place of fantasy for she fears the unsettling truth that sits just outside her door. She uses the borderland to separate herself from the home she cannot face, staying in bed as an act of disengaging from and denying the reality of her situation.

**Borderlands**

As Silla and the Señora move into their respective borderlands, they become further separated from their homelands and discover themselves in a space between country, culture, and memory. Homi Bhabha describes this place where the migrant resides as an “in between, of

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10 “easy-going’ as they say in the club brochure. Not like life on the other side of the fence, it’s
occupying an interstitial space…not fully governed by the recognizable traditions from which you came” (Thompson 190). The women are “in between” societies, stereotypes, personalities and histories. As strangers in a new place, both female characters are beyond the borders of their native homes yet not included within those of the place where they have landed. They occupy a third space, resulting in a kind of cultural limbo lacking any sort of larger frame, and belonging neither here nor there. Bhabha believes that the migrant who resides here is not fully governed or controlled by the traditions of their homeland, suggesting that the female immigrant would also be released from some of the social roles her country imposes upon her.

Anzaldúa describes how the woman living in this “in between,” “interstitial space” feels both “alienated from her mother culture [and] ‘alien’ in the dominant culture…Petrified…her face caught between los intersticios, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits” (Anzaldúa 42). Crossing boundaries poses a great challenge for the woman, turning her into an “alien,” a foreign and strange presence, in the eyes of both her home country and her host nation. Similar to Bhabha’s explanation, Anzaldúa’s description of the female migrant suggests that her movement into the borderland means the loss of any cultural, social or familial borders that once surrounded her. As Anzaldúa suggests, this can be a petrifying, unsettling experience, but it also offers the woman a unique opportunity to build her own frame and define her own personality, voice, and identity in the way that suits her best.

By daring to shed one space and trespass into another, a woman may feel alien, but can also experience freedom from social structures that constrain and oppress the individual. Edward Said sees that “borders and barriers which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, terrible there. The country’s on the other side. Or what they call reality” (Valenzuela trans. 31).
break barriers of thought and experience” (Henderson 4). Moving out of and into boundaries allows the woman to scale the walls of societal norms, cultural expectations, imposed gender roles and power dynamics, all of which hinder a woman’s freedom and individuality. Home can actually be a place of “prisons” for the woman, a site where her identity and independence are kept locked up by social restraints. Migration offers the woman a chance to destroy the mold society has forced her to fit into and reconstruct herself once beyond her country’s borders.

By separating herself from her homeland and breaking the ties she has to her native country, the borderland inhabitant becomes a free-floating, frameless figure. She is outside the defining lines of her own home culture, while at the same time, excluded from the new society she borders. In this in-between space, the desire to break out of social and cultural roles becomes a possibility. Anzaldúa addresses this need within her writing, declaring:

I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture—una cultura mestiza—with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture. (Anzaldúa 44)

Anzaldúa speaks the wants of many women, to be free to shape their own lives and control their own bodies. She describes building her own homeland, one that is founded on her own beliefs, ideals and dreams. Within the borderland, Anzaldúa, along with Silla and the Señora, find an open, unstructured space where they can begin to piece together a life constructed of their own materials, not one handed to them by a society or a culture.

The independence a female border inhabitant can discover and cultivate may be considered threatening and dangerous in a male-dominated culture. By abandoning her old boundaries, the woman discovers a certain freedom to recreate her own identity and voice, a power that men have so long tried to control and restrict. Jane Marcus explains how in a
patriarchal society “a woman exile is an uncanny figure…for her very body means home and
hearth; it signifies the womb/home of humankind. If a woman chooses homelessness, becomes a
voluntary and even sometimes exultant exile…she frightens people” (Henderson 56). The
migrant as well experiences this homelessness, abandoning her country to live in a place where
she will always be marked in some way as different or as an outsider. The woman who decides
to move outside of the borders of her native land becomes an “uncanny,” unfamiliar and
unsettling figure. The female, so often identified as the embodiment of “home and hearth,” has
moved outside her homeland and is no longer limited by the socially constructed roles she
encountered within her country. Without the connection to the home, she cannot be confined to
the position of child bearer, continuous caregiver, or dependent wife. By becoming an exile, a
migrant, a relocater, a woman shifts into Bhabha’s “in-between” place and out of the frames that
her homeland has built around her. As she begins to stretch her personality, her mind and her
identity and occupy some of this new space, the borderless woman becomes a foreign body, a
strange shape, an uncanny form no longer recognized within a male society.

Anzaldúa describes the part of herself that has been repressed, rejected and denied a
space within the world as her “Shadow-Beast.” She explains “there is a rebel in me—the
Shadow-Beast. It is a part of me that refuses to take orders from outside authorities. It refuses to
take orders from my conscious will” (Anzaldúa 38). Within the frame of a patriarchal society,
she identifies her inner strength and determination as a dangerous, horrific monster that must be
hidden at all costs. Women stifle their inner voices because they fear

being abandoned by the mother, the culture, la Raza, for being unacceptable,
faulty, damaged…To avoid rejecting, some of us conform to the value of the
culture, push the unacceptable parts into the shadows….Which leaves only one
fear—that we will be found out and that the Shadow-Beast will break out of its
cage. (Anzaldúa 42)
To be accepted within her culture, the female has to conform and hide parts of her identity. A woman who refuses to repress her individuality is considered “faulty or damaged” by society because she allows her “unacceptable parts” to show. A woman who refuses to contain herself within the defining lines her culture imposes on the female is cut from her homeland and marked as a transgressor. Nevertheless, not all women can deny themselves a voice or an independent identity and movement out of the homeland allows them to open their cages and let the beast out of its prison.

Anzaldúa portrays her inner self, which desires a society with no repressive powers, as a grotesque figure, something hideous that must be kept hidden from the light of day. Although Anzaldúa uses the image of a monster to describe her fear of her own true personality, she did not create the monster. Her feelings have grown out of the pressures of the culture she lives in, formed by the rules and expectations laid out for her. It is a beast not because it is truly ugly, but because it is being filtered through a patriarchal lens. In truth, the monster is beautiful in its realness. It is an unencumbered expression of the woman who no longer tries to contort her body into a reflection of what man searches for in women and what he expects her to look like, act like and be like.

Both Marcus and Anzaldúa mark the borderland as a place where the woman takes on an identity that is seen as threatening to the outside world. As the woman moves away from the homeland and enters into a borderless, rootless existence, the image of the female as the emblem of home, comfort and stability is suddenly lost. The woman, who was once a familiar, reassuring presence becomes a strange, foreign figure. This image recalls Sigmund Freud’s 1919 essay entitled “The Uncanny,” in which he discusses the connection between what feels familiar and ‘homely’ and what becomes abnormal and ‘unhomely’. Extending the association made between
the woman and images of house and home, Freud’s analysis of the uncanny suggests a way to understand the transformation of the female figure from beauty into beast as she moves from a familiar place into strange lands.

Das Unheimlich
In his analysis of the German word ‘unheimlich,’ translated as uncanny, Freud attempts to exact a concise definition of the term based on the multitude of meanings it has acquired. The word ‘unheimlich’, which means literally ‘unhomely’, is set as the opposite of what is familiar or ‘heimlich’ (‘homely’) (Freud 220). Although they appear to be inherent opposites, a closer look at heimlich and unheimlich reveals a way in which the distinctions can collapse, suggesting a direct connection between the two contrary words.

Freud cites an array of definitions for heimlich, including “belonging to the house, not strange, familiar”, “friendly comfortable” and creating the sense of “security,” as well as “concealed, kept from sight…withheld from others” (Freud 222-223). Although heimlich is used to explain a type of feeling or environment, it shares many of the same descriptors associated with the woman. She is often seen as the emblem of the household, a familiar and comforting presence who is confined to the home or kept on the fringe of society. The unheimlich is understood as “eerie, weird, arousing gruesome fear,” as well as “everything that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light” (Freud 225). In the two latter definitions of each word, both heimlich and unheimlich are used to describe that which has been hidden, concealed and kept secret. The only difference between the two is that in the case of unheimlich, what was supposed to be concealed is revealed. The unheimlich is drawn from the understanding of its converse heimlich, combining the comforting with the secretive to create “something which is familiar and old-established in the mind which has becomes alienated from it only through the process of repression” (Freud 241). The frightening, haunting feeling referred to as unheimlich appears when suppressed familiar events or emotions recur in some form or another despite the control of the individual. It is therefore when the woman begins to present her inner voice and independent personality within a society that tries to repress the female figure that she may begin
to appear as an *unheimlich* character. This identity may be familiar to herself, but unknown and alien to the world around her.

When placed side by side and read in relation to the borderland, the ideas of Freud, Bhabha, and Anzaldúa combine to demonstrate how the woman migrant can become an uncanny image in a patriarchal society. As a woman abandons her homeland and crosses into the intermediate, in-between space, as explained by Bhabha, she finds herself in a place that is not governed by the same social frames which often limit and suppress the woman’s personal voice and independent freedoms. For the first time, she is not forced to draw herself within the lines defined by her native society and culture. As she moves outside the controlling space of her homeland, aspects of her identity, her mind or her personality that have so long been repressed finally find room to rise up and take shape. She begins to regain her memory of herself and a perception of what her life could and should look like. Anzaldúa speaks out, deciding that “I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent’s tongue—my woman’s voice, my sexual voice, my poet’s voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence” (Anzaldúa 81). As the woman begins to claim her own existence and take power of her own situation, she becomes even more foreign and dangerous within society. Anzaldúa describes herself as a female with a “serpent’s tongue,” ready to sting the rest of the world with its powerful words. She is connected to an animal’s shape, indicating that she no longer embodies the form imposed upon her by society. There is a new feeling of openness and possibility for the woman, giving her the freedom to define herself, a power she has yet experienced. A new female identity emerges and confronts society, one that may be familiar to the woman, but seems strange and foreign from the outside. She assumes a socially “uncanny” figure, the embodiment of what her culture tries hard to bury but can not wipe out.
Not only do others perceive the woman as an *unheimlich* form, but she also experiences her own feeling of uncanniness as a borderland inhabitant. Within this new space, she encounters the eerie sense of being both at home, since this is the place she must live, and feeling like a total stranger in an unfamiliar land. Although she may try to distance herself from the country she left behind, the differences she wears on her body, in her thoughts, and on her tongue remind her constantly of the past she is trying to repress. She is haunted by a constant feeling of ‘homelessness’ that lingers in the place she must learn to call home. The migrant searches for security and familiarity in the new space she occupies but is instead forced to see herself as an 'other,' a stranger in every shape and form.

**Silla and the Uncanny**

In the story of *Brown Girl Brownstones*, Marshall demonstrates this sense of disconnection between her characters and their new home in the way she portrays the physical buildings in which they live. The novel begins with a description of the Brooklyn neighborhood whose brownstone houses have, over the years, been home to a mixture of immigrant cultures and communities:

> The long Brooklyn street resembled an army massed at attention. They were all one uniform red-brown stone. All with high massive stone stoops and black iron-grille fences staving off the sun. All draped in ivy as though in mourning. Their somber façades, indifferent to the summer’s heat and passion, faced a park while their backs reared dark against the sky. They were only three or four stories tall—squat—yet they gave the impression of formidable height. (Marshall 3)

These buildings both reflect the histories of their past occupants and create the reality for the current residents. Although a home is supposed to represent shelter, warmth, protection and security, these brownstones are frightening and unhomely in their very nature. They stand “at
attention” like soldiers ready to battle those who enter or come near. The “high massive stone stoops and black iron-grille fences” protect the houses from unwanted outsiders and give them cold, hard, uninviting faces. They have been built to keep elements out, not to welcome people in. The ivy suggests death, as if “mourning” a life left behind on other shores. The brownstones provide shelter for each round of new tenants, all the while maintaining their original figure. The new occupants may live here, but can never make the rooms their own. The building does not yield to their influences but instead forces the residents to conform to the space as it is. The immigrants merely fill the empty rooms, never able to impress their own identity into the structure that surrounds them.

These brownstones dominate the space they occupy, succumbing to no changes that a new resident or owner may bring. The buildings have their backs “reared dark against the sky,” ready to withstand any blow to their foundation. Although the houses are only a few stories high, they appear tall and massive, determined to face down any challenge. Marshall describes the home in an unconventional manner, portraying it not as a peaceful place, but as the site of battle. The buildings fight off the outside elements and stand against the influence of the natural world. Marshall places the brownstones is a space of their own, separate from the city and its other buildings.

Marshall sets up the image of the brownstones to parallel the figure of Silla, infusing her with the same strong, dark and unhomely characteristics. Her form is built to protect her from any outsider that may try to invade her space. Like the buildings, which rule over the location they occupy, Silla dominates her own place in the world. She is controlled neither by the culture that surrounds her nor by her Barbadian past. Selina watches in both awe and terror as her mother approaches:
Silla Boyce brought the theme of winter into the park with her dark dress amid the summer green and the bright-figured house-dresses of the women lounging on the benches...every line of her strong-made body seemed to reprimand the women for their idleness...her lips, set in a permanent protest against life, implied that there was no time for gaiety. And the park, the women, the sun even gave way to her dark force. (Marshall 16)

Silla’s appearance, like the brownstones, is cold, hard and determined. She has a “strong-made body” that cannot be claimed by any other and is unwelcoming to any outsider. Without a word, Silla’s rigid form communicates her “permanent protest against life” and the troubles the world sets out in front of her. She is a “dark force,” that sweeps all gaiety and nonsense out of the world. Just as the buildings show indifference “to the summer’s heat and passion,” Silla sweeps away the spring air bringing “the theme of winter into the park.” Within these two descriptions, Marshall connects the woman’s figure to the house, but not to the typical image the home. Like the brownstones, Silla does not represent a place of comfort or security. She occupies an unconventional, dark space that is separate from the place in which the other women in the park reside. Silla’s body acts like the walls of the buildings, reared and ready to battle against anyone who dares to step within her circle.

Introduced into the novel through the eyes of her daughter, Silla appears as an unhomely, disturbing figure. Although Selina loves her mother, Silla still invokes anxiety and awe in her daughter and her description of Silla reflects the relationship that has developed between mother and daughter. Although Selina loves her mother, she is still frightened by the role that Silla has assumed within the family. She sees Silla as the pillar of all strength and if she were to falter “the world would collapse then, for wasn’t the mother, despite all, its only prop?” (Marshall 46).

In Selina’s eyes, Silla is a great force not to be contended with, one that decides the fate of the rest of the family. In order to support this position, Silla has to assume a different form, unfamiliar within her society.
Selina’s voice expresses the mixture of fear and confusion she associates with her mother, feelings that influence her narration. Silla does not act like other mothers she knows, but instead functions within her own world. She occupies a space distinct from that of the other housewives in the park; determined not to be limited to the role of mother or captured within the lines of “home and hearth” (Henderson 56). She is an alarming presence in the novel because as a borderland inhabitant, Silla begins to claim a new identity, one she can form and control outside the expectations of her native society. Silla’s self-constructed personality is unsettling because it contrasts with the culturally accepted forms a woman is forced to assume, shaped by the boundaries imposed by a male-dominated society. In her existence outside these gendered borders, Silla scorns the women lounging about in “bright-figured house-dresses” who accept the restrictive frames of mother and housewife that have been built around them. Silla refuses to allow herself to be placed within any space man has carved out for her. Instead of taking after the other women in this new country, she makes use of her in-between status, reaching within herself to create her own identity instead of allowing an outer force to form her. This defiance turns Silla into a threatening figure, trespassing and encroaching on the limits set within society to ensure man’s domination and ultimate control.\[11\]

\[11\] Although it takes her years to see it, Selina eventually identifies her mother’s same strength and determination within herself. When Silla tries to discourage Selina from setting out on her own, Selina replies that “everybody used to call me Deighton’s Selina but they were wrong. Because you see I’m truly your child. Remember how you used to talk about how you left home and came here alone as a girl of eighteen and was on your own woman? I used to love hearing that. And that’s what I want” (Marshall 307). Selina is finally able to see her mother as she really is, a beautiful, strong person who just wanted to be her “own woman” and controlled and dominated by others. This struggle disfigures Silla in the eyes of her child until Selina decides she wants the same freedom for herself. Only now can mother and daughter see how alike they really are and that they are on the same side of the battle.
Not only does her body become drawn as dangerous, but Silla’s powerful speech becomes unsettling as well. “’Talk yuh talk, Silla! Be-Jees, in this white-man world you got to take yuh mouth and make a gun’” (Marshall 70). Silla uses her mouth like a dangerous weapon, turning her words into bullets and firing out at those who threaten her advance. There is a dismemberment of Silla’s body, replacing something organic with something destructive, mechanical and merciless. Silla is separated from her human flesh, her body becoming a hard, cold, steel object that cannot be manipulated by outside forces. She no longer represents a figure that gives life, but one whose purpose is to take it. Like Anzaldúa’s serpent tongue, the freedom Silla claims to express her opinions and make her voice heard transfigures her body into a threatening shape that cannot be dominated by any outside force. Her words arm Silla, giving her the force to shoot through any restrictions that may be placed around her.

Theorist Hélène Cixous promotes the same transformation that Silla undergoes, encouraging women to write if they wish to become powerful forces. In her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous addresses all women when she states, “your efficacy will be seen at work when your speech is no longer suppressed, its point turned in against your breast, but written out over against the other” (Cixous 268). The woman’s written words can act just like Silla’s mouth, which turns into a gun pointed out at the world, taking aim at all that she sees as unjust. Cixous’, Marshall’s and Anzaldúa’s separate descriptions of the power embedded in the woman’s word resonate off each other, producing a fuller image of the female voice that is infused with force, strength and aggression. When the woman writes or speaks, she directs her words outward, firing at “the other,” the patriarchal society that keeps her speech suppressed and her words turn inwards. She protects herself with words, taking the initiative to change her situation instead of hoping that someone else will make it better.
Writing, just like speaking, becomes one mode through which a woman may transform herself from a weak figure into a strong and independent presence. Cixous sees this change as expressed physically, releasing the woman’s body from a prefigured image imposed by society and allowing it to take its own shape. She believes that

by writing herself, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display – the ailing figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions. Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. (Cixous 262)

She argues that “women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes and rhetorics, regulations and codes…” (Cixous 267).

The woman’s body has been “confiscated” by culture and forced into a shape that does not resemble the true female. Cixous describes the uncanny shape as an image forced onto the woman, which is different from the way in which Silla assumes the form. Although these seem to be divergent types of the uncanny, both are figures of the woman created by societal forces. Cixous’ female is turned into an uncanny form by patriarchal control, where as Silla’s new freedom and position is perceived as uncanny by society.

Cixous describes a woman who has been refigured into an “uncanny stranger,” unrecognizable to her own self. The woman’s body has been used like a mannequin by society, which constructs her as a muted figure, draping her in whatever image it chooses and twisting her limbs into its desired form. By writing, the woman regains control of her body and may shape it however she decides. She breaks down gender and class barriers, social codes and cultural restrictions that have for so long denied her control and domain over her own flesh and mind. When Silla speaks out, shattering the silence imposed on her, her body begins to take a different shape. Those who wish to keep the female limited to the subservient position given to
her by society, discern her change as dangerous and threatening; but for herself and those she speaks for, Silla looks powerful, strong and unstoppable.

Selina recognizes the strength in her mother, but cannot understand it for herself. In Silla’s drive to reclaim her body and voice, she sacrifices her connection with her daughter. Expanding her role as mother and caregiver, Silla begins her fight into the world outside the home. In the eyes of Selina, this makes her look like a scary and unfamiliar figure:

She could never think of the mother alone. It was always the mother and the others, for they were alike—those watchful, wrathful women whose eyes seared and searched and laid bare, whose tongues lashed the world in unremitting distrust. Each morning they took their trains to Flatbush and Sheepshead Bay to scrub floors. The lucky ones had their steady madams while the others wandered these neat blocks or waited on corners. (Marshall 11)

Selina pictures her mother as an “other,” a figure foreign and unknown. She is grouped with a type of woman unfamiliar to Selina and unlike the neighbors that gather in her mother’s kitchen. In her daughter’s eyes, Silla would fit Anzaldúa’s description of the borderland inhabitant as “squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome.” Silla has a tongue like Anzaldúa’s, one that can lash out at the world with cutting strength. Marshall uses language similar to Anzaldúa’s description, yet these words do not come from the migrant herself, but instead from her daughter. Where as Anzaldúa is empowered by her “serpent’s tongue,” Selina’s portrayal of her mother makes Silla seem cruel and bitter. Marshall in not trying to present Silla as a cold-hearted character, but to instead demonstrate the sacrifices that Silla has to make in order to survive. Selina’s narration shows not only the hard work that Silla endures, but also the fact that in her focus to move ahead, she has left her daughter behind. Selina has been born and raised in the U.S. and cannot understand or imagine her mother’s life as it was in Barbados and does not understand the space she occupies in America. Her mother appears as an outsider to Selina for they do not share the same world. Silla walks on the edge between two boundaries, no longer
connecting herself to Barbados but still not accepted as within the U.S. Selina does not have to balance her past and present as her mother does and therefore has difficulty appreciating the constant battle in which Silla is engaged. Selina belongs within the U.S., even if she is curious about her Bajan roots, and cannot enter the borderland that Silla occupies.

Selina describes Silla’s strange ‘otherness’ in terms of supernatural powers and unbodily characteristics. She has eyes that “seared and searched and laid bare” all that crossed their vision and a tongue like a biting whip that when used “lashed the world” and left a stinging mark. Selina describes Silla in the same terms used to portray the Medusa figure that Cixous maps onto all females, a powerfully dangerous woman with absolutely no motherly features. The Medusa represents a type of woman who lives independently outside the male-dominated world and whose body cannot be controlled by others. She leaves behind the roles imposed upon her by society, “cut[ting] through defensive loves, motherages, and devourations: beyond selfish narcissism, [and] in the moving, open, transitional space, she runs her risks” (Cixous 272). Silla dares to step outside the home, cutting through the nets of mother, wife and caretaker. As she grows strong and independent, no longer docile and dominated, she becomes an uncanny, grotesque figure.

Society marks Silla’s liberty and self-reliance as something distorted and frightening. Like Medusa, who refuses to comply with the rules of society and limit herself to the role of wife and mother, both are described with deadly eyes and horrible feature. They are both like Anzaldúa’s “Shadow-Beast,” and having escaped from their cages, Silla and Medusa no longer conform to culturally imposed values and ideas. Cixous breaks free from this distorted, misguided stare that disfigures the female’s image, suggesting that “you only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She is beautiful and she’s laughing”
(Cixous 267). By looking at Silla not through a male-constructed lens, but instead “straight on,”
her grotesque figure becomes beautiful just as Anzaldúa’s “Shadow-Beast” looses its monstrous
qualities. It suddenly becomes possible to see her unrepressed identity and personality. Her
desires to dream, to work, to create a future and to take an active role in her life are finally freed.
These feelings begin to transform her body, making her seem uncanny to the outside observer.
The opportunities her migrant status provides, the in-between, unbounded space in which she
finds herself, allows Silla to release these pent up ambitions and realize some of her personal
goals. She only looks uncanny because her aspirations, so familiar to herself, are completely
foreign to society’s sculpted image of the woman.

As Selina watches her mother continue fighting to push her inner identity to the surface,
Silla’s figure takes on other unconventional shapes. Selina positions her mother in the absolute
center of power and force when she visits Silla at her new job in the war supply factory. Upon
opening the door, Selina is “drowned suddenly in a deluge of noise…a controlled, mechanical
hysteria, welling up like a seething volcano” (Marshall 98). “This machine-mass, this machine-force
was ugly…[a] form of life that had submerged all others” (Marshall 99). Amid the
shrieking screams and bellowing blasts of the factory that overwhelm Selina, she locates her
mother calmly running one belt. Selina sees that “only the mother’s own formidable force could
match that of the machines” (Marshall 100). Silla has become a woman with strength equal to

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12 Selina generally describes her mother to the reader, and although she is not completely a part
of the male-dominated society U.S. culture, she does judge her mother in comparison to the other
females in her life. Silla is in no way like the kind Miss Thompson who works her life away
with no hope for a better future, nor is she like her best friend’s mother, who stays in the house
and tends to the family. These women conform to the patriarchal frames and are controlled by
the duties they feel they must take on as females. Silla refuses to assume the same position as
these women and creates her own space outside these controlling dimensions, thus becoming
strange and unfamiliar in comparison to the other females.
that of the machinery. She is the one form of life in the factory with enough force to keep her from being “submerged” by the machines. She has broken out of the frame that keeps the woman weak and dependent and has come to occupy a new space and a new power. Silla is working outside the home, taking control of her own future and deciding her own path. She is like the mighty equipment she controls, hard and determined, an image made threatening by the very force she embodies.

Marshall draws the woman’s change within the borderland onto her own form, using her body to portray the conflicted space that she comes to occupy. Silla’s body is molded into strange, unfamiliar shapes, physically representing the woman’s transformation from the comfortable, reassuring homely figure, into a displaced, unpredictable, unrestricted form. As Cixous suggest, a woman’s “flesh speaks true. She lays herself bare. In fact, she physically materializes what she’s thinking; she signifies it with her body” (Cixous 263). Silla speaks out with not just her voice, but her physical structure. Cixous demonstrates that although the Medusa is a beautiful, laughing woman, the power and strength she has disfigures the male-constructed image of her body. She is supposed to be a weak, silent figure, but instead Silla empowers her body with the emotional force she has discovered within her. Selina narrates this change as it occurs in her mother, describing the scenes in her kitchen and the factory as they appear to her. Silla’s body transforms in the eyes of her daughter, physically demonstrating her protest against any limitations imposed on her by society. She assumes the authority to build her own identity, to fashion her personal desires and to go after her independent dreams. As Silla begins to mold herself back into the woman she knows herself to be, feelings long suppressed begin to surface on top of her flesh. She becomes the embodiment of these repressed and long forgotten emotions, assuming a physically uncanny form.
Where Marshall chooses to draw the struggles and changes that the woman migrant confronts onto her character’s body, Valenzuela focuses on the woman’s mind, her memory and her imagination as the site where conflict and unsettling transformations take place. Just as a female’s free body can be conceived of as uncanny and dangerous by society, so can a woman with a powerful mind. Valenzuela’s novel portrays the female borderland inhabitant in her effort to gain control over her thoughts and memories, to connect the past with the present, and to separate reality from a constructed vision of truth. The bubble that she constructs within the borderland cannot keep the strange and uncanny images and figures from invading her physical as well as her psychological space. Although her battle is distinct from that of Silla, both are trying to empower themselves with the strength to survive and to see themselves clearly within a patriarchal society.

The Strange and the Señora

Just as in Marshall’s novel, Valenzuela’s text recalls Freud’s theories of the unheimlich, but her work demonstrates different applications of the uncanny. The Señora’s story deals with the separation of the fantastic and the real, a mix that encourages distinct expressions of the strange and the unsettling. Freud suggests that “an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality” (Freud 224). Valenzuela plays with the distinction between the real and the imaginary to create an image of the female’s borderland. Events and characters that might have once been but figments of her protagonist’s nightmares
while abroad, come to life in front of her very eyes. The bedroom she has moved into becomes an uncanny space, invaded by disturbing, hostile figures. Valenzuela’s protagonist finds herself in a psychological battle, fighting for control over her mind and memory while trying to establish a stable, reliable space within a country that seems to be built on fantasies.

The Señora moves into the country club believing it to be a place that can provide her with protection and tranquillity while she slowly reaccustoms herself to her country. However, her safe space quickly becomes the site of both internal and external conflict as the Señora is pressured to let go of her thoughts. The intrusive, pushy maid María tells the Señora that she needs not worry about remembering, for the club is “’es el sitio ideal para olvidar. Como corresponde, señora” (Valenzuela 12). Even better than forgetting, “’no piensa’. Suavecito se lo dice, en voz muy baja. Pensar hace mal, no pienso, insiste” (Valenzuela 27). María’s voice is low and soothing, as if she is trying to tempt, or trick, the Señora into letting of the one control she has: the powers to compose her own thoughts. She tries to convince the Señora to simply “olvidar” (forget) her problems and confusion, using a sweet, gentle voice to cover up that fact that such forgetting would disconnect the Señora from her independent identity and create a space for someone else to reform her. María targets the Señora’s mind because it is what exemplifies her divergence from society. Since she was in exile, the Señora has yet to be placed under the new dictatorship’s control and still remains outside its controlling frame.

The space of the bedroom imposes a different sort of detachment onto the Señora, disconnecting her not from her mind but from her surroundings. The Señora’s bed faces two large windows, each with their curtains drawn. When the Señora asks for them to be opened,

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13 “the ideal place for forgetting. Exactly what you need” (Valenzuela, trans. 8).
14 “don’t think. [María] says softly, in a very low voice. Thinking’s bad for you, don’t think she repeats (Valenzuela, trans. 26).
“María se empaca. Si hay algo que no quiere hacer en este mundo es abrirle la ventana…Para nada abrir la ventana, todo debe quedar en su lugar, ojos que no ven, esas cosas” (Valenzuela 15). Opening up the French windows would introduce the outside world into her room, allowing the Señora to see what is occurring around her. María’s reaction shows the way in which society fears the consequences of permitting the female to open up her eyes and her mind to the real situation in her country. Everything has to “quedar en su lugar” (remain in its place), which means prohibiting the Señora from mixing with the world outside her window. She needs to be kept in a place where she has no power or influence over the events happening in the country. María prefers to keep the “blinds” drawn, serving to “blind” the Señora to the events taking place in the outside world. Without knowledge or awareness of what is really occurring past her window, the woman cannot begin to question or challenge those who control the country and remain in power. In María’s mind, the bedroom should not be infiltrated by outside images and the Señora should have no idea what is actually occurring on the other side of the wall. She looks at the room as a place to sequester and control the Señora, where as the Señora came here in hopes of having the chance to organize her own thoughts. The struggle between the Señora and María marks the shift in the function of this borderland from a safe space to a conflicting site where the battle for power and independence is staged.

María’s best devise to use against the Señora’s desire to look out on the world is the huge television set that sits in the bedroom. When the Señora wants her to pull the window blinds open so that she may see what is going on outside, María tries to divert her attention by turning on the television:

15 “María balks at this. The one thing she won’t do…is open the French windows. She wouldn’t open them for anything: everything in its place, what the eyes don’t see, etc.” (Valenzuela trans. 11).
En la pantalla gigante de televisión que ocupa casi toda la pared aparecen
imagines bellísimas de la capital, avenidas con palos borrachos en flor,
jacarandáes del color lavanda…parques tan radiantes que parecen estar allí por
equivocación. Se van las calles limpias, dichosamente transitadas…no aparecen
los tachos de basura ni los que hurgan en ellos. (Valenzuela 68)16

The images that come across the screen are in no way related to the real scenes that the Señora has seen since being home. The clean, happy, flowering picture that is supposed to represent the nation’s capital looks nothing like the city does now. The picture is almost eerie in its perfection; there are no poor, no signs of unrest, unhappiness or discontent. Valenzuela introduces the television as a force that works against the Señora’s mind and power. The huge set dominates the room with its presence, while the Señora feels herself confined to the bed. This electronic box chooses the images that she is exposed to and denies her the opportunity to see things for herself. The room is filled with the sounds and pictures produced by a far away station, both of which have no connection to any real scenes that the Señora has yet witnessed within her country. The television becomes a false window, opening up onto an imaginary world that does not truly exist. It produces the images of reality in which the society wants the Señora to believe. The pictures fill the room as they fill her mind, trying to push out any independent thoughts the Señora may be holding on to.

Not only is the Señora’s mental space invaded by this big television set, but as well it bombards her physical space. María uses the television like a firearm against the Señora, drawing “el aparatito de control remoto…del bolsillo como de una cartuchera. María le esgrime

16 “Exquisite images of the capital appear on the giant television screen which occupies almost the whole of one wall: flowering chorisia trees, jacarandas in bloom…parks so splendid they seem almost incongruous. There are clean streets full of happy passers-by…no sign of trash cans or homeless people scavenging in them” (Valenzuela 77).
como una arma. ‘Apun…tén…¡Fuego!’” (Valenzuela 60). Unlike Silla, whose transfiguration into a gun demonstrates her position of power, the Señora is attacked by a firearm, which is used by María to challenge her power and reveal her weakness. María pulls the trigger of her remote control and the Señora’s physical and emotional space is belligerently invaded by the images projected out of the television. Under attack is her ability to balance the real scenes she saw of poverty and ruin within her country against the false pictures trooping along the screen, along with her capacity to form her own evaluation of the situation. The television becomes an uncanny form, confusing the difference between reality and imagination. The scenes may look real, but it is impossible for the Señora to know what is true and false. She is pressured by these images to replace her own dark memories with unsettlingly happy, carefree pictures of her country.

Valenzuela portrays the Señora’s refusal to watch television and her insistence to know what is going outside her bedroom walls as a threat to the powers trying to control her and the rest of the country. The military men roaming outside her bedroom window describe her as a dangerous contaminate, “vaya uno a saber qué peste trajo del extranjero. Le peste de la indiferencia, por pronto, que no le permite entrever el brillante destino patrio encarnado en ellos, y por ellos personificado” (Valenzuela 36). Similar to Silla, the Señora’s body is portrayed as a threat to society; having been infected with hazardous diseases, including “indiferencia” (indifference) to the new government, independent knowledge and judgment. While abroad she was introduced to other cultures, different governments and new ways of thinking and has come

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17 “the remote control out of her pocket as if from a holster. She wields it like a weapon. ‘Ta-ake aim…Fire!’” (Valenzuela trans. 67).
18 “having brought with her from her time abroad who knows what type of infectious diseases. The disease of indifference, from a start, which prevents her from seeing the brilliant national destiny of which they are the embodiment, the personification” (Valenzuela, trans. 38).
home with this “peste” (infectious disease). The borderland inhabitant is marked as a sick figure that needs to be quarantined until her disease of difference and doubt can be cured, hopefully by large doses of television. The female exile returning to her country is not welcomed, but marked as poisonous. The independence gained by moving outside her society’s restrictive frame is considered a threat to the nation’s stability. The Señora has to realize and apply the power she has achieved if she want her self-constructed identity to exist in her homeland.

The club represents not only the external struggle that the Señora faces, but as well an internal battle. She came to the place to hide, for refuge, and is not sure if she is ready to give up this protection. She struggles within herself, contemplating that perhaps the window’s reflection “me impiden ver algo que tendría que ver y no quiero, o algo que no quiere ser visto y lo intuyo, quizá la puerta de vidrio si se abriera del todo me permitiría por fin entrar en esta realidad, y ¿qué es la realidad?” (Valenzuela 26). The Señora’s thoughts suggest an inability and unwillingness to identify reality within the world in which she resides. She feels like there is something fantastic about the space she is in right now, as if the image she sees of her room in the window does not reflect a safe, supportive space after all.

Valenzuela’s language depicts the way in which the female has almost willingly become trapped within the space of the borderland. She has to take action if she wants to control this space, but the Señora remains unsure whether to remain blinded or open her eyes to what could be lurking on the other side of the wall. Unlike Silla who charges ahead to create her own world, the Señora takes a passive role within her borderland. Where as Silla creates change, pushing out a new space around her, the Señora becomes a receptacle for change, pressured into a space

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19 “stop[s] me seeing something I should see but don’t want to, or something that doesn’t want to be seen but which I sense is there; perhaps if the French windows were opened wide I would be at last able to enter that reality, but what is reality?” (Valenzuela, trans. 25).
that closes her off from reality and keeps her questioning her own mind and power. She lies inactive within her bed, situated between two possibilities, and struggles within herself, trying to decide whether to open her eyes to the reality or just bury further under the covers and into her past: “¿habrá que despertar? ¿Y despertar del todo? La conciencia” (Valenzuela 28). The Señora is almost willing to continue sleeping, keeping her mind in the dark and her eyes closed to the frightening place that her country has become. She has to decide if she wants to “despertar” (wake up) or keep her “conciencia” (conscious) asleep and inactive. Valenzuela puts the decision in the hands of a woman since it is the female that is so often kept blind and silent by her society. The borderland becomes a place of choice for the woman, she can either wake her mind up and begin to battle for control of her own space, or roll over in bed and watch passively as the outside forces come to dominate her world entirely.

As the Señora struggles internally with the decision to open her eyes or fall into deeper sleep, her bedroom begins to be invaded by strange, surreal figures:

De golpe descubre una mano que con cuidado infinito, con delicadeza, asoma de debajo de la cama y muy lentamente le roba un paquete. Aparece enseguida otra mano, y otra, cada vez a mayor velocidad, aligerándola de los paquetes de comida.

Algunos risas suenan debajo de esa cama…toda ella se estremece con esas manos que van multiplicándose…Habré vuelto para esto?, se pregunta. ¿Para ser despojada y tener que empezar de nuevo? (Valenzuela 28-29)

Hands reach up at her from under the bed in which she has taken refuge, invading her place of protection. The groping fingers belong to the people living in the shantytown and represent the

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20 “Should she wake up? Wake up properly? Her conscious…” (Valenzuela, trans. 28)
21 “She suddenly sees a hand appear from underneath the bed and the hand, with infinite care and delicacy, very slowly steals a package of food. Another hand appears immediately afterwards, and another, each one swifter then the last, each one relieving her of another package.

A few peals of laughter ring out beneath the bed…and a shudder runs through her at the sight of those multiplying hands…Is this what I came back for? she asks herself. To be stripped of everything and have to start again?” (Valenzuela, trans. 28).
real situation within the country; the citizens have become so hungry that they will take anything within their grasp. The hands are “aligerándola” (relieving) the Señora of the food, as if they are lightening the load that weighs down her memory. They remind her of the situation in her homeland, of the pain and suffering that the television tries to wipe from her mind. The unheimlich takes its form as exaggerated representations of a reality that the Señora’s society has tried to deny and keep concealed. The real and the imaginary mix together inside her bedroom and bring an unsettling feeling into the text. Images that would have only been part of the Señora’s nightmares while abroad present themselves as a terrifying picture of reality.

Valenzuela introduces these uncanny figures into the bedroom to suggest that the borderland is not a space totally separated from the territories that surrounded it. The Señora’s room is not isolated from the other realities around her, but is subject to the invasion of unfamiliar, disturbing images. As Anzaldúa describes it, the borderland is created by the clashing of two different worlds and is a place in constant transition and flux. The Señora finds herself outside the frame of her country, but still affected by the events taking place on the other side of the border. She is left to sort out and make sense of these strange occurrences, forced to contemplate the significance of these outside invasions into her space.

As her room becomes slowly occupied by the military, and turned into a type of headquarters, the Señora begins to feel that she is seeing her past rise up in front of her:

Algo de esto ha sido vivido antes, aunque quizá no directamente por ella. Algo está allí al borde de su memoria tratando de expresarse y ella quiere y no quiere recuperarlo. Quiere, y se esfuerza, y sabe que es muy necesario, vital casi, y quedándose muy quieta con los ojos cerrados presiente que va a poder recomponerse, encontrar las piezas de algún rompecabezas interno y por ahí el recuerdo le sirva para entender algo de toda esta incongruencia. (Valenzuela 79)22

22 “There is something familiar about all this, although not perhaps as experienced by her. There’s something on the edge of her memory trying to find expression and she both wants and
The Señora is experiencing the familiar stirrings of yet another dictatorship, similar to the one that she fled from in the first place. However, this time she cannot escape since the overthrow is being staged within her bedroom. Her memory is trying to remind her that history is reoccurring, that chaos and unnecessary violence are on the brink of eruption. The Señora’s description of her repetitious memories recalls one of the examples Freud provides of the uncanny, explaining it as “an unintended recurrence of the same situation” which results in the “feeling of helplessness and of uncanniness” (Freud 237). Her imagined fears rise up as realities, forcing her to struggle within herself. The Señora lies helplessly in bed, watching the same scene repeat itself, while trying to fight an invisible force from taking control over her mind. She realizes that she needs her memory to reclaim her pieces and put herself back together again. Valenzuela depicts the female exile’s only power as her independent mind. By remembering she can reclaim control over herself and begin to make sense of the soldiers, the hands, the television images and all that is going on around her. For the patriarchy, this is the most dangerous threat of all: that the Señora might actually be able to criticize the scene taking shape within her room and at the country club. Her memory becomes a menace within the society she has returned to, an avenue that could be used to regain the female’s independence and identity that have so long been denied to her.

As the Señora begins to become aware of the reality outside her bedroom window, she starts to realize that her mind is being taken out from under her power. She explains that “siento como si quisieran borrarme la memoria, que sé yo, tachármela con otras inscripciones” doesn’t want to recover it. Yes, she does want to and she struggles to do so, knowing how important, indeed vital, it is, and lying very still with her eyes closed, she senses that she will be able to put herself back together again, to find all the pieces of an internal jigsaw puzzle and that
She thought that she was coming home again in order “‘recuperar la memoria y me la roban, me la borrar. Me la barren. ¿Y si esto de estar metida en una cama ajena sin poder moverse fuera la forma de preservar la memoriash, todo lo que tan rápido nos están quitando a fuerza de quitarnos el pan?’” (Valenzuela 69). The Señora finally realizes that she wants her memory, she wants to control her own mind, make her own decisions and judge the world based on her own observations. However, someone is trying to “borrar” (erase) her memories, steal them out from under her. Lines are being drawn around her consciousness that deny her access to her own interior identity. Distinct from Marshall’s protagonist whose struggle is displayed in terms of the physical, Valenzuela’s borderland inhabitant becomes involved in a psychological battle, fighting for a space for her mind within a repressive society.

This battle against the patriarchal, oppressive dictatorship ruling her country is made evident when the Señora begins to expand her thoughts on the political situation occurring around her. Military officer Major Vento shouts at her to “‘cállese la boca… y no se me insubordine. Usted no sabe nada, no ve nada. Le conviene quedarse en el molde. Se nota que usted simpatiza con la izquierda; una idiota útil como todas las mujeres, digo yo’” (Valenzuela 64). Standing within her space, within her bedroom, Major Vento expresses quite well what the country thinks of its woman. She is supposed to “quedarse en el molde” (conform to the stereotype) and accept the borders which society has drawn around her. The Señora is not her memory will then help her to understand a little of this whole incongruous business” (Valenzuela, trans. 90).

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23 “I feel as if someone was trying to wipe my memory clean, I don’t know, obliterate it with new inscriptions (Valenzuela, trans. 53).

24 “to recover my memory and they steal it from me, erase it. They sweep it away. And what if lying in a strange bed unable to move was my way of preserving my memory and everything they’re busy snatching away from us” (Valenzuela, trans. 78).
supposed to think, to answer, to see or to know. Her role as defined by the patriarchal rule is to merely do as she is told and accept the decisions that are made for her. She is supposed to abandon control of herself and her identity and simply lie silently in bed, with her mouth shut and her brain turned off.

Not only is the Señora’s room invaded by a repressive military regiment, but her bed as well stages a battle of male dominance. The Señora sends for a doctor, hoping that he will help explain the ill sensation she has experienced since returning to her country, including the sick feeling that she may be losing her memory and her strength to leave her bed. Dr. Alfredi, who is supposed to come to cure her, instead sexually seduces the Señora, using her weakened state against her. As he is diagnosing the Señora, he has undressed and “cálidamente se apresta a sumergirse bajo el acolchado balnco, sus olanes y adyacencias” (Valenzuela 51). The doctor lifts up the only protective covering left to the Señora, eagerly sliding into the white sheets and invading the last bit of her space. The Señora is happy to let him in, but does not realize that there is more to the doctor than it first appears. In the morning the doctor is transformed into his day-job character, a rude, obnoxious cab driver. The Señora refuses to be pushed around by this stranger and threatens “’no me jodás. No me gustan los prepotentes’” (Valenzuela 54). The cabby does not take well to her words and “se la tira sobre la cama, aparta con una mano el acolchado, con la otra levanta camisón, separa ropas, hace lo que puede sin atender demasiado a

25 “shut up…and don’t answer back. You know nothing, you see nothing. It suits you to conform to the stereotype. You’re obviously a left-wing sympathizer, a bit of an idiot—like all women in my opinion” (Valenzuela, trans. 71).
26 “is eagerly preparing to slip beneath the white quilt, the sheets and the bed’s other accoutrements” (Valenzuela trans. 55).
27 “don’t mess me around. I can’t stand bossy men” (Valenzuela trans. 60).
los detalles, pega unos corcovos, se despacha” (Valenzuela 54).28 The Señora has no reaction to this violent rape, accept to tell the cabby not to come back unless he is the doctor.

The Señora’s body appears to be totally separated from these sexual acts and she does not register the rape physically or emotionally. Valenzuela introduces a type of disembodied sexuality that is more a psychological act than a physical one, creating a metaphor for the mental rape that the Señora has endured since entering her bed. The Señora is attacked in two ways, first seduced by a man of words and then violated by a man of power. The doctor tries to convince the woman not to worry about her situation and just forget her struggle to regain and retain her memory. The cabby in turn demonstrates a violent reaction to the Señora’s attempt to exert her mind and establish some form of control over the situation. He uses his physical power to try to dominate the woman’s intellect and reason. He actually forces her back into the bed, as if trying to push her back into the inferior role she is supposed to occupy in society. It is important to note that these two men come from outside the club and are representations of the real state of the country. The sexual encounter exemplifies the manner in which women are treated within the Señora’s homeland. There is a complete invasion of the woman; she is denied power over both her mind and her body. The strange transformation of the doctor into the cabby and the Señora’s apparent acceptance of this change as normal underscores the position the female is used to occupying while under patriarchal rule. She passively accepts her situation as normal, as if the Señora almost expects it and feels there is nothing she can do to change the circumstances.

28 “shoves her back on to the bed, pushing the covers aside with one hand while lifting her nightdress with the other. He unzips his fly, does what he can without paying too much attention to detail, gives a few thrusts and is done” (Valenzuela trans. 60).
Although her predicament may appear impossible to alter, Valenzuela leaves one window open for the Señora. Although she is terrified by the military men congregating in her bedroom, she “sabe que de esa situación solo puede salir recuperando el habla como quien recupera un recuerdo perdido” (Valenzuela 83). She knows that the only way to escape the bizarre, uncanny situation that she has found herself in, lying in bed surrounded by an army, is to “recuperando el habla” (recover her power of speech). She has to gain control of her words so that she can defend herself, speak up for what she desires and out against those trying to deny her power over her own identity. She needs to get out of her sickbed and accept that her only cure is to face reality and reclaim her mind. Valenzuela again emphasizes the importance of speech and of the woman’s voice. She communicates the same type of message that Cixous imparts, that by writing, speaking or remembering, the woman can regain power over her body and deny society the ability to control and contort it into a shape that best serves its own ideals.

In a whirling spin of chaos and confusion that ends the novel, the soldiers desert the army, choosing food over guns. The television images begin to show what is actually occurring in the bedroom, the towns people start a party outside the Señora’s window, and the doctor/cabby/madman Alfredi marches into the room, grabbing the Señora’s hand and despite her protest, makes her finally stand up. “¡El club ya es nuestro!’ se oye la voz de él, zapateando sobre las armas.” To which the Señora replies “¿y el país?’…la muy realista” (Valenzuela 106). Just because some man picks her up out of bed, the Señora is not going to believe that she has been given back her memory, her voice and her power. She wants to know what he is going to do about the country, which is what supports an atmosphere of male

29 “she knows the only way out of this situation is to recover her power of speech like someone recovering a lost memory.” (Valenzuela, trans. 96).
domination. Maybe he has conquered the club, but she is not impressed. No one has liberated her, no one has declared her free of male domination and social constrictions. The Señora also points out that the club is only one space; there are still so many more places where the female is forced to live in a borderland that denies her access to her country and herself. Although the Señora can now leave her bed, free to remember and to judge the changed country, she still cannot return to her home. She remains a stranger in her own homeland, a foreigner whose voice is yet to be heard and whose powers are yet to be granted.

The ending of *Realidad nacional desde la cama* speaks for the female figure in general. The Señora stands up and addresses the constant struggle women must face. She is forever the figure of “other”, kept on the outer edges of culture and society, denied positions of power and control even over her own self. The Señora argues that just because one space opens up for her, one which lies outside the club, does not mean that she should stop fighting. Even if the struggle presents itself as strange and uncanny, a woman must continue to battle for command of her inner voice, her mind and her memories that have been so long repressed and forgotten.

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30 “‘Now the club is ours!’ he says, stamping on the weapons.” To which the Señora replies “‘and the country?’…ever the realist” (Valenzuela, trans. 121).
Two places, two spaces

The female protagonists within *Brown Girl Brownstones* and *Realidad nacional desde la cama* both face the difficult experience of migration and relocation from one country into another. Both women have to confront societies that try to force the female into a restrictive frame that defines and confines her role and her position within the culture. Silla and the Señora’s movement over borders help them to open up a space between boundaries where they begin struggling to create a place that feels homelike and habitable. Each of the two women manages to erect a borderland, in which at least some of her repressed emotions and inner voices surface. Their battle is important for it points out the existence of a domination imposed on women, demonstrating the female’s need to break free from the limitations, restraints and controls that are placed on her by others.

The two places that the women occupy are quite different in their structure. Silla’s space is much more connected with the physical and the real. She moves into a new country and takes part in the world around her. The changes that occur on account of her movement are expressed in terms of her physical body. Her mouth turns into a gun, her eyes become dangerous and deadly; her body grows in shape and form as she carves out room for herself within the white society. Silla’s figure reflects the fears and discomfort stirred up within a patriarchal society when a woman dares to break out of the frame placed around her. She does not accept the role imposed on her from the outside and instead reaches down within herself and releases the figure that has been so long repressed. Silla’s life within the borderland is a freeing experience where, unlike Deighton, she is able to strive forward and reach for goals that were once only distant dreams.
The Señora has constructed a very different borderland, a place that resides more within her psyche than within the real world. The space that the Señora occupies is governed by her mind and the images that invade the room are completely surreal and dreamlike. The Señora came to the club with the idea that she would become the inhabitant of a safe space, a refuge amidst the confusion of unfamiliarity that she encounters on her return home. However her room turns into a dangerous site and becomes the stage for a military battle. The Señora does not try to gain control over her borderland, but instead hides herself completely in bed, as if trying to make her figure disappear. She chooses to sleep all day and ignore the changes occurring around her, assuming a passive and inactive role. Where as Silla goes out to meet her oppressor, challenging the roles imposed on her, the Señora waits in her room for the enemy to find her.

The Señora does not have the same strength and willpower as Silla because she is in a very different position. Although Silla has no interest in returning there, she still has a place to call home. The changes that occurred in the Señora’s country while she was gone have turned it into something she no longer recognizes. She has lost her roots and her history and feels she no longer has a place to call her own in the world. Unlike Silla, she is trying to return home, but the place no longer exists.

Although the two spaces are shaped very differently, they are both alternative sites that sit outside the frames of the dominant culture. These are places that the women have come to because they cannot fit into the new society set in front of them. Silla lives between two different countries, uninterested in returning to her homeland but unable to become part of the world that sits in front of her. Silla’s black skin and strong accent subject her to discrimination and rejection by the white class that rules the U.S. She is forced to remain on the fringe of society, never accepted as a member of the inner circle. The Señora does not exist between two
different countries, but instead between two different images of her own home. She remembers the country of her past and does not know how to confront the nation that she presently faces. The Señora remains at the border of her own country, marked as different by her time abroad. She no longer belongs to her homeland and cannot even recognize the country as her own. The Señora has no other choice but to create her own space where she might try to understand what happened to the land she once knew so well.

The experiences of the Señora and Silla as borderland inhabitants are quite distinct, yet they do overlap in certain ways. Both women are able to find new voices and express parts of themselves that had been so long repressed. Silla comes into her own, taking control of her life, moving outside the confines of the home and her role as mother, to build the life she never had before. She begins to work and save money and is able to buy a house and stabilize her future. She takes control of her body and her mind, no longer afraid to express her opinions or fight for her rights. However, Silla is forced to make many sacrifices to gain this independence, including losing her husband and damaging her relationship with Selina.

The Señora also benefits from her limited time within the borderland. From within this space she is able to regain her memory and mind, finally taking control of her own voice and actions. Unlike Silla’s battle, which is staged within herself and within her family, the Señora fights against surreal, nightmarish figures that attack her with words and television images. She has to fall back on her own self, trusting what she remembers in order to survive the military infiltration. The Señora wins a different sort of independence, finally standing up in her bed, but only with the help of a man. She does not give in to the celebrations of the end of the dictatorship, but instead wonders what is going to happen in the rest of the country. She does not
yet believe that the nation has been liberated and foresees continuing struggle in her country and across the world.

Within both these borderlands, the woman finds herself connected to bizarre, uncanny images and events. Silla herself becomes the strange figure, her body appearing in unfamiliar, discomforting forms. The Señora herself does not become an unsettling figure, but instead finds herself in the midst of weird, disturbing events. The uncanny connection to both women joins their experience as borderland inhabitants, suggesting that there is something very *unheimlich* about the woman migrant. These women both negate the image of hearth and home, disconnecting themselves from the role of mother and obedient female. By moving outside their homelands and given cultures and into the in-between space of the borderland, the societal restraints that once controlled their voices, their bodies, and their minds no longer apply. As they women begin to release their inner selves from such repression, they are no longer recognized as the same stable, comfortable figures. To the outsider, these unbounded women appear uncanny and unsettling in their newness. The individual may recognize the parts of herself that have been so long repressed, but to the other, she is no longer distinguishable. Within the male-dominated society, this woman embodies the *unheimlich*: “everything that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light” (Freud 225). She was not suppose to discover the means of releasing that which society believes “ought to have remained secret,” including her inner voice and independent form. To the woman, this self is simply “something which is familiar and old-established in the mind which has becomes alienated from it only through the process of repression,” including societal, cultural and historic repression (Freud 241). Although the uncanny images in the two novels cannot be completely explained by Freud’s reading of the subject, one can easily see the connection between the two images.
Concluding Thoughts

The figures of the female protagonists that Marshall and Valenzuela create within their novels are complex and at times strange and unexpected. It becomes difficult to relate to Silla as her drive for power and independence begin to break the family apart, making her look more evil than strong. The Señora’s character at times seems contradictory since she spends the entire novel fighting against the patriarchy for her memory and then allows a man to sweep her off her feet without really gaining what she set out to accomplish. Although each woman can frustrate the reader, they both are daring enough to stand outside social norms and confront structures of power that they are supposed to simply accept. Because of their willingness to test the lines that surround them, try on new identities and question the world, their societies come to mark them as threatening and dangerous, uncanny and bizarre. However, it is not the women themselves who cause these weird changes to occur or strange forms to appear. For so long, women have been dominated, controlled, molded, framed, and brainwashed by the society that surrounds them. They have been told all their lives that they must keep their identity, mind, memory, power, and voice locked deep inside them, forever banned from the light of day. But a woman cannot be silenced forever and all her feelings that are familiar and natural to her will eventually push their way to the world’s surface and take shape.

Neither Marshall’s nor Valenzuela’s novel attempt to solve the problems facing their characters, nor do they suggest that a happy ending can be reached. The fact that these two narratives do not lend themselves to being reduced into resolved, comforting stories suggests that the issues raised are still pertinent problems in society. The novels are often contradictory and confusing because the topic of movement and relocation is a difficult and complex issue. The struggle staged by theses two authors suggests that although a woman may manage to find some
sort of outlet and escape when crossing borders, the female is still repressed and fighting against
a problem that has no simple solution.

Migration, immigration, exile, or any type of border crossing is not a joyful experience; it
involves difficult decisions, great loss, sacrifice and heartbreak. Yet in the moment of such pain,
there is a possibility of change, of freedom and a chance to make a new start. In Salman
Rushdie’s words, such movement can lead to:

the creation of radically new types of human beings: people who root themselves
in ideas rather than places, in memories as much as material things; people who
have been obliged to defend themselves—because they are so defined by other—
by their otherness; people in whose deepest selves strange fusions occur,
unprecedented unions between what they were and where they find themselves.
The migrant suspects reality…To see things plainly, you have to cross a frontier.
(Seyhan 14)

The experiences of dislocation and migration have allowed both Silla and the Señora to become
“radically new” women, women with voice, identity and memory. They both try to defend the
dual “otherness” they experience, as women and as borderland inhabitants, and take control of
their situations. Crossing borders has allowed these women the chance to reconnect with their
interior persons and reclaim pieces of their identities that had seemed lost forever. The changes
that occur within the women make them appear unsettling and unfamiliar in the eyes of society,
foreigners to their male counterparts. In the end, men too are forced into a different place, one
where their control over women is no longer as strong. Rushdie’s final words must therefore be
addressed to both man and woman: “to see things plainly, you have to cross a frontier.”
Bibliography


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