

Marjorie Agosin



Reader's Resource Guide

Biography

In her life and her writing, Marjorie Agosin makes use of refusal. She refuses to forget the violent past of her native Chile, to forget her Jewish family's history of exile or to forget her own sense of displacement. She refuses to be quiet about what she knows of atrocity through empathy or experience. But Agosin's refusals are inherently affirmative. Her poetry, fiction, memoirs and edited anthologies are most often concerned with fostering human rights, with a particular emphasis on the suffering—and strength—of Latin American women. Agosin's poetry ventures topically and geographically from the woeful entreaties of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina to Vincent van Gogh's Impressionist musings on the South of France to algae-covered islands in the Sargasso Sea. Regardless of scope, style or form, Agosin's work displays compassion and depicts community as a means of survival and empowerment amidst distress.



Marjorie Agosin was born in Bethesda, Maryland in 1955 while her father, a doctor and biochemist, completed a three-year tenure at the National Institute of Health. The family returned to Santiago, Chile three months after Agosin's birth and they continued to live there—summering in Valparaiso and Isla Negra—until they fled the country in 1971 amidst rumors of an imminent military coup. They settled in Athens, Georgia where Agosin's father eventually became a professor.

The move— what Agosin terms her “exile”—seems an eerie reenactment of the near-constant flight of her ancestors, German-speaking Jews uprooted from Europe. Indeed, Agosin's displacement seems almost fated: as a young girl she called herself Miriam—the biblical name of Moses' sister, who Agosin considered “the determining figure behind the Exodus”— because her name, Marjorie, was “too strange for Chile.” Her maternal great-grandmother fled Vienna for Valparaiso in 1939 while her paternal grandparents escaped pogroms in Odessa and migrated across Europe before finally landing in Chile. The families, though saved from the Holocaust, found persecution in their new country, which had a tendency toward Nazi sympathy: Agosin's mother was raised in Osorno, in the South of Chile, where the 50 local Nazi families flew swastika flags from their front doors.

Agosin's exile at fourteen defined her sense of heritage and history. Displacement is a dominant theme in her poetry. Agosin writes, “The sense of not belonging, of feeling constantly on the margins, or beyond them, was a constant in our lives, which little by little I learned to resolve through my writing.” Agosin's unique fusion of biography,

memoir, anecdote and fiction—what she calls “genealogies of memory” and “cartographies of love”—is the prevalent style of such works as *The Angel of Memory*, *Always from Somewhere Else*, *A Cross and a Star* and *The Alphabet in My Hands* in which the specific stories of her family (her great-grandmother’s, her father’s, her mother’s and her own) show a resiliency that resonates universally.

But the myriad voices Agosin adopts in her work are not always familial. Much of her poetry is intimately linked to those left behind in Chile to suffer through Augusto Pinochet’s brutal dictatorship. Although her family successfully escaped the political violence that she writes about, Agosin claims that her work is “autobiographical in terms of empathy.” Rather than recounting the atrocities perpetuated by military regimes in Chile and Argentina—in which political opponents as well as artists and other “subversives” were murdered, kidnapped or otherwise “disappeared”—Agosin’s poems in *An Absence of Shadows*, *Zones of Pain* and *Circles of Madness* honor the strength of the women who searched for their lost loved ones, mourn the loss of a generation of youthful thinkers and scold those who easily forget their struggle. Agosin believes that a poet’s role is to “become the voices that ask for compassion for the voiceless victims,” but she often does more than that, imagining into language the voices of those who cannot speak. “The writer in exile writes for an audience of remote phantoms,” Agosin says. “I wrote to say something about that gagged place called Chile, about the silence and indifference of people who succumbed to the demons of fear.”

Agosin’s varied heritage makes her difficult to define. She is a Jewish Chilean American woman writer and she celebrates her hybridity. Unlike Latino writers born in the United States who choose to write in English, Agosin and other exiled writers never abandoned their native Spanish. “Nor,” she adds, “Did we wish to integrate ourselves into a multicultural and multifaceted community.” Agosin prefers to embrace her “hybrid, complex reality” rather than melding her differing parts. While this duality would seem to push and pull on Agosin’s loyalties, she finds instead that her role as exiled poet is liberating: “I have lived in a space where borders get watered down, where writing is not so tied to place, since it includes a larger community of human beings. I think of myself as being from a long, narrow and far-off country, but also as being from everywhere.”

Agosin has lived in the United States since her family moved to Georgia in 1971, although she returns to Chile annually to visit relatives there. She attended the University of Georgia as an undergraduate and earned a Ph.D. in Latin American Literature from Indiana University. Agosin is currently a Spanish professor at Wellesley College in Wellesley, Massachusetts where she lives with her husband and two children. She has published eighteen books of poetry, four memoirs, three books of fiction and twelve anthologies including those she edits for White Pine Press’ *Secret Weaver Series*, aimed at promoting Latin American women’s writing otherwise unavailable to English readers. Her most recent book of poems, *At the Threshold of Memory*, was published in October. Agosin has received the two highest honors presented to writers of Latin American literature: the Letras de Oro Prize for Poetry and the Latino Literature prize. She has also been awarded the United Nations Leadership Award in Human Rights and the Gabriela Mistral Medal of Honor for Lifetime Achievement.

Starry Night

Teacher Background:

Marjorie Agosin's *Starry Night* poems are told from the perspective of Vincent van Gogh during the artistically productive yet troubled period he spent in the South of France near the end of his life. The poems imagine the artist as sleepless, in love, often reflective and rambling and always ecstatic about color and scene. They also show wild shifts in mood: the lines "happiness/ making paths through the sprouting fields" and "I, too, was/ spun off course, into dark solitude" appear in different poems on facing pages (94-95).

Agosin's language in her *Starry Night* poems mirrors the vivid color and twisting lines of Van Gogh's art, while her rhythms and line breaks reflect the painter's sometimes lucid and sometimes frenzied state of mind. (Mary G. Berg preserves this style in her English translation from the original Spanish.)

For additional online resources on Vincent van Gogh, please see <http://www.vangoghgallery.com>. It features thumbnail and standard size images of his complete works as well as biographical information, letters and other information. Look particularly at the section Arles (1888-89) and Saint-Remy (1889-90) for artworks made during the period discussed by Agosin in *Starry Night*.

Questions for Discussion:

To help you consider Agosin's *Starry Night* in light of the art that inspired it, poems from the collection are paired with paintings by Vincent van Gogh in the following pages. Feel free to consider other Van Gogh paintings from slides or books in your school library or from the internet. Pick a painting and a poem that have something in common in order to think about the following questions:

1. What are your first impressions of the Van Gogh painting? What is it a picture of? What types of colors or lines do you notice (bright colors, heavy lines, blues, yellows)? What emotional tone does the painting seem to show? Make a list of the words you associate with the painting and use these observations to make your own poem inspired by Van Gogh.
2. In what ways does Agosin's poem change or add to your initial reactions to the Van Gogh's painting? How does Agosin's poem help create a sense of Van Gogh as a person/ artist?
3. How successfully does Agosin's poem recreate the style and impact of Van Gogh's art? Which tools of description does Agosin use to show Van Gogh's colors, lines and scenes? How does Agosin use language to show Van Gogh's different states of mind?
4. Find lines in *Starry Night* where Agosin discusses flowers ("The Garden," "The Room," "Irises on the Table," "Market," "Harmony," and "Yellow" contain some examples). Now look at Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, *Irises* or other paintings of flowers. Compare and contrast the ways Van Gogh and Agosin create images of flowers in their work. Which artistic vision (painting or poetry) do you find more engaging and appealing? Why? What can descriptive writing accomplish that painting cannot? What can a painting do that writing cannot? How do the poem and the painting compare to your sense of "real" flowers?

NIGHT OF THE JAGUAR

Night like a velvet screen of winged smoke, the
limpid
And prescient night, moving through forests,
rustling through
branches, a solstice of scattered lights. The night
opens like
a heart in flight and whispers in our ears about the
faces of fear.
I paint all night and seek myself in the chiaroscuro
devouring colors, I call out to myself among the
tattered shadows,
in the night of the jaguar
swift as a
deep song.



Vincent
van Gogh,
Poplars
at
Saint-Remy

ST. PAUL'S

Among the madmen
who play at magnificent
obscurity
at being the chessmen
of magic,
among the madmen
inclined over the shadow
of the cypresses
as though they were a motionless and solitary
scene,
in the bonechilling halls
of naked solitude
it is here
where I mix leaves
with the green of time and
demented seasons
I invent the fragrance of yellow
I sketch the reflection of all the shadows
I am happy.



Vincent van Gogh, *A Corridor in the Asylum*

Among the madmen
here in St. Paul's
in the rooms with windows
like shards of light.
Here I
paint.
From afar
they give me a poppy
it is the beginning of summer
in gratitude I lose my way
as if I myself were
a short path through my fog.

Among the madmen
in the imaginary demons
of peace
I paint
at St. Paul's
and I hold the breeze
of all dreams
in my hands
like a string
of beads.

THE ROOM

Come to my yellow
room
in the very heart
of the forest
in Arles, starred and diurnal
fragrant with summer, with dried roses
heaped behind the wood,
my room with its just-painted walls
with the vase of sunflowers
that turn to follow the light
it has imaginary doors and windows
there are no locks
or guardians.
My room is a yellow
and resonant cadence, it laughs happily
and never demands,
it hovers near the earth
and holds the hollow of my loves
within its walls.
I have shed my clothes
I have chosen the garments of light
the meager belongings of noble happiness
and when I am here, I am filled
with the pulsations
of the rapid heartbeats
of your unexpected and miraculous
arrival at my door,
when you kiss
my hair
when the mistral wind fills us
with shivers and
welcome noises.

II.

This is my
home.
This is my room,
yellow,
sommnambulant
I have placed a sunflower
upon the pillows
I have placed
my lips
upon the resurrection
of my hands.

Vincent van Gogh, *The Bedroom*



SUNFLOWERS

I brought you
a sunflower
dragged out
of the shadow
moist like embarcations
of love.

I brought you
a sunflower
from the darkest and bluest place
so that it could be tinted
and return to your light,
return to your
clairvoyant face,
radiant among the leaves.



Vincent van Gogh, *Sunflowers*

II.

I, too, started to kneel down in the shadows
desolate, I was an augury of early ghosts
I, too, was
spun off course, into dark solitude
that is why the yellow sunflower
in the garden in the painting
in the garden of your face
turns toward the light.

Sargasso

Questions for Discussion:

1. The first section of Marjorie Agosin's *Sargasso* is titled "Outcrop of Water," while the second section is titled "Islands." How does Agosin balance land and water in this book? How are they blended into one another? How are each related to the sky? Do you, like Agosin, feel that the boundaries between earth, sea and sky are fluid, or do you tend to regard them as separate parts? What might be the significance of thinking of their relationship in these different ways?
2. The poem "Alien" (21) seems to refer to Agosin's exile from Chile. She writes, "Floating, exposed to the elements/ of her exile,/ water brings her close/ to the life of her imaginary world,/ and she conjures a tiny island." Why would Agosin—or anyone so uprooted—want to create a "tiny," "imaginary" island for herself? Is this what she is doing with her poems? Why is "floating" sometimes preferable to being grounded?
3. The poem "Frontiers" (33) starts, "She prefers to look at the seas of foreign lands." How does something universal, like water, help us feel connected to other places and people? What can travel teach us about our homes? Think about your own experiences of travel.
4. How do the poems in *Sargasso*—such as "Growing Old" (23) and "I knew myself wise..." (15)—contemplate age and ageing, particularly for women?
5. Agosin refers to wise women, clairvoyants, magicians, and a sorceress in *Sargasso*. What is she suggesting about the possibility of magic in the world? How is it connected to "madness" (27)? In what ways does she imply that there is a connection between female magic/ madness and the restrictions society places on women?
6. The poems in the "Outcrop of Water" section seem to be investigating women's self-knowledge and their relationships with other women, while the poems in "Islands" discuss amorous or sexual relationships with men. Why would Agosin choose to associate these different types of relationships with these section headings? What does love have to do with land and self have to do with water? Do you agree with these connections?
7. The poems in *Sargasso* often refer to the water as a mirror. Do you find lakes and seas interesting places for reflection (both physical and philosophical)? Are there particular places in nature where you are prone to be reflective?

An Absence of Shadows

Questions for Discussion:

1. Agosin accounts for the prevalence of Chile in her poetry by saying that her “only possible return” to her homeland after her exile “was through words.” She says, “I wrote about the blindfolded and the disappeared because I could not forget, because by writing about a darkened continent I also reconstructed my own history and my flight.” Look at the poems “You” (19), “Fear II” (49), “An Apology,” (61) “How many times...” (93), “Beloved sister” (113), “Sounds” (123), “And their lips began...” (131), and “Disappeared Woman” (165).

How does Agosin refer to her own role as a poet who speaks for the speechless? How does she blend her own experiences with those of the women she writes about? What different purposes do women’s voices serve in this collection (mourning, singing, demanding, appealing, crying)?

an
arpillera
showing
soldiers
beating a
man while
grieving
women
watch



2. Marjorie Agosin has written extensively about *arpilleras*—folk-art tapestries embroidered by women in Chile in order to denounce human-rights violations during the Pinochet dictatorship. Agosin explains, “The weaving is made for one purpose alone: to denounce and expose. It has the power to condemn invisible tortures and clandestine detentions. It brings us closer to memory. It recovers the names of the disappeared.” In what ways do Agosin’s poems function like the *arpilleras*? How else do women use art, dance and other forms of expression to “speak” without using their voices in her poems?

3. What connection do people have to the landscape? How does Agosin invite us to redefine what we mean by “landscape” to include urban and natural scenes, city streets, homes and the Plaza de Mayo?

4. In what ways do inanimate objects take on human characteristics in Agosin's poems (houses, clothing, trees, leaves)? What might Agosin be saying about the domestic life of women? What might she be saying about the natural world of Chile?
5. Marjorie Agosin includes "prose poems" in her collection—poems that appear in a block of paragraph-like text—as well as poems broken into traditional verse ("And then the visionaries..." [99], "The saw her grasp..." [101], "They began to move slowly..." [101]). What is important about the appearance of the text on the page? How do you react differently to these forms? Do the different forms affect the speed or rhythm of your reading? Why might Agosin want to create this effect?
6. Photographs appear in several of Agosin's poems ("When the evening light..." [75], "Renee" [35], "And sometimes I approach..." [79], "When she showed me..." [85]), and she even begins a poem with the single-word line, "Look" (81). What does Agosin seem to be saying about sight in her poems? What relationship do photographs have to memory? Think about photographs in your own life. How well do they preserve the past? What can they prove?
7. How do you interpret the lack of male voices in Agosin's poems? Is this gap in voices effective? Do you think Agosin risks alienating male readers?

Internet Resources on Marjorie Agosin

<http://voices.cla.umn.edu/authors/MarjoriesAgosin.html>

Voices From the Gaps. Includes a profile of Marjorie Agosin, including a biography, bibliography, secondary bibliography and links to other resources.

<http://www.unr.edu/chgps/cn/sp00/07.htm>

Center for Holocaust, Genocide & Peace Studies. Includes an essay on Marjorie Agosin from Spring 2000.

<http://www.wellesley.edu/PublicAffairs/Profile/af/magosin.html>

Wellesley College profile of Marjorie Agosin.

<http://www.femistpress.org>

The Feminist Press. Includes sections on *Always From Somewhere Else*, *The House of Memory* and *A Cross and a Star*. For more information on *A Cross and a Star*, go to http://web.gsuc.cuny.edu/feministpress/hot/cross_d.htm, which includes an excerpt from the book, a summary and author blurbs.

<http://www.whitepine.org>

White Pine Press. Includes information on Marjorie Agosin's newest book, *At the Threshold of Memory*.

<http://www.cwru.edu/pubs/cnews/1997/9-4/chileart.htm>

Information on *arpilleras*—Chilean folk-art tapestries—from Marjorie Agosin's 1997 traveling exhibit of her private collection of 40 *arpilleras*.

<http://www.wingspress.com/Titles/agosin.html>

Information about *The Angel of Memory*, including two full-length reviews of the book from *The Americas Review* and *The Texas Observer*.

<http://www.shermanasher.com/featureslluvia.html>

Information on *Rain in the Desert*, including excerpted poems.

Internet Resources on Chile

<http://www.atlapedia.com/online/countries/chile.htm>

General information on Chile, including geography, climate, economy and modern history.

<http://www.expeditionepes.com/Chilelesson1.pdf>

A website with lesson plans on Chile's geography, politics and culture, a timeline of Chilean history and a Chilean travel log.

<http://www.derechoschile.com/>

Chile Information Project. Includes a daily English newspaper—The Santiago Times—about Chilean current affairs and a section devoted to human right abuses under Pinochet.

<http://www.remember-chile.org.uk/>

A website devoted to disseminating information about Pinochet's military dictatorship as well as his recent arrest for human rights abuses. Includes links to other sites about Pinochet, human rights organizations, general information on Chile and full-text articles from Human Rights Quarterly and Amnesty International.

<http://www.trentu.ca/~mneumann/pinochet.html>

The Crimes of Augusto Pinochet. Includes case studies from Amnesty International's 1983 report on torture in Chile, passages from Robinson Rojas Sanford's The Murder of Allende and the End of the Chilean Way of Socialism and a *New York Times* article on Chilean torture survivors from January 2000.

<http://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/chile/>

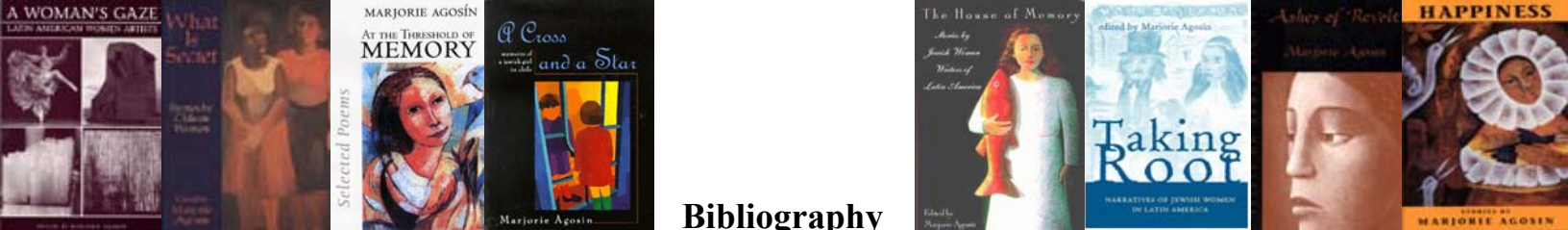
A Report from Human Rights Watch titled, "Chile: When Tyrants Tremble: The Pinochet Case." Includes background on the overthrow of Salvador Allende, a summary of the events of Pinochet's arrest and trial and a report on repercussions in Chile.

http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Dictators/Chile_Declassified.html

A full-text article from *The Nation* from August 1999 on the declassification of U.S. government documents concerning Pinochet's regime.

Compiled with help from:





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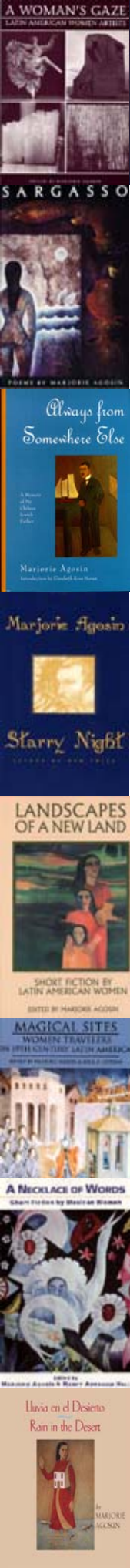
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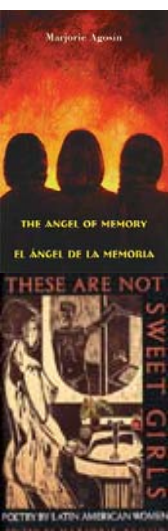
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