

Toward a Migrant Politics of Location

Gláucia Renate Gonçalves (UFMG)
Juliana Borges Oliveira de Moraes (UFMG)

ABSTRACT: *This article offers a discussion of the concept of home in contemporary times and how it is closely related to an immigrant's feeling of displacement or sense of placelessness. After brief theoretical considerations on how the concept of home was built traditionally upon a binary world view, the authors move on to undermine a romantic view of home as a place of security and to propose a new politics of location that is based more on confrontation and that has the self as the very site of home. Finally, it is our claim that the construction of this migrant concept of home involves as well a negotiation with one's memories. As a form of illustration, the article discusses the fictional representation of Dominican immigrants in the United States through an analysis of Loida Maritza Pérez's novel Geographies of Home.*

Keywords: *immigration, memory, displacement, Latino literature.*

RESUMO: O presente artigo oferece um debate sobre o conceito de lar na atualidade e discute como esse conceito está relacionado com o sentimento de deslocamento vivenciado por imigrantes. Após breves considerações teóricas acerca de como o conceito de lar foi tradicionalmente construído a partir de uma visão de mundo binária, os autores buscam desfazer a visão romântica do lar como espaço seguro e propõem uma nova política de lugar baseada em enfrentamentos, e que têm como centro o próprio sujeito. Ao final, apresentamos nosso argumento de que a construção desse conceito de lar migrante envolve ainda uma negociação com as memórias do passado do indivíduo. A título de ilustração, esse artigo discute a representação ficcional de imigrantes dominicanos nos Estados Unidos a partir da análise do romance *Geografias do lar*, de Loida Maritza Pérez.

Palavras-chave: imigração, memória, deslocamento, literatura *Latino*.

In contemporary times of technology and increasing human flows, the significance of boundaries and their relevance in the process of constructing one's sense of 'homeness' is undoubtedly changing. Some of the questions that may come to mind when considering the reconfiguration of the notion of proximity are: what does geographical distance effectively stand for when just about everything and everyone is one phone call or one click of the mouse away? What moves masses of peoples across the globe, especially voluntary migrants? Why do some of these present-day nomads feel utterly displaced in the new setting, while others claim to have re-rooted themselves? Why is it that for some the feeling of displacement can be so (dis)orienting to the point that for them "imagining a home is as political an act as imagining a nation" (GEORGE, 1996, p. 6)? Considering that "homes and nations are defined in the instances of confrontation with what is considered *not home*" (idem, p. 4), does uprootedness result from a comparison between a romantic idealization of the place of origin?

The first step toward an investigation of the questions above is the realization that home is, first and foremost, an individually crafted concept. Moreover, as Rosemary George reminds us, “home resonates differently from different locations for different subjects and often even for the same subject in different locations” (idem, p. 17). Consequently, to embrace the notion of home as a signified that is continuously under scrutiny and revision requires the undoing of the long lasting association between home and essentialization. That is, the idea of a single, pure origin must be abandoned; it is replaced, rather, by the hybrid location of the self, a product of historical and cultural intersections; a self that inhabits a place no longer of comfort and protection, but one that has become the very site of tension and confrontation.

Two very insightful discussions of such condition in relation to home vs. displacement are Eva Hoffman’s and Bharati Mukherjee’s pieces in *Letters of transit*, a short collection of five personal accounts of immigrants from various parts of the world who settled in the United States. Speaking of her own emigration from Poland during the Cold War years, Hoffman recalls that this kind of rupture is “a powerful narrative shaper; it creates chiaroscuro contrasts, a stark sense of biographical drama” (1999, p. 45), and as a result “the world becomes riven in two parts, divided by an uncrossable barrier” (idem, p. 46) that set the past on one side and the present on the other of what she describes as “a bipolar personal world” (ibidem). However, many years later, upon a visit to Krakow, the divide was blurred and she was forced to see the world differently, which at first made her a bit uncomfortable, but gradually she realized that she “felt the loss of the very sense of loss [she] had experienced on her emigration” (idem, p. 47). Once she was able to decenter her bicultural experience, she could then embrace the idea of a shared world and feel at home in it, with all its joy and harshness.

Mukherjee, similarly, acknowledges the predicament of immigrants and the tone of bitterness in the discourse of exile, especially in contrast with the discourse of expatriates (who, according to her, comparatively partake of a certain glamour, or luxury, regarding their condition). However, she alerts the reader that in our supra-national times, when what she refers to as the scripted cliché of immigration – that is, the ‘happy’ ending of assimilation – no longer holds, some sort of new negotiation must take place:

Expatriation, exile, immigration, and repatriation, four ways of accommodating the modern restlessness, the modern dislocations, the abuses of history... Somehow, we must find a way of integrating all four modes of entry into our narrative of Americanism. (1999, p. 84)

The critic's greatest contribution to the discussion regarding integration, the 'homing' of the immigrant or the foreigner, though, is that she calls for the participation of the non-foreigner in this process. Feeling at home is not exclusively the immigrant's task, but also the responsibility of the adopted country.

The discussions presented by Hofman and Mukherjee show that the issue of place and location must be disentangled from a binary world view, since that entanglement may prove rather limiting insofar as it cannot account for the immigrant's empirical experience in the new setting. Critically speaking, a questioning of a binary way of thinking is well underway, but paradoxically the very method of questioning is indeed to polarize the supposedly opposite terms. Timothy Powell warns us that this "form of analysis has inadvertently replicated many of the critical blind spots of the theoretical paradigm that it helped to displace" (1999, p. 2). To clarify this, let us recall that a traditional binary form of analysis established the hierarchy between, say, center and periphery. With a recent attempt at destabilizing such hierarchy, initial critics of a binary perspective ultimately ended up maintaining the opposition between the two stances they aimed at undoing, despite the fact of inducing or promoting a shift in the roles of center and periphery.

Following a binary line of thought, there would be necessarily a sense of 'being-at-home' opposed to a 'not-at-home' condition, meaning that, for example, often an immigrant in the U.S. would not feel at home as he or she would in their home country. It is our contention, however, that in the case of some groups of immigrants in the U.S., at certain moments they may feel both at home and not at home due to overlapping categorizations, such as gender and race, besides nationality. A male subject, for instance, may feel at home given his position as the 'masculine' figure within the private space of his patriarchal household, and at the same time feel displaced considering his role in the public sphere, facing racial or ethnic prejudice.

The complexities of such categorizations and how they are ultimately compounded is certainly worth further investigation. As Avtar Brah states,

the binary is a socially constructed category whose trajectory warrants investigation in terms of how it was constituted, regulated, embodied and contested, rather than taken as always present. A bipolar construction might be addressed fruitfully and productively as an object of analysis..., as a means of investigating the conditions of its formation, its implication in the inscription of hierarchies. (1996, p. 184)

Given this scenario, our concern is a discussion of how immigrants may build their notion(s) of home(s), and we depart, then, from the problematization of embedding this discussion within a binary form of analysis that confronts a simplistic home vs. not-at-home approach and move toward a perspective that acknowledges intersections and overlapping positionalities, such as gender, race, ethnicity, or nationality that may inform one's construction of this concept. Needless to say, the issue of nationality becomes even more complicated when we take into account the diasporic condition of a given subject.

According to Carole Boyce Davies, "geography is linked deliberately to culture, language, the ability to hear and a variety of modes of articulation. It is where one speaks from..." (1994, p. 20). That is to say, the geography of home could refer to the locus itself of the subject, one's very site of enunciation when building one's concept(s) of home as a byproduct of the enmeshed categories of race and gender, for example. Despite the fact that the binary form of analysis "helped scholars to delineate the inner workings of oppression and to establish a critical paradigm that would allow minority voices not only to be heard, but to be esteemed as a critically important point of view" (POWELL, 1999, p. 1), the time has come to move beyond this method of analysis so as to avoid oversimplifying the historical complexities of peoples such as blacks, women, "and the many points at which these cultures intersected, overlapped, or else came sharply into conflict" (idem, p. 2). And that is why I intend to approach the many geographies of the subject in such a way as to portray the very decentered standpoint that one may have, even though inserted in a hegemonic and yet prevailing national/not-national, man/woman, white/black discourses.

Rosemary George's *Politics of home* contributes greatly to unveil the cultural structures that underlie Western traditional analytical approach. According to this author,

today the primary connotation of "home" is of the private space from which the individual travels into the larger arenas of life and to which he or she returns at the end of the day. And yet, also in circulation is the word's wider signification as the larger geographic space where one belongs: country, city, village, community. Home is also the imagined location that can be more readily fixed in a mental landscape than in actual geography. (1996, p. 11)

The "wider signification of home", in George's terms, points to the easy denotation of homeland. Often one associates the idea of 'home' to a motherland, place of birth, a national ideology, because both homes and nations are contrasted against that which is foreign. Homes and home-countries as a matter of fact more often than not turn the

immigrant into a different one, an outsider, a foreigner. Yet, home and homeland are not always, or not exactly, synonymous: although both may imply a degree of longing, homeland is still linked to a physically and politically demarcated territory. Home, differently, may move about ‘more freely’, as a wanderer, so to speak. In Kenneth Parker’s words, home is that “place where the affections center,” a “place where the writer finds a refuge” (1993, p. 67). The case of exiled writers is an interesting illustration of this: home, for them, does not have the same meaning as homeland, for their condition as exiles results exactly from their not finding a place of security in their ‘homeland’.

Regarding the private sphere, home traditionally referred to the place where one would encounter protectiveness, warmth, a sense of “being surrounded by individuals who seemingly share the same characteristics” (COLLINS, 2000, p. 161). However, the very binaries public vs. private are destabilized and a romantic view of home consequently falls apart. Davies points out, for example, that for women ‘home’ as a private space can even be felt as a hostile territory, as exile (1994, p. 22), since this is the space in which she faces more closely the consequences of a patriarchal discourse that often oppresses and marginalizes her. When adding to that a racialized perspective, the implications are even more complex, for black women may suffer the oppression both in the private sphere, for being women, and in the public realm, for their blackness.

In conclusion, so many overlapping instances – one’s political standpoint, one’s imagining of a public space, one’s experience in the private sphere – are involved that it becomes a frustrating task to conceive of home as fixed and stable. It is unstable in what regards not only different people but also one same person on different occasions. Transnational times, thus, call for a revision of the concept of home, one that subverts traditional assumptions in order to accommodate a new politics of location.

In our research, we have found the case of Latin American immigrants in the United States particularly fruitful for this discussion. As the largest group of immigrants in that country, being estimated that they have already outnumbered African-Americans (MENAI, 2003, p. 64), there is now a significant number of Latino Studies departments in higher education institutions – Rutgers’ website even calls Latinos the “changing face of the U.S.” Latino literary production has been achieving greater visibility in the greater context of U.S. literature, confirming Cherríe Moraga’s 1994 foresight that Chicanos in the decades to come can “make a profound contribution to the social transformation” (1994, p.

304) of the U.S. through their writing. Moraga's comment regarding Chicanos may in fact apply paradigmatically to other groups of Latinos.

Several issues concerning migration processes are reflected in the writings of Latinos, among them the very concept that is the focus of our article. The great emphasis on homesickness found in Latino literature occurs, according to Moraga, "because they know that in the United States they will never have it all, they will always remain 'spics', 'greasers', 'beaners', and 'foreigners'" (idem, p. 302). Doomed to portray themselves as outcasts, often they craft fictional characters that feel both dislocated from their native soil and alienated from the U.S. mainstream culture. As a consequence, they are in a situation of dispossession, and long for a space to call home.

The novel *Geographies of home*, by the Dominican-American writer Loida Maritza Pérez, illustrates aptly this discussion and deserves special attention because it succeeds in its attempt at going beyond, at complicating further the feeling of displacement. Her characters seem to have their own way of portraying home, each one differently from the other, at times even contradicting one another with their clashing views and experiences. That is, *Geographies of home* seems to offer its readers a complex political construction of this concept, as the novel's very title indicates with its use of the word Geography in the plural form.

Geographies of home portrays the tribulations of a Latino immigrant family in the United States. Aurelia and Papito, the parents, struggle to nurture their children and grandchildren, despite their profound sense of dislocation in that country. They immigrated to the U.S. in an attempt to escape from poverty and the lack of opportunities in the Dominican Republic, an aftermath of Rafael Trujillo's dictatorship in that country. However, even after years of settlement in the U.S., Aurelia and Papito still seem to be looking for a place to call home. Other members of the family also long for the feel of a home, especially the daughters Iliana, Rebecca and Marina. As the novel progresses, these characters attempt at constructing what they believe to be the idea of home by means of their individual perceptions, identifications, and memories.

In Pérez's novel, some of the Dominican-American characters are women and black. They are heirs to an African legacy which began with the slave trade: "The island of Hispaniola or Santo Domingo served as a port of entry to the first African slaves who stepped on Spain's newly conquered territories following Christopher Columbus'... voyage in 1492" (TORRES-SAILLANT, 2000, p. 1086). Still according to Torres-Saillant, ninety

percent of today's Dominican population is either black or mulatto (ibidem). Uprooted from their native land, these black Dominican women characters are marked with a foreignness that encompasses at least the following different aspects: race (white/black); ethnicity (Latin American/Unitedstatesian); gender (man/woman); and nationality (national native/non-national). As diasporic subjects, their politics of location, too, is a product of constitution, regulation and embodiment, and must be probed as a politics that is "embedded within and across binaries", to quote Brah once more (1996, p. 184-185). They inhabit different homes (in the plural) due to their various and varying positionalities.

The narrative symptomatically opens with the sentence: "just a few more hours and she'd be home ..." (PÉREZ, 1999, p. 1), describing Iliana's journey as she returns to New York from a college located a few hours away. Her *home*, at this point, is not the Dominican Republic, but her parents' house in the U.S. Iliana is the character in the novel who most recurrently brings up the concept of home when deciding to go back to her parents' house after going through tough situations at university, including prejudice against her skin color (she has a dark complexion). While reflecting on the idea of returning, she recalls events in which she had not been so happy while living with her parents: "I just think I'm fooling myself. I mean, I've come to hate this place [college] so much that I've convinced myself I should take a year off and help with all the shit going on at home" (idem, p. 11). It is interesting at this point to notice that, even though her memories warn her of the far from idealized place that her parent's house was, it is the same memory process that fosters in her a desire to go home: "I've even flattered myself by thinking I'll be welcomed with open arms. But that's pretty funny, considering we were never one big, happy family to begin with" (ibidem).

Aurelia, Iliana's mother, is the character in the novel who mostly associates home to her native land. She enacts traces of the Dominican culture, such as the use of *santería*, whenever she faces difficulties. She also reminds the reader of the Dominican Republic by means of memories and longings: when Marina, another daughter, sets fire to the house, the former watches the flames through the window in the bedroom door, and recalls the dust thick in the air when their family had just moved in: "Five years of arduous work had transformed the house into a home" (idem, p. 22). This quotation demonstrates that, yet, Aurelia too wants – or needs – to believe in a safe harbor.

When comforting her daughter Marina, who had just returned from the hospital, Aurelia says: "It's hard to believe you're finally home. But you really are, mi'ja. You're

home and no one here is going to hurt you” (idem, p. 246). This far into the reading of the novel, the reader is aware that the New York environment is not exactly friendly towards this immigrant family, which emphasizes Aurelia’s idealized view of home as a space for protection, a space for the self, which can be accounted for, in part, by her appreciation of a democratic environment in contrast with a dictatorship controlled Dominican Republic.

Interestingly enough, both Aurelia’s and Iliana’s attitude toward their make-do sort of home echo the ambiguity found in Parker’s idea that home is “where the heart... lies” (1993, p. 1): the verb “to lie” ambiguously denotes the state of being in (home) but also refers to an intentional construction (of home). The ultimate contribution of the novel to a discussion of homing and displacement appears in the end, when Iliana suggests that home is more than a geographical space: “she had wanted, more than anything, to belong. Having spent years plotting how to leave only to discover, when she finally did, that she felt as displaced in the world as much as in her parents’ house” (PÉREZ, 1999, p. 132). And that is why “she had made the decision to return and to re-establish a connection with her family so that, regardless of where she went thereafter, she would have comforting memories of home propping her up and lending her... courage” (PÉREZ 132). In this passage, it is as if Iliana makes a pact with herself to *construct* her own notion (or notions) of home, the best way possible, so as to go on facing life.

Her final realization, significantly, refers not to her earlier association of home and her parent’s house, but rather to an association of home and self. This leads to the conclusion that to the signifier ‘home’, there may be several possible signifieds, being redirected by one’s new routes. It is our point that, not only for the fictional characters in Pérez’s novel but also for many immigrants in the U.S. and indeed elsewhere, regardless of whatever triggers and informs one’s attempts at retrieving or creating a home, the result is an endless process of imagining and of re-creating that proves fertile only if the subject acknowledges that he or she is the very location of homeness, and a conflicting site at that. As one’s subjectivity is an ongoing process of discoveries, one’s standpoint concerning what home stands for in a specific situation or moment will also be subject to continuous change. However, the most enriching aspect of process is that it takes place in the present, but is the result of a cumulative set of memories.

Loida Maritza Pérez, in a brief interview about her novel, states that “home is not a geographical site but... a frame of the mind able to accommodate any place as home” (PENGUIN, 1999, p. 4). To help understand the workings of such accommodation, Salman

Rushdie's words can be enlightening: it is the "present that is foreign" (RUSHDIE, 1991, p. 9), rather than the place. Consequently, home must exist in the immigrant's memory rather than in a geographical location and it is constantly changed and reshaped in the process of one's carrying across so many pieces of broken mirrors from the past (idem, p. 11). Only such politics of location that allows the creation and recreation of one's home can guarantee survival in the foreign, present space.

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Gláucia Renate Gonçalves possui doutorado e mestrado em Letras - University of North Carolina. Atualmente é professor associado da Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, atuando na área de Literaturas de Língua Inglesa tanto na graduação quanto na pós-graduação. (grgoncalves@yahoo.com).

Juliana Borges Oliveira de Moraes possui graduação em Letras pela UFMG (2007) e no momento desenvolve sua pesquisa de mestrado junto ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Estudos Literários na Faculdade de Letras da UFMG. Já atuou como coordenadora da escola de idiomas MAI, e atualmente é bolsista da CAPES. (jubmoraes@gmail.com)