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“Building the home of Latinos”

Latin writers exiled in the US tend to find themselves in a rather awkward position, for they do not feel that they belong to their original country any longer, due to physical distance, nor to the United States, due to cultural differences. That is, they experiment the sensation of dispossession and displacement, as if they had been out-rooted from their very earth, and have been put in a non-fitting ground. Cherrie Moraga, a Chicana writer, portrays this in-between position when she says: “Los Estados Unidos es mi país, pero no és mi pátria” (MORAGA in FERNANDEZ, 1994, p.301). So, the US is geographically the place where she finds her self settled in, but it does not necessarily represent her homeland.

In fact, the notion of ‘homeland’ is closely associated to the immigrant writers’ feeling of displacement once, according to PARKER (1993, p.67), “what connects these writers is a shared project of ‘dreaming’ their homelands”. That is, “homeland” is more a construction of their minds, than a fixed reality. Consequently, this term becomes detached from the former view of being exclusively related to a fixed notion of nation-state, being in contemporary fiction mostly related to a creation, to a product of the mind.

The aim of this research is, therefore, to investigate the construction of “home” in the novels *Under the Feet of Jesus*, by the Chicana writer Helena María Viramontes; and *Geographies of Home*, by the Dominican Loida Maritza Pérez. By pointing out and

analyzing some characters' points of view, I expect to confirm (or not) the hypothesis that there is no such thing as a conclusive view of homeland, and that it is indeed a continuous process of construction, culminating, therefore, in what Salman Rushdie aptly termed "imaginary homeland".

Traditionally, it is common sense to relate the idea of *home* to a specific native *land*, a geographical space. As a consequence, "home" would also convey a national ideology, "establishing difference" (GEORGE, 1999, p.2): if one is not in his or her spatially defined "home", he or she is spatially dispossessed, being therefore, different. That is, if one lives in a foreign land, he or she is different from the "natives" of that same territory. According to this perspective, the word *home-land* is made up; by compounding nation and home, by intertwining the two concepts.

Looking back into history, the origin of this connection comes from the birth of modernity, in which culture, power and territory are combined in one national ideal in order to make feasible for authorities to administrate a vast space as a cohesive unit. So, by delimitating a political, territorial and cultural space called "national", it is also possible to define certain characteristics expected from the natives of that unit, such as built-up traditions and cultures, according to NEIRA in SANTOS and PEREIRA (2000, p.206).

However, in contemporary times, the very concept of *nation* is questioned, once the phenomenon of detachment individual-national is brought about: there is an increasing tendency to connect national values to what was formerly considered non-national, or foreign. That is, the *a priori* classification of emotional binding to a national value, formerly important to constitute the phenomenon of the nation is now revised,

once it is not always what happens. This detachment from what was conveniently labeled national leads to a questioning of what cultural boundaries effectively represent, and if they actually exist in a globalized era. The contemporary questionings of the national also transform the idea of home, which represents more complex ideas than the mere attachment to land.

In the novel *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Perfecto Flores, a Mexican immigrant living in the US, is the character who mostly refers to “home”. In chapter two, the omniscient narrator says that “Perfecto desired to return home. To his real home, not the bungalow” (p.78) where he lived in the US. Analyzing this statement, first it is implied the idea that Perfecto *is not* at home, for he desires to *return* to it. The difference is then established between the feeling of inclusion, which would be to be at home; and the feeling of exclusion or not-belonging, evoked by the desire of *returning* home (here being considered the both the hypothesis of home as closely linked to a geographical national space, as well as the one in which there would be more complex individual matters in the home idealization felt by the character).

Second, it is noticeable that Perfecto mentions in the sentence a *real* home, as if it were fixed and palpable. This brings to mind the conventional notion of home and homeland. However, in the same chapter of *Under the Feet of Jesus*, the omniscient narrator mentions about *Perfecto*: “What would happen if he forgot his way home?” (p.79), bringing about the idea that despite *home* traditionally represent something stable and rooted, it is actually something else, for if there were such a thing as a real home, it would probably be impossible for Perfecto to forget the way leading to it.

That is, the narrator's questioning suggests that "home" is a memory *construction*, for there was probably a fear of Perfecto forgetting his way for his own imaginary home, which would include his culture as well as his feeling of belonging somewhere. This hypothesis is supported by the affirmation that "he tried to rack his brain, shake out the contents of his memories to remember who he was and who he wasn't" (p.80); and also by the affirmation that "it was the memories that bound his spirit to his native soil" (p.100).

According to GEORGE (1999, p.1) "the concept of home (or home-land) has been re-rooted and re-routed in fiction written in English by (...) immigrants", which is clearly seen in Viramontes' character Perfecto. Perfecto grows new roots of home, according to the situations in his life, as well as he constantly creates new routes for accessing his own imaginary home: a smell, a portrayal. Consequently, home would not stand simplistically for the geographical space from where one has departed from, but foremost to the notion of belonging to somewhere other than the reality of a foreign country. There would be not only one real land to be evoked for through memories, but many lands of the mind, each relevant in a specific place and/or moment of one's life.

Another character in *Under the Feet of Jesus* who mentions the term home in a relevant way is the boy Alejandro, who becomes severely sick due to poisoning by pesticides. When in agony, he claims to be *taken* home. Estrella, his companion, asks: "Where?", and he replies: "Back home". She then says: "Come on, Alejo, don't do this to me. What do you mean?"(p.146). She cannot understand exactly what he is referring to, but she "knew she couldn't get him home" (p.147). This dialogue, as well as Perfecto's reflections, also brings about the hypothesis of an imaginary homeland: Alejandro

probably does not want to go back to a geographic place and a specific cultural aspect traditionally linked to that place, but instead to a space evoking safety and protection, which is, perhaps, his construction of what it should be. As a consequence, home would be “the imagined location that can be more readily fixed in a mental landscape than in actual geography” (GEORGE, 1999, p.6).

In the novel *Geographies of Home*, as the title suggests, there are many “homes” described, once each character has the opportunity to describe it in his or her own way. The family portrayed in the book is from the Dominican Republic, in the US for many years, but still struggling for a better condition. The story begins with Iliana coming back “home” to New York, from college, which is some hours away. The narrative begins with the statement that “just a few more hours and she’d be home”. It is relevant to highlight that *home* here is not the Dominican Republic, but her parents’ house, in the US. Therefore, home does not refer to a space-bound national notion, but to an idea other than that.

Iliana goes through tough situations at university, such as racial prejudice (for she had dark-colored skin), and even a social one from the very Latino group, who claims that she “dated only white men” (p.5), and that is why she decides to go back to her parents’ house. However, she also recalls events in which she hadn’t been so happy while living with her parents, pondering: “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. 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” (p.11). It is interesting to notice that by this extract, it is

demonstrated the beginning of a construction of *home* by Iliana: even though she is aware that life in her family's place is not exactly heaven, she still intends to convince herself of its benefits.

Another interesting character is Aurelia, who is Iliana's mother. She points out her perspective of home in significant ways: when one of her daughters, Marina, sets fire to the house, she watches the flames through the window in her bedroom door, and recalls the dust thick in the air when they'd just moved in. "Five years of arduous work had transformed the house into a home"(p.22). On another occasion, when the same daughter attempts suicide, she reflects on the meaning of home, and says "that throughout more than fifteen years of moving from apartment to apartment, she had dreamed, not of returning, but of going home. Of going home to a place not located on any map but nonetheless preventing her from settling in any other [place]. Only now did she understand that her soul had yearned not for a geographical site but for a frame of mind able to accommodate any place as home" (p137). By this reflection, Aurelia comes to the conclusion that there is no place in the map she would like to return to, but that *home* is, in fact, a frame of the mind, a construct of a notion. Perhaps for Aurelia *home* is also seen as a space of safety and protection, for when consoling Marina, who had just returned from the hospital, she 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"(p.246).

Her point of view contrasts with Iliana's, who, after being sexually abused by Marina, has the following reflection: "Her primary thought was that she wanted to go home [this safe and comforting place]. Every spasm of her body, every tremor and heave only reminded her that she was already there" (p.91). That is, in this specific moment

Iliana connects *home* simply to the house in which her parents live, making her previous dreaming of home tear apart due to her disillusionment.

However, after pondering for a while, Iliana concludes that *home* is more than a geographic space, once “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 out in the world as in her parents’ house, 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 the courage to confront the prejudices she had encountered during eighteen months away” (p132). In this extract it is as if Iliana makes a pact with herself to *build* her notion of home the best way possible, on order to give her strength to face life. This same character ends the book with the reflection that “everything she had experienced (...); everything she had inherited from her parents and had gleaned from her siblings would aid her in her passage through the world. She would leave no memories behind. All of them were herself. All of them were home”(p.321).

Analyzing both Iliana’s and Aurelia’s points of view on one hand, it is clear that the Dominican writer Loida Pérez undoes the idea of one, fixed, notion of home. She, instead, proposes a fluid notion, which is built differently: it changes according to the character, and even for the same one, according to his or her points in life. Pérez, from the perspective of a generation brought up in the US and trying to understand and reconnect roots, shows that survival ultimately depends on *creating* a home for oneself.

On the other hand, taking into account Viramontes’ characters, we can see that “home”, in the narrative, refers to something other than a straight connection to a

geographic space. Even though the space is one connection to home, it is not sufficient. Perfecto's home, for instance, is evoked by images of his mind, some even not so reliable to the reader, as well as by scents. It seems to involve memory construction, due to the desire to have a sense of belonging, rather than it is a will to return to a specific point located in map. According to Rushdie, it is "the present that is foreign", rather than the place, for home is in the memory one builds of his or her own past. Time, therefore, would be of more significance than space, once memory would have more relevance concerning the building of home than geography. And that is why writers in exile would tend to "create fictions" when referring to their homes, for these locations would be invisible ones, "imaginary homelands" (RUSHDIE, 1992, p.10).

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