LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Mapping the Transnational

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Abstract:

This essay presents a synthesis of different conceptual approaches to the issue of cross-cultural experiences and contact-zones among cultures and languages, with a special emphasis on the importance of spaces of "crossing." Through these critical lenses, national identity becomes a fluid concept, and borders are redefined as necessary but at the same time also shifting. The idea of "navigation" is here a key to working within a framework that simultaneously posits norms of identity and opens national identity up to discontinuity and displacement. The uneasy articulation of multiple figurations of displaced identities is key to the question of crossing linguistic and cultural borders.

Keywords: liminal spaces; border crossings; plurilinguism.

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Zones of contact

If the late twentieth century was a period marked by the predominance of the prefix 'post' (post-postmodernism, postcolonialism, postfeminism) the last ten years have been characterized by the prevalence of discourses of the 'trans' (translation and translational, transnational, transcultural). In our brave new world of 'liquid modernities,' (Bauman 2000; 2007) contemporary critical discourse urges us to think, as John McLeod reminds us, 'across and beyond […] nations and cultures.' In other words, it urges us to think 'transnationally, transculturally – if we hope to capture and critique the conditions of our contemporaneity' (McLeod 2011: 1). Peter Hitchcock in his influential study, *The Long Space: Transnationalism and Postcolonial Form,* explicates the transnational 'as indicating dynamism "across" rather than "beyond"' (Hitchcock 2010: 21). A relevant part of the challenge of cultural transnationalism is to scale up the world of the text not 'in the interest of homology […] but to bring difference sharply into view' (16). The

transnational exceeds the terms and codes of an individual national culture as a primary mode of identification. This kind of writing questions the logic of location and identity informing the world system as such.

Transnational groups do not seek a territorial bound status. This does not mean that space or territory are not important. In the case of transnationalism, territoriality gains a new perspective. Arjiun Appadurai underlines the complex current relation between territoriality, sovereignty and nationalism: 'Once twin ideas [...] sovereignty and territoriality [...] are gradually coming apart [and] live increasingly different lives' (Appadurai 1996: 57). In this light, territory can be seen as the crisis in the relations between the nation and the state:

> [...] the problem is not ethnic or cultural pluralism but the tension between diasporic pluralism and territorial stability in the project of the modern nation-state. What ethnic plurality does [...] is to violate the sense of isomorphism between territory and national identity on which the modern nation-state relies. What diasporic pluralism particularly exposes and intensifies is the gap between the power of the state to regulate borders, monitor dissent, distribute entitlements within a finite territory *and* the fiction of ethnic singularity on which most nations ultimately rely. (Appadurai 1996: 57)

Territoriality becomes a crucial geopolitical element to understand how society and space are interconnected. Robert Sack in his *Human Territoriality* (1986) defines territoriality as a spatial strategy associated with the ways people organize themselves in space, and how they give meaning to place. According to Sack, human spatial relations are not neutral; rather they are the results of influence and power.[1] In both Appadurai's and Sack's formulations of territory as a starting point in the re-articulation of the political, it becomes clear that what is crucial in re-thinking the nation's territorial imperatives is the link between territory and power. This is precisely what the geo-philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari tries to attain. The two philosophers emphasize the creative potentials generated by interconnection, alignment, and orientation. Deleuze and Guattari urge state sovereignty toward a movement of deterritorialization, in order to unsettle the regulation of the vocabulary of the nation. From a feminist perspective, Rosi Braidotti takes Deleuze and Guattari's work, including their definition of a 'minor literature,' as a starting point to articulate her theory of the 'nomadic polyglot' (Braidotti 1994). In their seminal work, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari (1986) theorize the concept of 'minor'. 'A minor literature doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language' (16). Their argument is based on how Franz Kafka, a Czech-speaking Jew living in Prague, made use of the German language, which was Prague's major 'vehicular language' (25).

Deleuze in *Dialogues* (1991) continues to investigate the idea of 'minor' extending its implications even further. 'We must be bilingual even in a single language, we must have a minor language inside our own language, we must create a minor use of our own language [...] Not speaking like an Irishman or a Rumanian in a language other than one's own, but on the contrary speaking in one's own language like a foreigner' (4-5).

Deleuze, therefore, adds complexity to the notion of 'minor' and proposes using it also to refer to what an author creates in his / her native language by becoming a foreigner in it.

Within the area of transculturalism, Mary Ann Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* (1992) constitutes a seminal contribution. Pratt takes her starting point from the work of anthropologist Fernand Ortiz, who was the first to introduce the notion of transculturation. According to Ortiz, 'transculturation is a set of ongoing transmutations; it is full of creativity and it never ceases; it is irreversible. It is a process where we give something in exchange for what we receive; the two parts of the equation end up being modified. A new reality springs out from this movement. What is created is not, however, a patchwork of features but a new phenomenon, original and independent' (Oritz 1995: 54).

For Pratt, 'contact zones' (Pratt 1992: 7) are 'social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power' (Pratt 1991: 33). In her influential study, she elaborates on this concept: 'The "contact zone" is an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal co-presence of subjects previously separated by geographical and historical dis-junctures and whose trajectories now intersect' (Pratt 1992: 7). The dynamics of what may happen in these non-places are as follows: 'A contact zone perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other' (7), relations conceived in terms of 'copresence, interaction, interlocking, understanding and practice' (7). A notion that is loosely connected with Pratt's invaluable contribution is Victor Turner's *liminality*. Far from excluding one another, the two ideas are complementary. The ideas of 'outsiderhood' and 'transformations' are crucial in Turner's theory (Turner 1969/1977: 117).[2] It is in this liminal space that 'we can transcend the narrowness of traditional, mono-cultural ideas and […] we can develop an increasingly transcultural understanding of ourselves' (Welsch 2009: 201). The word *liminal* comes from the Latin word limen, meaning threshold – any point or place of entering or beginning. A liminal space is the time between the 'what was' and the 'next.' It is a place of transition, waiting, and not knowing. Liminal space is where transformation takes place.

Michel Onfray following Deleuze calls this 'the in between state,' the '*intermezzo,*' which has its own special logic, outside time and space. The *intermezzo* begets a specific geography, neither here or there. It obeys to its own laws, which ignore the norms that regulate human communication (Onfray 2007). It is in the cross-cultural space of the threshold then, that one can find fruitful encounters and mutual respect. Ahdaf Soueif, the Egyptian-born author of the bestselling *The Map of Love* that was shortlisted for the Booker Prize for Fiction in 1999, and a political and cultural commentator, has written at length on her condition of living and writing in different cultures. What she is most interested in are the interstices between languages and cultures. Of herself as novelist, she comments, 'the particular location I'm in is where more than one culture merge' she says in an interview (Mahjoubm 2009: 60). She adds, 'it is literature which forms the basis for the encounter' among cultures (61).

In *Mezzaterra: Fragments from the Common Ground* Soueif elaborates on this notion. The territory she speaks of – the 'Mezzaterra' -- is most valued for 'being the meeting-

point for many cultures and traditions' (2004: 6). It is considered by generations of Arab Mezzaterras 'a fertile land; an area of overlap, where one culture shaded into the other; where echoes and reflections added depth and perspective, where differences were interesting rather than threatening, because they were foregrounded against a backdrop of affinities' (7-8). Her own fiction tackles insistently with this issue. An example is her novel *In the Eye of the Sun* where Soueif does not expunge an uncomfortable relationship with the nation. As a critic has stressed, 'she narrates through it, finding a home for modern Egyptian politics in the English literary canon while, by translating dialect, affirming the presence of a community that has its own way of being. The polyphony of the history of the nation is amplified. She contests what it means to belong in a nation, away from an essentialized model, like that which the publishing market demands. This tension becomes a productive site of conflict between two languages rather than a reproductive site of hegemonic narration' (Ayad 2016: 63-4).

The mention of French thinkers Deleuze and Onfray takes this essay back chronologically, culturally and geographically to where possibly a transnational / transcultural mode of thinking started. For Maurice Blanchot, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Emmanule Levinas, Michel Foucault responsibility entails a dislocation. What they all have in common is their reflections on the quality of the relation they can engage with otherness, with another culture, and / or with another language. This relation would disengage from the proper, from subjectivity. There is no rapport of belonging, of property or of mastering to language. For Derrida language is 'ex-appropriation' (Derrida 1998: 24). In *Monolingualism of the Other* Derrida theorizes a concept of 'non possession of language'; French is neither a second language nor does it provide the comfort and safety usually associated with mother tongue. In his renowned complex statement, he speaks of dispossession: 'I have only one language, yet it is not mine' (2).

The 'impossible property of language' that Derrida proposes unveils the unfamiliar in the familiar. 'We never speak only one language' (Derrida 1998: 7). The idea of minor returns as a process of estrangement that goes beyond biographical and identitarian definitions. Becoming minor is prompted by a type of creative process able to invent ways to make language work multilingually. The emphasis here is on the power of *invention*, as Derrida stresses, 'invent in your own language if you can or want to hear mine; invent if you can or want to give my language to be understood' (57). The making of a 'minor', foreign language within one's own, which renders speaking *like* a foreigner possible, is perhaps the best way for speaking *to* the foreigner.

For Derrida, the fragmentation and the unfamiliarity of the mother tongue results in a contamination of dominant discourses on national identity. He argues that a non-possession of language reflects and unveils a 'disorder of identity' (Derrida 1998: 17) that undermines the rationale behind 'linguistic oppression' (23). This is highly significant if we take into consideration the role that nationalism (broadly defined) attached to unitarian national language to support its ideology. To quote Derrida again,

> contrary to what one is often most temped to believe, the master is nothing. Because the master does not possess exclusively, and naturally, what he calls his language, because whatever, he wants or does, he cannot maintain any relations of

property or *identity* that are natural, national, congenital or ontological, with it, because he can give substance to and articulate [dire] this appropriation only in the course of an unnatural process of politicophantasmatic constructions, because language is not his natural possession. (Derrida 1998: 23).

Transnational literature recount the ways in which cross-cultural experiences have informed the author's lives and writing, or in some cases, their characters. The authors / narrators are often portrayed as outsiders who attempt to free themselves from their "own" culture (in which they were born and educated) with greater or lesser difficulty. In other words, they try to distance themselves from their culture of "origin". I shall return later in this article to the crucial notion of critical detachment.

In a typical dynamic of loss and gain that characterizes narratives of travel and exile, the freedom the authors /narrators gain is sought, and in part realized, through the experience of embarking on one's own cultural wanderings and transmutations. Often transnational fiction deals with 'lives in translation.' I borrow this expression from a remarkable anthology of autobiographical stories edited by Isabelle de Courtivron, *Lives In Translation: Bilingual Writers on Identity and Creativity* (2013) which illustrates both the sufferings and the advantages of a life lived simultaneously in two cultures and two languages.[3]

The anthology engages with fundamental issues pertaining to identity and creativity in relation to bilingualism. It raises issues that are vital in any discussion of cultural and linguistic multiple belonging, that are, of course, the result of border crossing(s). As de Courtivron stresses in her 'Introduction',

> Being Bilingual. What does it mean? Living in two languages, between two languages, or in the overlap of two languages? What is it like to write in a language that it is not the one in which you were raised? To create in words other than those of your earliest memories, so far from the sounds of home and childhood and origin? To speak and write in a language other than the one you once believed held the seamless connection between words and things? Do you constantly translate yourself, constantly switch, shift, alternate not just vocabulary and syntax but consciousness and feelings? (De Courtivron 2003: 1)

These issues lead to many explorations in different areas. In linguistics, they lead to questions pertaining to how one learns language and how the human brain stores and uses languages in bilingual speakers. Political scientists explore the link between the language of power and the power of language: the part played by language as a mechanism of assimilation and nationalism, colonialism, disglossia, and ethnic resistance. Literary theory and cultural studies reflect on bilingual games, on translingual imaginary, on hybridity, in betweenness. In explaining the premises of *Lives In Translation* the editor insists on the role played by language in processes of identity formations: 'The life-long struggle to reconcile the different pieces of the identity puzzle (or at least to acknowledge that they cannot be reconciled) continues to be a painful and constantly renegotiated process' (De Courtivron 1997: 2). These are all fruitful and complementary

approaches. The question discussed here however has to do with fundamental issues of identity and creativity within bilingualism.

Literary theory and cultural studies ponder on bilingual games and questions of agency, on the so-called translingual imaginary, on hybridity, nomadism and metissage: these are complementary approaches to a multidimensional phenomenon. Nevertheless, whenever the authors engage with these issues they almost immediately come across concerns that connect language, identity and creativity. In his autobiography *Errata: An Examined Life*, George Steiner, prodigiously polyglot and mobile in his professional life, reflects on the endless, often painful process of negotiations of the 'identity enigma.' More importantly perhaps, Steiner stresses that the most salient aspect of fragmentation that deserves our attention is that which resides in language, the most intimate of places: 'Are there disadvantages to being a traveler between languages, a double, triple or even quadruple agent crossing frontiers of identity?' (1997: 24). Steiner takes the first steps towards theorizing the privileged intimate space where the plurilingual subject moves across and through languages (and consequently, moves across his identities). As early as 1971, in his *Extraterritorial*, Steiner articulated his enthrallment for those polylingual talents like Samuel Beckett, Jorge Luis Borges and Vladimir Nabokov. In his review of Steiner's study for *The New York Times,* Edward Said (1971) expressed his utmost admiration for the analysis carried out on displaced writers. At the same time, his comments suggest that there was still a good amount of thinking necessary in order to understand the phenomena of physical, linguistic and psychic dislocations and the boundary crossings that goes with them.

Stephen Clingman, in his fascinating study of transnational narrative, *The Grammar of Identity: Transnational Fiction and the Nature of the Boundary* (2009), stresses the relevance of this act of border crossing, and introduces 'the idea of navigation' (6). This highly significant movement implies the multiple crossing of boundaries and the creation of a 'transnational imaginary' which means, in effect, living without secure and safe coordinates, open to explorations of self, of landscapes, of memories. The process of creating a critical distance that accompanies the act of 'crossing frontiers of identity' to use Steiner's words, will prove crucial in this kind of unconventional *Bildung.* Thus, this does not concern the political right to freely choose one's place of living, to emigrate and cross state borders. Many people who leave their own mother country remain attached to its language and traditions for the rest of their lives. Others turn their backs on their past and become prisoners of a different, newly acquired culture. Only a few writers/creative artists who have access to two or more cultures are able to move between them and navigate across cultural and national boundaries, and benefit from the process.

According to Clingman, a transnational imaginary can happen in varied circumstances. In trying to define what it is that makes fiction transnational he examines a vast array of possibilities, and discusses different approaches and studies produced on this issue. It is clear that his own notion of the transnational embraces a wide spectrum of type of texts. He stresses the necessity to reflect on what *is* the migrating textual element that makes such fiction transnational. For example, in her study, *Writing Outside the Nation*, Azade Seyhan offers some useful specification in this respect. Her work on

Turkish-German authors in Germany and on Chicano writers in the United States regards as transnational the narratives produces by authors who have traversed borders and address questions pertaining 'deterritorialized cultures' (Seyhan 2000: 9), and are read in her study as the 'voices of transplanted and translated subjects' (10).

Clingman suggests the pursuit of a different approach, which does not exclude Seyhan's but that is rather more inclusive. In some cases, it is not just a question of the journey undertaken by the author. It could be the text that travels, regardless of the starting points or the trajectory of its author. Within Clingman's theoretical framework, transnational fiction, then, does not essentially come from authors who travel or books that do; it can be found in works by writers who never left home. What makes fiction transnational, in his critical perspective, are questions of form: structures of time and space, and set of figurations, metonymies, chiasmus, constellations and so forth. At this level form becomes content: 'a way of being and seeing' (Clingman 2009: 11). The notion of border, always crossed over in this literature, acquires a major role when transformations are considered from this new perspective. Whether geographic, national, territorial or symbolic, a border both separates and circumscribes. Yet borders are also crossings whether physical or mental; they become a space where identity is at stake for those who cross them, come up against them, or move around and beyond them. Furthermore, borders are themselves moving. More importantly, perhaps, beyond their empirical reality borders are ascribed a symbolic nature that allows them to be regarded as places for encountering otherness.

What links together the nature of the boundary, the grammar of identity and transnational fiction, is the idea of navigation. The transnational is intrinsically navigational. Navigation, however, cannot be envisaged without the boundary. Clingman highlights the crucial paradox at the core of the transitive imagination: navigation can occur because of the boundary, not despite of it. What is significant is how navigation transforms the nature of the boundary. In this process, the role of space is crucial:

> the transition across these boundaries that produces meaning, and where meaning is not complete, or is deferred, then further navigations are both invited and required. […] And so the boundary is also a horizon, a destination never quite reached. […] The boundary of meaning, then, is a transitive boundary; the transitive is intrinsically connected with meaning; navigation depends on, and creates, the transitive boundary which itself may undergo change. In all these ways the boundary is not a limit but the space of transition. (Clingman 2009: 22)

This is also valid for the grammar of identity. Difference within the self or between the self and other selves, are not overruled in this conception. On the contrary, they become the basis of identity as a kind of meaning regarded precisely as navigation, exploration, transition. In fact, difference is not a hindrance to navigation; it constitutes instead 'the very *ground* of its possibility and necessity.' These points of encounter, differentiation, refusal, repression, combination constitute, among other things, the transnational imaginary[4], the very territory of transnational fiction, 'a space of transition […] a navigational space' (Clingman 2009: 22-3).

Whether it concerns language, fiction, identity or location, navigation does not mean crossing or having crossed, but *being in the space of crossing*. It means *being prepared to be* in the space of crossing, in transition, in movement, in journey. It means accepting placement as *displacement,* position as *disposition,* not through coercion of others or by others to ourselves, but through 'disposition' as an affect of the self, as a kind of approach. (Clingman 2009: 25)

Travelling Cultures

Cultural anthropologist James Clifford, from his early work, has had at the focal point of his attention the significance of place in determining the production and reception of knowledge. Clifford was the founding director of The University of California-Santa Cruz's Center for Cultural Studies, and has been a leading figure first of all in anthropology, particularly for his preoccupation with the dialogical nature of knowledge production that he describes as the 'rejection of monological authority' (Clifford and Marcus 1986: 6). In the 'Introduction: partial truths' to *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* Clifford observes that, 'It has become clear that every version of an "other," whenever found, is also the construction of a "self," and the making of ethnographic texts ... has always involved a process of "self-fashioning." Cultural *poesis* -- and politics -- is the constant reconstitution of selves and others through specific exclusions, conventions and discursive practices' (24).

Since the 1990s, he has worked in a cultural studies framework that coalesces cross-cultural scholarship with the British Birmingham tradition. Clifford's transdiciplinary approach, which brings together history, literature, and anthropology, has been very influential and has ignited a lively critical debate within these disciplines. His notion of 'travelling culture' has become now essential in any study on cultural differences. Clifford emphasizes the vantage point of the outsider looking in and of the insider looking out, a position that he has characterized as typical of global modernity: the 'state of being in culture while looking at culture' (Clifford and Marcus 1988: 9). In addition, his seminal essay "Travelling Cultures" (1992) questions the received notion of 'culture' in anthropology and urges to rethink culture in terms of travel, freed from the naturalizing bias that has accompanied the term. Culture is not organic, it is not 'a rooted body that grows, lives, dies, etc.' (Clifford 1997: 101).

In *Writing Culture* (1986), Clifford and Marcus forcefully articulated the nuances and the problematic issues regarding questions of discourse, representation, power, and textuality that have become since then, a major concern in anthropology. Twenty-five years later, in an article that could be seen as an experiment in 'self-historicizing' ('Feeling Historical' 2012), he acknowledges the crucial importance that leaving New York had for him. "The Big Apple" started to feel for him (too much) like 'the center of the world'. It was not until he moved to Northern California, an experience that he characterized as 'a crossing of multiple unfinished stories' (418), that he started to realize the potentially powerful implications of dislocation. From then onward, he has been concerned with displacement in its experiential and epistemological dimension.

Although preoccupied mainly with race and the language of racism in contemporary western societies, Paul Gilroy's provocative model in *Between Camps: Race Identity and Nationalism at the End of the Colour Line* (2000) explores non-traditional, counter ideas of cultural difference and national belonging. This is a dense theoretical contribution to sociology; however, it can also be read within the perspective of Gilroy's own (auto)biography, as his own navigation across the Atlantic. The transcultural effects he is analyzing in *Between Camps* echo and reflect Gilroy's crossing of the ocean.

For Gilroy the 'sedentary poetics of either blood or soil' that usually accompany claims of 'soil, roots, territory' (what he calls 'the dictum of nation,') should be strongly opposed in favor of movement and 'placeless imagining of identity'. Instead of considering the separation and consequent mourning for the lost homeland, Gilroy proposes a model for thinking about identity and identification that turns away from the dictum of nation and genealogy. Theories of identity are thus reoriented 'toward contingency, indeterminacy, and conflict' (Gilroy 2000: 128). This move would provoke transformations of notions of both space and identity and would produce 'new possibilities and new pleasures' (129).

Nationalism has been seen for some time as a 'by-product' of modernization (Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm 1992). Other influential theorists, however, have argued more convincingly that nationalism is indeed a kernel component of 'the modern' (Kohn 1982; Balibar 1994). Stuart Hall has noted that, 'the hope of every ideology is to naturalize itself out of History and into Nature and thus to become invisible, to operate unconsciously' (Hall 1988: 8). By means of this strong link to nation, political ideology manages invisibility as it is made to appear to pour out of the actual nature of the national people. As Hall continues, 'common sense, however natural it appears, always has a structure, a set of histories which are traces of the past as well as intimations of a future philosophy.' Common sense is, as Gramsci says, 'not without its consequences' since 'it holds together a specific social group, it influences moral conduct and the direction of will' (8). It is precisely this re-elaboration of 'common sense' -- which gave ideology a sense of the natural -- that has proved a crucial turning point in alternative theorizing of nation.

Nations offer an identity beyond the self, a sense of belongingness and connectedness. The connection of the individual to others, and their sociality is crucial to the construction of the idea of nation. As Benedict Anderson has powerfully argued, any notion of 'we' is in part an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983/1991: 3). The theoretical implication of Anderson's *Imagined Community* rests in its approach, which recognizes nationalism not only as a widely spread phenomenon (closer to religion or kinship than political ideology) but also and more importantly as a cultural phenomenon. The recognition that nations are cultural artifacts implies that they are acknowledged as constructions of human efforts, and even more importantly, it implies they are recognized as form of signification, as enclosed structures, or systems of meanings. 'My point of departure is that nationality, or, as one might prefer to put it in view of that word's multiple signification, nationness, as well as nationalism are cultural artefacts of a particular kind' (4).

Nationality grants an identity that exists outside the self and, at the same time, constructs an idea of the self that excludes other identities. The concept of likeness can be dangerous when used to exclude, silence, and punish. The nation implies borderlines and boundaries that inevitably create openings and closings, an inside and an outside. A nation is characterized by its unity: shared commonness is favored against diversity, often synonymous with disorder. In addition, nationalism articulates a 'communal loyalty', which is set against loyalties that are seen as subversive to the recognized shared identity[5].

Furthermore, Anderson was perhaps the first to emphasize that home / nation / family operate within the same mythic metaphorical field. In his lucid analysis, Anderson articulates and theorizes the strong connection between the representations of home, mother country, and community. In a seminal 1991 issue of *New Formation,* which opened the debate on 'questions of home,' the editor Angelika Bammer refers to the work of anthropologist Roger Rouse, among others. One of the most insightful researchers in the field of Mexican immigration to the United States, Rouse's research has shifted the emphasis far from a narrow focus of nation to one in which Mexican migration is located and analyzed within a context of much larger international, economic, political, and social transformations. His results, following the study of the establishment and maturation of migrant communities over generations, have challenged anthropologists' traditional ways of interpreting migration. He registers how migrant groups in the course of 'chronically maintaining two ways of life' have contributed to destabilizing and disordering conventional ways of thinking citizenship and nationality, sojourners and settlers, as well as the social construction of communities. Rouse suggests that 'the old paradigms within which we used to situate ourselves (via such concepts as 'mother tongues,' 'fatherland,''cultural identity,' or 'home') are becoming inoperative. Yet, this does not mean that we have simply lost what formerly held us in place, that we are homeless migrants' (Bammer 1992: viii).[6] Most importantly for the present discussion, he argues that the terms which define who, what and where we are, need to be reformulated in the light of the new social and psychological spaces we create for ourselves, in a manner that is reminiscent of the emphasis on the intimate space of languages anticipated by Steiner.

'Imaginative geographies': Overcoming the 'us' and 'them'

The idea and the consequences of thinking only in terms of a 'here' and a 'there,' of an 'us' and a 'them' was first elaborated by Edward Said in his *Orientalism* (1978), when he introduced the concept of 'imaginative geographies'. 'For there is no doubt that imaginative geography and history help the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far away' (Said 1994: 60). Said refers to the dramatization of distance and difference involved in the imaginative geographical process. Key to Said's theorization, is the folding of difference through a series of what geographer Nicholas Blomley (1994) calls spatializations, or a set of geographical markers such as grids, surveys, and territories. Said argues that these partitions and enclosures work to more clearly demarcate a

familiar space that is 'ours' from one that is 'theirs'. To illustrate this, he gives the example of a group of people living on a few acres of land who set up boundaries and call the territory beyond these boundaries the 'land of the barbarians'. Clearly this distinction is arbitrary, in that it does not depend on the so-called barbarians to acknowledge the our land / barbarian land distinction. Said goes on to explain that it is thus enough to set up the distinction in our minds: they become they and we become us in relation to territory, and perhaps other factors such as social, ethnic and cultural markers.

Within human geography a problematization of 'home' started, albeit tentatively, in the late 1970s. The sense of bounded comfort and protection associated with "home" has been supported by a significant amount of scholarship. As an example, one could refer to the work of human geographer Douglas Porteous:

> Home provides both the individual and the small primary group known as the family with all the three territorial satisfactions [identity, security, stimulation]. These satisfactions derive from the control of physical space, and this control is secured by two major means. The personalization of space is an assertion of identity and a means of ensuring stimulation. (Porteous 1976: 383)

However, even for Porteous the idea of home as major fixed reference point for structuring reality is not so straightforward. Precisely because it functions as an archetypical reference point, there are other important aspects to be taken into account. Primarily the main division of psychic space between self and non-self, which has generated the essential dichotomy in geographical space between home and not-home need to be analyzed (see also Bachelard 1969). For Porteous and other human geographers of the seventies, home is thought of only in terms of journeys (Lowenthal 1975). It is likely that, during the absence, both home and the individual may irretrievably change. That is why homecoming is impossible, and the traveler, in this view, is left with longing and unassuageable regret. As Porteous concludes his argument: 'As psychic space, home paradoxically involves journey, the result of which may be the loss of the original home image and an infinitude of regret' (Porteous 1976: 390).

More recently, within literary cultural studies Rosemary George Marangoly underscores how shifting notions of home suggest that home partakes in a logic of inclusion and exclusion. Home is not a neutral place: it is a political concept, like nation. As she has so forcefully argued:

> Homes are built on select inclusions [...] grounded in a learned (or thought) sense of kinship. [...] Membership is maintained by bonds of love, fear, power, desire and control. [...] Homes are not about inclusions and wide open arms as much as they are places carved out of closed doors, closed borders and screening apparatuses. [...] Imagining a home is as political an act as is imagining a nation. Establishing either is a display of hegemonic power. (Marangoly 1996: 6, 8, 9).

Home recalls bounded, enclosed spaces, when one can feel grounded and secure. It works within the same metaphoric field of roots. To quote Margaret Atwood from the novel *Bodily Harm* (1981), where the protagonist, Rennie, muses over the meaning of roots, which she finds rather disquieting:

> Rennie is from Griswold. Ontario. Griswold is what they call her background. Though it's less like a background, a backdrop [...] than a subground, something that can't be seen but is nevertheless there, full of gritty old rocks and buried stumps, worms and bones; nothing you'd want to go into. Those who'd lately been clamouring for roots had never seen a root up close, Rennie used to say. She had, and she'd rather be some other part of the plant. (Atwood 1981: 18)[7]

Roots here lose any appealing qualities and become something that is better to keep out of sight. Similarly, Bulgarian writer Ilja Trojanow, who grew up in Kenya and Germany and spent several years in India and South Africa before moving to Vienna, states in an interview: 'They ask me about my roots, but I am not a tree. Identity is rather something dynamic, a fluid concept, even if many people tend to think only in terms of belonging' (Dagnino 2012: 10).[8] Following Peter Hitchcock we could say that nation is not the fixed point against which the writer's affiliation can be measured; instead, like language, it should be seen as a 'living substance of identification that moves unevenly with the writer's own dynamism' (Hitchcock 2010: 20).

To have a transnational perspective means to exceed the terms and codes of an individual national culture; it means to be able to question the logic of location and identity informing the world system as such. In order to cultivate a cross-cultural imaginary it is necessary to be aware of the dangers of appropriation and tend instead to articulation, as John McLeod reminds us. In addition, when one seeks out transcultural understanding one must be aware of 'the disjunctive limits, discursive specificities and political realities that are extremely difficult to cross over' (McLeod 2011: 10). To avoid appropriation silence at times can be helpful. As McLeod suggests, 'In the transcultural contact zone of our global contemporaneity, silence does not signify absence or failure. In concert with the conversational imperatives of living in a world of strangers, the anxious silences of the contact zone mark a non-verbal process of understanding in which that yearning to engage hospitably with others is inflected with a consciousness of the limits of one's standpoint' (11). Transcultural understanding must be aware of its limits, and thus practice an approach towards singularity, not an appropriation of singularity. One must be willing to destabilize and decenter the self-assured I to tend towards the language of cross-culturalism. It is only by dis-placing the self, that one can be opened towards the discourse of the Other.

Notes

[1] For a brief overview of key aspects of the recent debate in literary geography, including the *Geocritique* theorized by Bertrand Westphal, see (in Italian), Donatella Izzo's (2015) dense review essay on recent geocritical approaches to literature.

[2] 'The attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* ("threshold people") are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to the eclipse of the sun and the moon' (Turner 1969/1977: 95).

[3] The collection includes, among others, Eva Hoffman, Anita Desai, Nancy Huston, Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, and a moving piece by the editor: 'Memories of a Bilingual Daughter.' See also *Letters of Transit* (1999), edited by André Aciman.

[4] For a discussion of the transnational in poetry, especially modernism see Ramazani (2009). See also Quayson and Daswani 2013.

[5] See Ranchod-Nilsson and Tétreault (2000).

[6] Rouse 1991, quoted in Bammer 1992: viii.

[7] For an intriguing critical discussion of ideas of home and nation within the Canadian context see Manning 2003.

[8] Trojanow 2011, quoted in Dagnino 2012: 10.

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