

## Introduction:

# Representations of Home: Conflict and/or (Be)longing: Thinking with Stories and Images

## Paula Horta and Margarida Pereira Martins

The idea of home was something they lived so completely that they would have been at a loss to define it. But they would have known to be inadequate phrases such as: “It’s where you’re from,” “It’s the place you live,” “It’s where your family are.”

Deirdre Madden  
*One by One in the Darkness*, 1996: 75

People not only think *about* stories; far more consequentially, people think *with* stories.

Arthur W. Frank  
*Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-Narratology*, 2010: 47

Notions of “home” in a 21st century world marked by the uncertain future of voluntary and involuntary migration and exile, and doubts as to where to call home, awaken several debates. Be it as a physical structure, a geographical location or an emotional space, *home* shapes one’s sense of self. As John McLeod (2000: 210) writes, “The concept of ‘home’ often performs an important function in our lives. It can act as a valuable means of orientation by giving us a sense of our place in the world.”

For many individuals this sense of self is rooted in the experience of home as a shelter, a place of comfort and security animated by a constellation of nurturing relationships (McLeod 2000; Tucker 1994). In particular, the home of one’s childhood is often a place one yearns to return to – if not physically, at least emotionally or in the imagination – in an attempt to “unlock the gates of lost time” (Rushdie 1991: 10). In this case, the nostalgic journey home may be triggered by the loss of a loved one or by family photographs and memorabilia that originate a process of mourning for not only the lost landscape of the home, but also the loss of dimensions of the self. In contrast, when the home is the site of conflict, confinement and oppression, a “new” self is fashioned through the geographical and emotional separation from both the physical and the remembered home, since rather than provide a sense of

place and belonging, home is understood as an alienating and hostile environment (Goldsack 1999; Jones 2000).

Home's many definitions have led to discussions about location and culture that are naturally enmeshed in the construction of individual and collective histories. Echoes of home may be heard when referring to belonging, to kin, shelter, community and land. But home also reminds us of distance and displacement when referring to migration, diaspora and exile. Historical, political, cultural, social and emotional factors give meaning to the contexts and circumstances which shape how individuals and communities perceive home and the homeland. And no matter how fragile, distant or broken, the place(s) we call home, these nevertheless remain a focal point of reference.

The magnitude of the populations affected by forcible displacements calls for active citizenship and engaged academia that address the fragility and meaning of home. This invites reflection on how home has been perceived historically and in various contexts, subject to ongoing (re)definition.

Interested in probing the multi-dimensional nature of home, the Representations of Home in Literatures and Cultures in English (RHOMÉ) research project, based at the Centre of English Studies at the University of Lisbon (ULICES), considers how home and belonging are experienced and perceived in a world marked by conflicts, migrations, and scarce and/or poorly distributed resources. It studies how personal and communal identities have been represented in literature and the visual arts in the Anglophone world.

In light of this, the "Representations of Home: Conflict and/or (Be)longing: Thinking with Stories and Images" international conference was held in 2017 in Lisbon. The conference resulted in an interdisciplinary debate emerging from this field of enquiry as scholars discussed interpretations of home by looking into how identity is shaped by migration and diaspora as well as the multiple meanings of belonging and non-belonging in a world which carries the weight of colonial and postcolonial history.

In this Special Issue, authors approach the theme of the conference working with a vast network of ideas that define, shape and situate home, and in the process of investigating the diverse realities involved, an intricate world of subjectivities, a multiplicity of stories and images are created. As Arundhati Roy (2019) states in an interview to *The Guardian* earlier this year, "the place for literature is built by writers and readers. It's a fragile place in some ways, but an indestructible one. When it's broken, we rebuild it. Because we need shelter". Home, too, is a fragile place and a source of shelter or refuge that undergoes ongoing transformations and subsequently acquires different meanings. According to Roy, only narratives and individual (hi)stories are "able to contain the universe" that builds inside each one of us. Individual stories are constructed like homes, "spinning up from the landscapes [one] wander[s] through" and composing themselves into a story-universe. This is, Roy claims, "unapologetically complicated, unapologetically political, and unapologetically intimate". Like the novel to Roy, other stories and images

and the experiences these contain provide the structure needed to understand where and what home is in a multitude of possibilities.

The volume opens with an article by José Pedro Serra who examines the notions of homecoming and the quest for a home from five different perspectives: the mythical, the ontological-religious, the anthropological, the political, the psychic and pathological. He aligns the desire to return/recover or to find a home with a set of emotions, singling out nostalgia – and, more specifically, “saudade”, a Portuguese term that encompasses the feeling of separation and solitary distance, of melancholy, sadness and abandonment. He traces these feelings not only in the story of Ulysses and other Greek classics but also in the present day lives of migrants and refugees.

It follows with the article by Simone Lazaroo, writer and the daughter of Eurasian immigrants to Australia, to whom the meaning of home and belonging resides at the intersection of (and tension between) cultures, in the experiences and story of her family, but has gained different nuances in the lives of the characters in her short stories and novels. Family photographs and anecdotes illuminate her narrative, where home is associated with the repository of memories that she wishes to salvage. Questions of race, identity, (not) belonging and displacement inform her meditation on her family’s process of making a home and struggle to belong in Australia. Her writing is infused with the feeling of “saudade” as she recalls her father’s recourse to the Portuguese term to define his homesickness and, indeed, as she describes a sense of mourning for the loss of her family’s Singaporean home.

In the next article, Susan Ash explores the relation between home and the female body in Simone Lazaroo’s novel, *The Australian Fiancé* (2000). Drawing on Jacques Derrida’s reflections on the spectre and spectrality, as well as on the interplay between absence and presence, and between visibility and invisibility, Ash elaborates on the intersection between East and West, and between past, present and future in Simone Lazaroo’s hybrid Asian/Australian novel. In particular, she examines different forms of appropriation of the body. She focusses on the significance of the *hantu* or bad spirit that haunts the Eurasian woman in *The Australian Fiancé*, claiming that it represents female sexual awakening, but also physical and emotional trauma and a “haunting” loss of the body/home. She concludes her essay with a meditation on the role of the photograph in the novel, arguing that it both “illuminate[s] and haunt[s] what it might mean to be ‘at home’, to dwell in one’s body”.

In a more intimate reading of home, Victor Marsh examines British expatriate writer Christopher Isherwood’s life and work which, by attributing him a place as a bearer for the Gay Liberation movement, excluded him from a rightful place in religion within the Imperial Christian practice. Auto-biographical writing, because of its confessional and intimate nature, has been known to challenge those authorising agencies which have instituted laws, codes of behaviour and the production of meaning. In his endless search for

himself, Isherwood, while residing in California and working at a Hollywood film studio, is introduced to the teachings of *Vedanta* which provide him with a deeper understanding of the self. In this ancient Hindu philosophy and its teaching, Isherwood finds a “home” free of the barriers and of the shame that commonly characterises Christian doctrine. Drawing on Isherwood’s life, spirituality and writing, Marsh also investigates his work as a teaching of where true knowledge of the self lies. Beyond geography, culture, or family ties, Isherwood’s “home-self” resides within the re-alignment of the self with the unified field of consciousness that underpins all life forms.

On a different note, the next article by Brian Bartell explores the burden of a history of slavery on the development of Bourne Island through Paule Marshall’s 1969 novel *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*. As this article argues, the idea of “home” in Bournehills is conflicted. On the one hand, the technological and material structures of colonialism continue to affect the island’s life, while on the other hand, the much longed for post-colonial life is marked by new technologies, also linked to imperialism. This colonial past and the effects of slavery continue to mark the Caribbean (as) “home” as the novel’s “Timeless People” are inevitably tied to the island’s material histories. According to Bartell, *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, with its focus on the interrelationship between race and technology, is in line with theoretical perspectives that examine the Caribbean as a site which tried to turn people into machines.

Joshua Lok turns to Amitav Ghosh’s *The Glass Palace* and Romesh Gunesequera’s *Reef* for an analysis of the aesthetic and beauty of form in the postcolonial novel from, respectfully, India and Sri Lanka. Drawing attention to the aesthetic has been considered a distraction from the main purpose of the postcolonial text: to be political in nature, and a symbol of colonial resistance. Lok, however, bringing forth arguments of postcolonial critics Elleke Boehmer, Robert Young and Homi Bhabha, identifies food and the aesthetic qualities of food as playing a central role in postcolonial discourse and in the longing for home. Considering the aesthetic, therefore, offers a more complete understanding of the experience of those affected by colonialism, allowing for an intimate examination of how the home is represented and is essential in the affirmation of post-colonial identities.

Still on the theme of food, the Special Issue ends with Rhian Atkin’s article on the Portuguese diasporic community in the South-Eastern Massachusetts area and the articulation of “Portugueseness” in American New Bedford society, an important factor of diasporic identity and how it is expressed through the cooking traditions that connect Portuguese descendants to their imagined homeland. The article also explores, through the work of two culinary authors, Maria Lawton and David Leite, of Azorean descent, how food and culinary literature are representative of home and gain meaning in the preservation of identity, in the passing down of heritage and tradition and in the dissemination of cultural habits. Food and how traditional recipes are

represented in cookbooks are fundamental narratives in the commodification of collective memory, as Atkin discusses, through which flavours, smells, ingredients and cooking techniques become fundamental aspects of identity formation for those who have left their homelands behind to construct new homes in new lands.

Navigating an intricate balance between uncertainty and hope, the articles in this Special Issue bring together an exploration of the respective authors' relationship with "home". From the abstract to the specific, this reflection on the search for home (perhaps the *ideal home*) but also for roots and a sense of belonging, contributes to the discussion of an ongoing theme.

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