

Paths for Location: Home(s) in Loida Maritza Pérez's *Geographies of home*

Juliana Borges Oliveira de Morais
Doutoranda em Literatura Comparada / UFMG

ABSTRACT

Geographies of home portrays a Dominican family who has immigrated to the United States. Home is presented in numerous ways by the women characters, pointing to a fluid rather than a fixed concept in the novel. Aurelia and Iliana are the objects of this analysis.

KEYWORDS

Home, gender, race

Loida Maritza Pérez's novel *Geographies of home* portrays a family who has emigrated from the Dominican Republic to the United States in search of a better life. The family lives in extreme poverty while in the Dominican Republic. Emigration becomes, then, a possibility of hope; of a better life condition. However, while in the United States, an idea recurrently haunts the members of this family: the idea of home. Whether in the form of a longing, a fear, and/or a memory, home seems to be presented and re-presented in numerous ways by the characters, especially the women. These characters build their notions of home throughout the narrative and these notions shift, according to specific moments and contexts lived by them. So, different paths lead them somehow to a home, or, as I suggest, to homes.

In the present work, therefore, I intend to analyze two women characters in order to examine their representations of home(s): Aurelia, the mother of the family and Iliana, the only daughter to have access to higher education. It is my assumption that whereas a traditional view on home stabilizes and fixes its notion, these characters offer a counterview, defying borders of conventional arrangements, such as the binary home/not home, from perspectives of women.

According to Rosemary George,

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.¹

The complexity of analyzing the concept of home lies in the fact that it signals different spheres of meanings, such as one’s household or one’s native country, as Rosemary George claims, but also because the very condition of being an immigrant is not something simple to be defined. It is many times essentialized as if all immigrants shared the same experiences and perceptions. However, each experience is quite unique for a number of reasons. And home, consequently, will have its meanings resignified accordingly.

Home is also intricately related to the idea of kinship, whether of the imagined community, or of the household. And, as Patricia Hill Collins asserts, “surrounded by individuals who seemingly share similar objectives, these homes represent idealized, privatized spaces where members can feel at ease”.² Idealized because not always are they experienced as they are imagined, and privatized because these homes tend to revolve around the idealization of family itself – on it’s supposedly feature of functioning as a private haven from a public world. Therefore, the idea of home would take family and familiar ties as points of departure, as foundations. That is why there would be the tendency to privatize spaces: in order to make them seem more “familiar.”

Privatization of spaces can be seen in *Geographies of home*, once the characters’ routes for building home(s) revolves around the family, whereas in the Dominican Republic, through memories, or in Aurelia’s and Papito’s house. The notion of family, of what is familiar, permeates all characters’ construction of their concept(s) of home. And, as a consequence, homespaces are also somewhat marked by gender:

because women are so often associated with family, home space becomes seen as a private, feminized space that is distinct from the public, masculinized space that lies outside its borders. Family space is for members only – outsiders can be invited in only by family members or else they are intruders. Within these gendered spheres of private and public space, women and men again assume distinctive roles. Women are expected to remain in their home ‘place’ . . . Men

¹ GEORGE. *The Politics of home: postcolonial relocations and twentieth-century fiction*, p.11.

² COLLINS. *It’s all in the family: intersections of gender, race and nation*, p. 161.

are expected to support and defend the private, feminized space that houses their families.³

Gendered ideas demarcate spaces as well as specify the roles that are expected from men and women within these spaces. Women are expected to remain within “the home,” traditionally represented as the place of the household, and men outside, providing for their family. In *Geographies of home*, interestingly enough, women are portrayed mostly within the walls of houses. And these women permeate their notions of home with the notion of family, even if the latter is idealized and gender-marked by patriarchal conventions. Therefore it would be expected that these women follow what is dictated by patriarchy. However, by analyzing these characters it is possible to untangle a series of loose threads that seem to defy the embroidery of patriarchal conventions in which they are inserted.

Besides being women, these characters also share the feature of being diasporic figures. They come from the Dominican Republic, sharing Stuart Hall’s claim that they must face, at least at some point of their lives, the predicament of participating in the African Diaspora.⁴ They come to terms with their blackness in the context of the United States, bearing in mind the discussion on race held in chapter two of this thesis, by different means and in different degrees of estrangement. The diasporic and transnational condition shared by the characters give them particular *loci* of enunciation towards belonging and identification, what, ultimately, shapes their concept(s) of home(s).

Aurelia represents the perspective of an older generation. She has come to the United States already an adult after experiencing the harshness of trying to raise a family in the Dominican Republic run by Rafael Trujillo. Aurelia is not able to visit her native country due to financial restraints, so a sort of unbridgeable gap is created between her native and her host country. It could be expected from Aurelia, then, to create a Dominican Republic of her mind, somewhat idealized. However, perhaps because she is already an adult when she emigrates and aware of her native country’s frailties, she does not idealize the Dominican Republic when evoking its memories:

³ COLLINS. *It’s all in the family: intersections of gender, race and nation*, p. 161.

⁴ HALL. *Cultural identity*, p. 399.

so often Aurelia and Papito had considered returning to the Dominican Republic but had remained in the United States to be near their married children and because their youngest, remembering little of their birthland, considered it a backward, poverty-ridden place (...) It wasn't that [Aurelia] romanticized the past or believed that things had been better long ago. She had been poor even in the Dominican Republic.⁵

Aurelia is aware that if she had the chance, going back to the Dominican Republic or to the past (if that were a possibility) is not a solution for her problems. Moreover, as Avtar Brah claims, diasporas are not a synonym for loss, being “also potentially sites of hope and new beginnings”.⁶ Aurelia is depicted as having made the choice that best meets the needs for her family, in her point of view. And that choice means living in the United States.

The non-idealization of the Dominican Republic does not mean, though, that Aurelia does not go through displacement in the United States. Her feeling of being out of place is evident at some points in the narrative, such as when she describes her arrival in the host country:

everything had seemed grim and violent (...) Terrified to step outside and claustrophobic in the three-room apartment shared with Papito and their children, she had deteriorated to a skeletal eighty-one pounds. Only the realization that her children would be left motherless in a country whose language and customs she still barely understood had inched her towards health.⁷

When arriving in the United States, Aurelia sees herself as if in hostile territory. Her feeling of displacement, of foreignness affects not only her mind, but also her body. An intimate battle takes place between her desire to stay inside the house, for the fear of what is outside, and the claustrophobia she feels within this household. Home, then, at this point, is not her host country, but neither is it the house. Aurelia does, later on in the narrative, connect home to the house (one purchased by Papito), which she claims to have transformed into a home after five years of arduous work. So far, however, her house is not home (yet).

She seems to feel displaced in the United States both because of descent and because of language. She does not speak English when arriving and neither is she acquainted to Unitedstatesian culture. In fact, it is the thought of not letting her children motherless in the United States, whose customs and language were foreign to her, which she claims to have given

⁵ PÉREZ. *Geographies of home*, p. 21-23.

⁶ BRAH. *Cartographies of diaspora: contesting identities*, p.193.

⁷ PÉREZ. *Geographies of home*, p. 23-24.

her the proper strength to recover. Language is an important marker of foreignness because it is closely connected to the idea of the nation-state, one possible reference of home, according to Rosemary George.⁸ Therefore, nations and language are intricately woven together. When Aurelia highlights that she does not know the language of the host country, she is automatically marking her difference, for, as George points out, “homes are not neutral spaces. Imagining a home is as political an act as imagining a nation”.⁹ Aurelia seems to mark her standpoint by seemingly not even wanting to learn English: even after years of settlement she still needs the help of one of her daughters to understand what a doctor is saying about Marina, when the latter is hospitalized. Not learning the official language may be a form of resistance that Aurelia performs in relation to the host country, not embracing it as home.

Home, then, at this point, is not her host country, but neither is it the house she lives in while in the US. Aurelia does, later on in the narrative, connect home to a house (one purchased by Papito), which she claims to have transformed into a home after five years of arduous work. When Marina, the so-called mad daughter, sets fire to this house’s kitchen, Aurelia thinks about the struggle she and Papito had to go through in order to transform that place into a homelike space. At this point, the house is for her a metaphor for what she considers to be home. She seems to parallel the house to a supposed place of safety, an anchor for her children. So the burning of the house is equated to the burning of home as well, to the frustration of all her efforts. However, paradoxically, when Marina sets fire to the kitchen and Aurelia sees the walls burning, she is regretting not the walls, but the effort she may have to go through once more to transform the place of the house into a space of home. So home begins to embody another meaning for her. As Aurelia develops her concept(s) of home throughout the narrative, at a certain point she seems to begin to conceive it as a space, not necessarily physical:

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. 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.¹⁰

⁸ GEORGE *The Politics of home: postcolonial relocations and twentieth-century fiction*, p.11.

⁹ GEORGE. *The Politics of home: postcolonial relocations and twentieth-century fiction*, p. 6.

¹⁰ PÉREZ. *Geographies of home*, p. 137.

Aurelia does not seem to put a closure on her concept of home, but rather seems to open the borders of what home may represent in her life.

Aurelia is also the character who is mostly portrayed within the space of the house. She is portrayed in the kitchen, sometimes the bedroom, and few times in the living room. When in the latter place, she is usually taking care of her children (in moments of fights and tension) and grandchildren. Even when apparently practicing vodou in order to have Pasi3n (her son in law who abuses her daughter) killed in the episode of the plucking of the chicken, Aurelia acts within the space of the house, and specifically the kitchen. The only times Aurelia is represented outside houses is when she goes to the livestock market, accompanied by Papito, in order to buy three chickens for Christmas feast (or her vodou practice against Pasi3n); and in her attempts to bring her daughter Rebecca to her house (Rebecca is married to Pasi3n and victim of domestic abuse). But still Aurelia goes accompanied by Papito.

Concerning the private sphere referred to by Rosemary George when theorizing home, added to the patriarchal convention of the household being very much linked to the feminine, opposite to the outside world, essentially masculine, one can argue that Aurelia is characterized very much within these conventions. Nevertheless, Aurelia's depiction does not convey the house as a space for either submission or confinement. On the contrary, the analysis of both her character and Iliana's shows that the house, even though marked by the imaginary of patriarchal society concerning private and public spheres, becomes a crucial *locus* for negotiation¹¹. Aurelia seems to experience the house as a space for continuous negotiation – with her husband, daughters, son, and grandchildren.

The narrator signals to the reader that her abiding to these rules may be much more a marker of strategy, articulation, than of passivity or submission. In her intimate moments with Papito her strategies and strength within this family are mostly revealed. It is known, for instance, that Papito rejects her connection to vodou traditions since the beginning of their relationship, which leads to her conversion to the Adventist Church. However, even though apparently following his new faith, she is still very much connected to her original beliefs, and he knows it:

Aurelia silently undressed. Despite her many winters in New York, she continued to sleep nude. Nights were the only times her body breathed freely,

¹¹ HARRIS. Outras cartografias: espa3os geogr3ficos e discursivos, p. 49.

she had often claimed, unwilling to admit what her husband already knew – that, like her mother, she too believed that garments confined her dreams.¹² (163)

It is not that Aurelia's portrayal suggests that her strength relies exclusively on her use of strategies, as if it were constantly concealed. She is also portrayed to be the character that has the strength to keep both Papito and the others of the family standing upright in moments of tension. However, these moments, in relation to Papito, the "head" of the house, occur mostly in the bedroom, away from the others, such as when Papito cries, deeply grateful for Aurelia's embrace after one of their daughter's near death. Papito thrives for Aurelia's forgiveness:

her flesh was unexpectedly warm as she wrapped her arms around him and twined her legs through his. The tenderness of that gesture unleashed tremors along his spine. He shut his eyes to steel himself. Yet, as she pillowed his head between her breasts, his tears burst forth in streams whose flow he was powerless to stop (...) Aurelia drew him nearer. Although her embrace elicited more tears, she did not try to stop them, nor did she suggest that he be strong (...) she (...) shifted his head so that it came to rest directly over her heart. Papito heard its insistent beats. He heard it murmur that she forgave and loved him still.¹³

Papito becomes fragile towards Aurelia, she who represents at this moment the pillar, the founding rock of this family.

However, in the overt environment of the house it is Papito's voice that is highlighted and understood as dominant, with Aurelia's strategically abiding to that, such as when Iliana wants to go out with Ed, her friend, and Aurelia permits, but with a piece of advice: "Just make sure you return before your father does".¹⁴ Iliana is allowed to go out and meet a man, even though her father would not have permitted, but she is advised to not confront him. Iliana's search for home is also very much influenced by the repression she feels while at her parents' house. It is this fact which seems to have triggered her will to study away from "home," and it is also this environment while at her parents' house which will, at the end of the narrative, have influence on her decision for departure once again, even though at this point she has changed so many of her views on the very concept of home.

¹² PÉREZ. *Geographies of home*, p. 163.

¹³ PÉREZ. *Geographies of home*, p. 165-166.

¹⁴ PÉREZ. *Geographies of home*, p. 168.

Concerning Iliana, in the beginning of the narrative she seems inclined to making a best at believing that her parents' house is "home" (despite evidence which would point to the contrary), throughout the novel she seems to get to different conceptions of what home may be. What initially drives Iliana back to her parents' house (from college) is a voice which she regards as being her mother's, pointing to a tendency of home being described as relating to familiar ties by the characters. Nevertheless, home as related to the family as well as patriarchal conventions are also questioned by her to some extent. Iliana, for instance, refutes the idea of home as a sanctuary for family members when returning from college:

the house looked nothing like what Iliana remembered. It was yellow now – abright canary-yellow which drew attention to itself, unlike the dull red of the brick facing it which had covered its exterior (...) She had expected to find the house cloaked in mourning and, somehow, as she approached it, to get a sense of what waited for her inside (...) Her parents' residence appeared deceptively new. She pushed open the front gate and climbed the steps leading to the door. As her fingers moved toward the bell she swallowed her apprehension. This was home: safe and familiar despite its appearance. There was nothing in it she should fear.¹⁵

Iliana knows deep inside that this particular house is not an embodiment of a dream-like environment or a place of safety. At the end of the citation, she in fact seems to be consciously trying to convince herself that homely characteristics are to be found there, even though she hints to the contrary.

Even before arriving at her parents' house Iliana tries to make herself believe in the house as a place to be called home, even though her memories insist on proving different: "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".¹⁶ Her thoughts are confirmed when Marina shuts the door at her face. Despite this fact, Iliana attempts to erase this counterview and silently denies Marina's act, by pondering that "of course she was welcome home".¹⁷ The third-person omniscient narrator makes it clear that Iliana wants to believe in an idealized conception of home, a desire that clashes with her experiences within the space of her household.

¹⁵ PÉREZ. *Geographies of home*, p. 27.

¹⁶ PÉREZ. *Geographies of home*, p. 11.

¹⁷ PÉREZ. *Geographies of home*, p. 28.

Iliana's search for home in the novel, such as other characters', parallels a search of identification, of subjectivity. Many instances influence on her feelings of (non) belonging and one of them is the question of race in the context of the US. Iliana faces tensions for being part of the African diaspora. These tensions are explicit, for example, in her hating the question "Where are you from?" – usually asked because of her dark complexion and leading to embarrassment, in her perspective, since few of her classmates knew of the Dominican Republic. Not only that, but many African-American friends assumed that she claimed to be Hispanic "in order to put on airs"¹⁸ because the labeling Hispanic makes a direct allusion to Spain. It is a misnomer for giving a false impression of a European status to immigrants in the United States of non-Spanish descent, even though that is not Iliana's intention. Therefore, Iliana gets caught in an identification war: even if nationally connecting herself to immigrants of Latin American origin and transnationally to African-Americans, Iliana feels that she does not fit comfortably in either group.

When a child she is apparently claimed by each of these groups, being somewhat invited for inclusion, even though she intimately does not feel as genuinely belonging to either of them. However, as she grows up she also faces voices of exclusion, especially concerning mainstream society's view of race. At college Iliana is overtly marginalized. There she hears the word "nigger" erupting from the lips of strangers and every time she goes back to her room she faces a message board hanging from her door with the ghostly trace of the same word. She then decides to go back to her parents' house.

Iliana is also marked by gender within her diasporic experiences, which influence as well on her feelings of (non) belonging, as well as her conceptions of home. She has to deal with a repressive patriarchal structure while in her parents' house, mostly because of her father's figure. Papito represents a repressive figure for her in such a way that she does not feel comfortable to maintain some clothing items she had purchased while at college as soon as she decides to go back "home", besides feeling destitute of voice in this household. It is in fact one episode of intolerance and of injustice in which Papito slaps her face, which makes Iliana rethink the concept she has of home and which ultimately leads her to depart once more from her parents' house. At this point, she seems to regard home more as a space of mind, such as Aurelia. She does not seem to desire for any kind of idealization, but to carry with her all of her memories (good and bad ones) in such a way that she may accommodate any place as home.

¹⁸ PÉREZ. *Geographies of home*, p. 190.

Before that, however, she goes through a number of situations which help her shape and re-shape her concepts. Not only Iliana's situation as oppressed by a patriarchal structure help her shape concepts, but also her attitude concerning expected roles. Her characterization sheds light onto the construction of gender and on the implications of it in one's conception of home. Concerning the construction of gender, she is characterized as being an ambiguous and almost amorphous character sexually speaking. Marina, her so-called mad sister, in fact suggests the absence of female genitalia in her and the possibility of finding something else inside Iliana's body in the place of her uterus. This ambiguity ultimately leads Marina, in her psychotic mind, for a quest into finding out whether her sister in fact hides a secret within her body. She rapes Iliana.

Marina's view upon Iliana also comes from the fact that Iliana is unconventional in regard to patriarchal roles for men and women and also concerning her views upon space, such as private and public spheres. If the private sphere is the one reserved for women, she goes out in order to have access to higher education (she is the only daughter to do so). And, if the private space is intended to embody home, Iliana challenges this patriarchal convention by being conscious, despite her will to believe the contrary, that her parents' house is not necessarily a synonym of belonging, of feeling at home. Marina is jealous of that.

At "home" they are very much constricted by Papito. However, Iliana is able to see in Aurelia a kind of possible strength which Marina does not perceive. While Marina seems trapped into patriarchal logic in such a way that it is difficult for her to conceive different possibilities for women besides patriarchal conventions, Iliana seems to be able to see beyond. One of her models is Aurelia. Iliana is capable of seeing her mother beyond her apparent conformity towards Papito's rules. Iliana throughout the narrative even unveils particularities about Aurelia that seem to pass unnoticed by the others in the family, such as Aurelia's having powers beyond conventions, beyond "normality." The memory of her mother's braids, for example,

evoked others to which Iliana had previously attached no significance: Aurelia waking restlessly before dawn to scrub clean floors; Aurelia wringing sheets dry with a strength that defied exhaustion; and Aurelia slicing onions, a sharpened knife blurring dangerously toward her thumb at a speed which would have resulted in the loss of a finger had anyone else attempted it.¹⁹

¹⁹ PÉREZ. *Geographies of home*, p. 3.

Iliana even thinks to herself that maybe all of this strength was an attempt to contain forces that otherwise would have escaped from Aurelia's control. Aurelia, then, would consciously do her best to at least apparently fit into the system. However, her ideas go beyond what shows. And Iliana is the one to notice it.

She is very much connected to Aurelia. In the novel this character is depicted as being Aurelia's heir of the mission of never forgetting, of keeping somewhat rooted to family and traditions. An important feature in the novel is the fact that tradition, very much brought up by the memory of Bienvenida, Aurelia's mother, and later on by Aurelia herself, comes as a counter voice both in relation to the alterity caused by foreignness and by gender. By means of vodou practice, for example, Aurelia is able to feel strong both as a woman and as an immigrant within the US boundaries and this strength is noticed by Iliana, as well as it suggested to be inherited by her. Iliana has inherited, for example, supernatural powers her mother and grandmother had: in the university campus, for example, she claims to hear her mother's voice telling her all about each member of her family, as well as prompting her to go "home". Even though the voice reassured her of her own existence and kept her rooted, it was not exactly desired by her. In fact, no matter how hard she tried, she could not escape from it: "she willed the voice to go away, but it persisted, hounding her as her mother's had at home".²⁰ The voice was as a mission or a curse for not forgetting – a mission Bienvenida, the grandmother, had also passed to Aurelia in the previous generation.

Aurelia's pondering regarding home as perhaps a space of the mind rather than a physical place resembles Iliana's, who after building and re-building the concept, concludes at a certain point that she can (and must) leave her parents' house in order to assert herself. Her parents' house does not embody home, mostly because of the family dynamics that are perpetuated in that place, which prevent Iliana from feeling fully at home, even though she cares for each of her family members. Iliana's experience in relation to Aurelia's attitude of (apparent) complicity towards Marina's and Papito's abuses, her father's narrow-minded view concerning gender roles and the feeling that these dynamics would not change, trigger Iliana's departure. She concludes that

everything she had experienced; everything she continued to feel for those whose lives would be inextricably bound with hers; everything she had inherited

²⁰ PÉREZ. *Geographies of home*, p. 3.

from her parents and 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.²¹

Iliana considers home, then, everything that is part of her: experiences, family, roots. Home is a space which encompasses experiences, the past, the present. It is a state of mind, a feeling of belonging that takes place within the space of her own self, instead of elsewhere.

Finally, Iliana's routes or paths towards possible homes are different from Aurelia's, but, as her mother, she also shifts perspectives: initially she idealizes home as her parents' house (in confrontation with the hostile environment she faces at college), and then she goes through a process of self-discovery in which home is re-signified. Ultimately she concludes that home is within herself instead of being a physical place. Throughout the narrative both Aurelia and Iliana struggle in this desire for homing, in Avtar Brah's terms. To Iliana home ultimately becomes a space she is able to carry with herself wherever she goes, which is very closely related to what Brah suggests as being home in the diasporic imagination: "the lived experience of a locality".²² Whatever place one is, the lived experience of it is what will enable one to find within it a space to be called home. This space is possible through the negotiation of positionalities within discourse – positionalities which lead to different paths in relation to nationality, gender, race and subjectivity.

RESUMO

Geographies of home retrata a história de uma família dominicana que emigra para os Estados Unidos. A representação de lar é apresentada e rerepresentada de formas diversas pelas personagens mulheres, sugerindo um conceito fluido na obra. Aurelia e Iliana são os objetos da presente análise.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Lar, gênero, raça

²¹ PÉREZ. *Geographies of home*, p. 321.

²² BRAH. *Cartographies of diaspora: contesting identities*, p. 192.

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