

Home and Home/land in the Autofiction of Anna Moï and Dany Laferrière

Attempting to define 'home'

The concept of home seems to be used naturally, carrying associations of shelter, rest, privacy and stability or permanence. It can denote a centralised, spatial location for family, and, as such, serves as a spatialised form of one's interactions with close ones, developed over time. The home space, as conceived by Gaston Bachelard, lies in personal memory as well as a common understanding of home.¹ The individual builds their home, and the space serves as a point of departure from which the separation between them and the rest of the world, as well as the connections between past self, present and dreams of the future, create links between personal identity and the home environment via the imaginary.

And yet, 'home' is elusive. Its boundaries seem strongly defined, designated perhaps by walls separating the interior from the exterior, by fences between neighbouring houses, or signs warning the public that they are entering private property; on the other hand, the spaces that fall under the scope of 'home' shift and change, rendering it malleable. In *Home Environments*, a geographical study on the concept of home, the phenomenological, psychological, anthropological (as examples among others) approaches taken by the authors demonstrate that 'home' can be conceptualised in various ways. For one of these authors, Kimberley Dovey, the concept of home emerges from the continuous existence, including the continuous evolution, of a plethora of dialectical relationships, categorised under more general oppositions such as inside/outside or individual/community. It is therefore composed of dynamic processes, defined by an individual's movement between spaces.

Meanwhile, drawing upon Deleuze and Guattari, Macgregor Wise argues that a sense of home is produced via the territorialisation of space: it develops from the attenuation of rhythms between people, space and the objects within these spaces.² As such, over time, even an office or a commuting journey can both become part of one's home. Similarly, though she places greater emphasis on the importance of childhood experience in shaping home, thereby aligning her thinking with that of Gaston Bachelard, Kirsten Jacobson anchors the home in bodily experience and the relationship between people - as bodies - and their surrounding space.³

It seems, therefore, that the home is centred in a person's relationship with their surroundings, developed over time and through physical, emotional and poetic - in the sense that it is tied to one's imaginary - interaction. Migration inflicts a rupture that has a continuing disruptive effect on this relationship with home. Though it may occur over a specific period of time, beginning with departure and ending with arrival, the effects of this moment continuously shape the migrant's understanding of their homeland.

Anna Moï and Dany Laferrière have both been heavily affected by their departure from, as well as return to, their homes. Moï left Vietnam for Paris in 1972, whilst Laferrière fled Haïti following the assassination of his fellow journalist in 1974, moving to Montréal. In their autofictional works, the two authors engage with their return to their respective homelands following an absence of approximately two decades. Through their writing, they chart their feelings of dissonance with their surroundings alongside the joy of familiarity.

¹ Gaston Bachelard, *La Poétique de l'espace* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1961). Published in English as *The Poetics of Space*.

² J. Macgregor Wise, 'Home: Territory and Identity', *Cultural Studies*, 14.2 (2000), 295–310.

³ Kirsten Jacobson, 'A Developed Nature: A Phenomenological Account of the Experience of Home', *Continental Philosophy Review*, 42 (2009), 355–373 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11007-009-9113-1>>.

In *L'Odeur du café*,⁴ Laferrière revisits his childhood in Petit-Goâve, located south-west of Port-au-Prince. He retraces his steps and depicts the people, places and interactions that formed his memories of the summer of 1963, focusing in particular on his grandmother's house in which he lived prior to joining his mother in Port-au-Prince. Anna Moï, on the other hand, seeks to capture her observations of Vietnam as a returnee in the 1990s, illustrating her search for a suitable future home for her family in *Le pays sans nom* and *L'Année du Cochon de Feu*.⁵ As memories resurface, feelings of rediscovery and loss accompany the re-encounters with places, people and cultural habits that appear in the narratives of Moï and Laferrière.

'Home' and 'land': an ecocritical and transnational approach

In contemplating the problematics of identity and cultural belonging as a result of displacement, Trinh T. Minh-ha states that migrants negotiate between "home and abroad, native culture and adopted culture, or more creatively speaking, between a here, a there, *and* an elsewhere."⁶ Due to not being grounded in either 'here' or 'there', writers in exile/ migrant writers create a new space that "is not merely a derivative of First and Second. It is a space of its own."⁷ In the writing of Moï and Laferrière, however, the authors' position of being "elsewhere" - as displaced persons - also lends itself to, via the search for, an interrogation of 'home' and the forms it may take. In particular, they also bring to the fore the manifold ways in which these homelands have been shaped and tied to neighbouring and distant nations, including France's colonial domination of, and dominion over, these spaces.

Therefore, when using an approach that takes into account transnational and transcontinental processes of power and influence, it is possible to explore the ways in which a homeland has been created through, for example, the exploitation of land and people in the Caribbean. As the question of being in the world becomes increasingly important, under the looming threat of extinction, the concept of the [Plantationocene](#) places emphasis on how land appropriation, capitalism and colonialism have shaped current-day human relationships with their social and natural environment.⁸

Under this lens of interrogation, Laferrière's home, is situated in a complex history of the production of goods for global consumption; and indeed, in *L'Odeur du café*, the rituals surrounding, and the role of, the coffee trade in Laferrière's personal and communal relationships are as a result inextricable from the larger scale practices of farming and production that influence the relationships within a family as well as within a community. This narrative of Laferrière's childhood may come out of his desire to revisit his time with his grandmother, but the depiction also provides an insight into the connection between self and environment that has been shaped by nationally and globally created practices.⁹

⁴ Published in English as *An Aroma of Coffee*

⁵ In English: *The Nameless Country* and *The Year of the Fire Pig* respectively. My translation.

⁶ Trinh T. Minh-ha, 'Other than myself-my other self', in *Travellers' Tales: Narratives of home and displacement*, ed. by George Robertson and others (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 9-26.

⁷ Trinh T. Minh-ha, 18.

⁸ Additionally, a conversation on the Plantationocene between Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing:

<https://edgeeffects.net/haraway-tsing-plantationocene/>

⁹ The matrifocality of Haitian family structures, for example, has been linked to slave owners' exploitation of familial relationships as a form of retaining power and preventing escape, and this is shown in the documentary *Madan Sara* directed by Etant Dupain.

Though the image of home that is presented by Anna Moï is manifestly different from that of Dany Laferrière, the ties between home, land and systems of land control are equally present in *Le pays sans nom* and *L'Année du Cochon de Feu*. As the author explores Vietnam, as a repatriate, her search for home also consists of an interrogation of industrialisation and the effects of tourism, which commodifies culture at the expense of the natural environment. Therefore, when these writers return to their homelands and seek to recapture or situate 'home', they also underline the ways in which their homes have been and are produced out of practices beyond the immediate family or community spaces of their childhoods. An ecocritical approach underlines the links between 'home' and relationships between humans and the environment in places affected by global forces of land exploitation.

Conclusion

Anna Moï's and Dany Laferrière's autofictional writings on home seem to focus on the authors' personal desires of either refinding or establishing a home, be it one anchored in memory, as in the case of Laferrière, or a future home for Anna Moï and her family. In using a comparative approach, the different spheres of home, such as specific geographical locations (Port-au-Prince or Petit-Goâve in Haiti; Ho Chi Minh city, former Saigon, in Vietnam), cultural, religious or family traditions can be brought to light. However, the transnational approach to 'home' in these works also allows me to examine the relationship between home and the world through the ways in which global practices have shaped the seemingly private space of one's personal home. The aforementioned ecocritical lens is an example of one transnational approach, but others, such as persisting images of Haiti and Vietnam in global cultural memory (medical, environmental, war-related disaster), as well as others, would further serve to illuminate the relationship between home and displacement.

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