

'At home': a discussion of diaspora and hybridity

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Abstract: The meaning of 'home' in the context of migration and displacement is the key theme of this paper. Examples come from people who left South Africa before, during and after the apartheid era and are now living in Australia, and they are all white. Although white South Africans are themselves a product of colonization, they are also the product of privilege, therefore making the diasporic condition a more complex one.

It is my intention to interrogate this complexity by looking at items of material culture that travelled with the migrants or were acquired afterwards. In addition, the design, decoration and arrangement of domestic spaces is analysed in terms of creating both a home and an identity that speaks a particular language to those who visit and those who inhabit the space. They have either carried their identities with them in domestic objects such as furniture and cultural items or created hybrid identities partially through specific acquisitions in Australia. The paper relies upon ethnographic research conducted with individuals and families in their homes. Visual and transcribed information will contribute to understandings of the meaning of migrant homes and the relationship of this material culture with national identity.

Introduction

The theme of this symposium, *Interior Spaces in Other Places* resonates with ongoing debates on belonging and diaspora. The meaning of home and the recreation of homes in new places is not a new topic, but by bringing a postcolonial and critical race reading to the diaspora of white South Africans, I will point to some less obvious spatial identities and national narratives.

Consequently the three subthemes 'time', 'signs' and 'security' help to structure the paper according to influences and expectations which are tied up in a complex semiotics of spatial and personal safety. In addition to postcolonial and critical race theory, the paper uses ethnographic interviews conducted with white South Africans in Adelaide, Australia.¹ The sample was taken from a sports club and their extended families in the hope of obtaining broad representation. However despite the club being state wide, there are no black or coloured South African participants. The racial representation is relevant even if it is not surprising. Therefore because the participants are white, this presents an interesting case study as not enough is written about white diasporas. The lack of writing on white diasporas is symptomatic of what Richard Dyer calls a white 'invisibility'.² There is discomfort attached to white South Africans who left. There are those who left in exile or disgust during Apartheid, those who left in dismay for the ruined 'white' dream after Apartheid and those who left with mixed feelings or personal intentions either during or after Apartheid.

Consequently the paper looks at the relationship between objects and people in the context of migration and identity. All the respondents have created spaces with objects which tell stories. Therefore together with Mieke Bal, the question 'can things be, or tell, stories?' is explored in relation to the types of 'fictions' embedded in these narratives.³ Such fictions are inextricably tied up with subjectivity, and as Gayatri Spivak says 'who then are we (not), how are we

(not)?'.⁴ In the process of unpicking these subjectivities through the voices of the objects and also via postcolonial commentaries, I abstract the notion of the migrant into 'the diasporic subject' to allow for a more inclusive reading than just the South African one.

Before I continue, it should be said that this paper is a shortened version of a much longer piece which does more justice to the research conducted, however by dividing the paper into the thematic sections mentioned above I hope to provide some cohesion and depth. Firstly the influence of *time* is considered.

Things in time

Things that have happened are not necessarily over; objects carry identities which both hold and efface time. In this way migration dislocates and relocates producing compound stories. The *thing* in this passage of time sits at the centre of the diasporic subject. And when two different migrant families who are unknown to each other, left South Africa many decades apart and lived in other continents before coming to Australia, choose an almost identical item as representing their 'favourite' thing, this presents an interesting conundrum. The object is a painting (Figure 1) of an elderly African man, in traditional attire smoking a long thin pipe. It is a typical example of a cultural stereotype, for which, one respondent, Judith, uses the following descriptive words: 'evocation of Africa – the old man is almost a muse for me [and then Sarah and Jo, speaking together]: We appreciate African art, it reminds us of the culture we left'. Both families use the words 'peace', 'old wisdom' and 'ancient' in their description of the painting as an object genuinely dear to them. Indigenous Africa is essentialised into a homogenous grandeur of ancient wisdom, which is encapsulated into the supposedly timeless sign of the elderly African without a name. This object-sign is then transported across the sea to another country of different indigeneties (Australia).



Figure 1: Seated African man smoking a traditional Xhosa pipe and dressed in semi traditional garb.
Oil on canvas.

These migrants are part of a diaspora that collect objects and memories as they move from one settler existence to another. The diasporic subject's 'empty' dwelling in the new country presents an absence or gap, which can be filled with objects that perform dialogical connections (imagined and real) between the past, present and future. The house that was empty before being filled with objects of memory equates with the colonial space of *terra*

nullius. The awaiting domestic space is akin to Homi Bhabha's 'caesura in the narrative of modernity'.⁵ Modernity is one of the consequences of colonialism and, for those who benefitted it offers the choice to move across the world when the need arises. Therefore both the caesura or pause in time and the empty space become part of the post colonizing moment in recreated homes. So the vacant rooms only become home when they are benevolently colonised and filled with objects that link time and place thereby giving the dweller a past that authenticates a future.

However belonging can be disrupted by an un-mended caesura. If the physical space is filled with objects that lack connective meaning then the space remains symbolically empty and the present is not embraced because it has no past. It can still be considered that people and especially migrants, who remove themselves from situations that they no longer feel 'at home' with, need to adhere to objects that can serve as icons in a semi-religious sense – vehicles through which silent and 'iterable' communication and action can take place. In so doing a space is created for the subjectivities to recognise themselves.⁶ It is not the commodity that is of concern in this paper nor is it the status of 'cultural capital' as espoused by Pierre Bourdieu, although it can certainly be argued that belonging to a new country carries cultural capital.

What I would like to focus upon is the way in which objects are used as agents of forgetting and remembering. 'Culture is the cult of memory' according to Viacheslav Ivanov (in Banerjee) who suggests that culture is indicative of an absence of God on earth.⁷ The 'thing', with its renegotiated meanings through time, becomes the fetish object, that which fills the space left by the absence of God or meaning. To explain this point I refer to Hal Foster's fascinating discussion of the substitution of God for objects in terms of the seventeenth century Dutch still life paintings, which are early representations of western domesticity.⁸ In his discussion, Foster refers to the northern European fascination with still-lives of silver bowls, ripe fruit, highly polished copper implements, glinting crystal, oriental china and gleaming fish on platters as the 'ultimate golden calf'.⁹ Therefore objects that fill the contemporary diasporic subject's domestic void can similarly take on the role of synecdoche and fetish. It is generally understood that the fetish is an object endowed with a spirit within and revered as such. However, as Foster points out, to Freud the fetish acts as a substitute for loss, but Foster contends that 'fetishism is not only disavowal: it is a compromise-formation that allows the subject to have it both ways ... the fetish is also a "memorial"'.¹⁰ Attachment to objects of memory that serve to uplift the spirit need not be pathological in the Freudian sense but can serve to negotiate between past and present in the hybrid state of performing identities.

Performances of selfhood, subjectivities and ultimately identities, are enacted in space and usually interact with forms/objects. Elizabeth Grosz writes 'The thing is the point of intersection of space and time, the locus of the temporal narrowing and spatial localization that constitutes specificity or singularity'. She goes on to say that things are 'localization[s] of materiality' and have 'the capacity ... to divide [themselves]'.¹¹ Therefore, the *thing* to Grosz is a catalyst for meaning in a transitional or new space; i.e. this object-thing can distribute, organise and separate the experience of such space 'for the living'.¹²

Judith said she objected to the term 'favourite' object in the interviews: 'I have a problem with the concept of favourite, as in life I like/favour many objects/travels/people/ experiences equally – but for differing reasons. I brought no furniture when I migrated to Australia only

objects as mentioned, equally loved'. She resisted selection and instead showed me walls filled with objects, books – autobiographical walls of life (figure 2). Here and elsewhere there are objects that resist isolated homage through their collectivity. But there are also those that rupture attempts at continuity and enact violence upon the mending of the caesura.



Figure 2: Shelves representing 'life-walls' of objects collected on travels and residencies in other countries.

With Jill, another respondent, there is the ink drawing of a burning neighbourhood (figure 3), a symbol of Apartheid carnage, which was mistakenly discovered in a portfolio in the back of a cupboard by her daughter. Although these two women are from different migrant families, the potentiality for collision between what is concealed and what is revealed from the past into the present is precarious.



Figure 3: Ink drawing of Apartheid South Africa, showing the destruction and desolation of black South African township homes and identities.

A present carefully *constructed* as home is always already fragile if it bears (or hides) shadows of lingering violence. 'I believe, a moment of a kind of "projective past" ... is a mode of "negativity" that makes the enunciatory present of modernity disjunctive'.¹³ Residues in the shape of speaking objects interrupt healing by the negation of their alternate stories but also by their mere presence. They set the diasporic subject in an ambivalent narrativity, a hybridity that according to Couze Venn reveals 'a fragility of the worlds that have been instituted in colonial and "postcolonial" times'.¹⁴

Signs and beginnings

Homes are use-worlds (a term I adapt from Venn's 'life-worlds'¹⁵), they are filled with coded representations of hybrid identities. And, because contemporary time is subject to a macro-world of sign systems, the empty house is filled with signs to make it a home. The important things to Kate, another respondent, are small things that hold personal narratives: '... my journals ... written record of my life ... two shells I found on a beach' (figures 4 & 5). 'We are surrounded by emptiness, but it is an emptiness filled with signs' writes Henri Lefebvre.¹⁶ Sign language, the communication device of the visual spectacle, may be rendered impersonal in city streets but it is given the warmth of personal tonality in the voices of objects in a home. Kant writes, 'To *think* an object is not the same thing as to *know* it' and to this I add: one cannot *know* an object if it is not in *use*.¹⁷ Kant's 'sensuous perception' can be adopted and added to an understanding of how objects are used. 'Use' in this case links the sign with the signified by way of communicating the narrative. Collections of objects, as discussed by Bal take on a 'radically different' meaning when they are read as signs. In this way their use transcends basic utility and incorporates a personal-political reading of the object-sign.¹⁸ Bal notes that, 'In one episode of this narrative, the extension of subjectivity through the investment in a series of objects fit to stand in for the absent attribute of the past [and] may overrule other affects'.¹⁹



Figure 4: Shells. Carried across the world by one respondent as memories of place



Figure 5: Journal. A transportable record of movement and experience by one respondent who has travelled more than the others. An object which holds the stories of lost and remembered objects and spaces.

The attributes of some objects are more heavily laden with signifiers than others and I now draw attention to the home bar, a site for entertainment and display. Figure 6 is the home bar of Sarah and Jo, and figure 7 is another couple, Fiona and Rob's home bar. I do not have the space in this article to write about drinking and sports culture nor, unfortunately about the vibrant multi-racial street bar culture that is permeating post Apartheid South Africa so the discussion is limited to the bar as an object of meaning in a migrant home.²⁰ The examples shown were offered as places of pride, corners that enshrined a past and held a cultural allegiance. The 'semiotic functioning' of the bar 'as a part of signifying practice ... includes the agency of the symbolic'.²¹ The bar in this instance is a device for enacting gender roles and national loyalties in the domestic domain. Seating is inscribed and performativities of gender and patriotism are 'encrypted'²² into its stage setting.

Gender [like nationalism] is in no way a stable identity ... it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylised repetition of acts*.²³



Figure 6: Home bar showing national and sporting memorabilia.



Figure 7: Home bar with less obvious national symbols.

The bar is a space charged with accountability but clothed in convivial hospitality; an arena where expectations are written into the dark wood, sliding glass panels, and promotional logos. 'Gender [and national] identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo'²⁴. Therefore in the case of the home bar, a small circumscribed country can be reconstituted almost anywhere in the world. In the intimacy of a domestic environment the explicit/authoritative form of the bar imposes spatial and social borders. In *Home Possessions*, Daniel Miller writes that 'power lies everywhere' and the 'ghosts' of past homes or loyalties travel with home possessions.²⁵ The bar in this sense can operate as an enshrined memorial to a lost nationalism, a nationalism that is haunted by the Apartheid legacy.

Sanctuary/security

The Apartheid legacy is tangled with security and fear, and some of the open-ended interview questions referred to favourite rooms or spaces and immigrant understandings of the term 'home'. The majority of respondents regard the home as a place of personal security and their choice of favourite space is the dining area; a place of family gatherings, love, peace, sharing and sanctuary. In this way the objects-possessed fade in their formal sense and assume a more active role in the relationships that operate spatially. Georges Perec suggests that we 'stop thinking in ready-made terms' and 'forget what the sociologists have said' in relation to space.²⁶ This calls for a more subtle reading of responses, one that recognises the rawness of wanting to make a home but yet have authenticity and roots. Diaspora can sever ties and as Venn carefully notes, there can be no 'routes without roots'.²⁷ And, Gaston Bachelard who is another theorist with a gentle touch, notes

We must first look for centers of simplicity in houses ... simplicity at times is too rationally vaunted ... We must therefore experience the primitiveness of refuge and, beyond situations that have been experienced, discover situations that have been dreamed.²⁸

Bachelard encourages the poet inside 'us' to find solace in remembered refuges but, with actual lived spaces. So, in order to make sense of this poetic, I return the analysis to subject formation (Venn) and narrative identity (Grosz). Venn enlarges upon space as 'chora', and draws upon Julia Kristeva and Paul Ricoeur in his explanation of 'chora' as emblematic of both the rupture and the join of part and whole.²⁹ I interpret this as the disjuncture that is experienced by the diasporic subject in her/his ambivalent state of transformation. For example, Judith, the respondent with the life-wall says, 'I don't know where I belong ... my

answers move in circles'. Therefore if a centred space can be found for or by the diasporic subject, it offers an alternate fertile ground for remaking the self. To this end, Grosz's reading of Plato offers 'chora' as a generative space, which has distinctive nurturing qualities that facilitate becoming. An incorporation of this meaning of 'chora' could be instrumental in releasing and healing what has been repressed. 'Plato's *Timaeus* ... invokes a mythological bridge between the intelligible and the sensible, mind and body, which he calls *chora*'.³⁰ The space or link which is 'chora' exists in time and motion, it is not static. In this way the object-space (old books, paintings, dining areas, bookshelves) act as conduits for 'chora'. Grosz writes

It [chora] functions primarily as the receptacle, the storage point, the locus of nurturance in the transition necessary for the emergence of matter, a kind of womb of material existence, the nurse of becoming, an incubator to ensure the transmission or rather the copying of Forms to produce matter that resembles them.³¹

Grosz also says that a 'chora' is a 'mediator'.³² The cherished object-space discussed in this article could take on this role of *chora*, the 'matter' of which include the energies of memory (past) and promise (future). The *chora*-object-space is akin to my previous discussion of the fetish; vehicles through which communication and identification take place. Grosz asserts that 'chora' does not have ontological status but to this I add that as an object or specific domestic space it generates ontological status amongst its recipients and produces a sense of sanctuary.

Closing

This paper has deliberated upon what it is to be 'at home' as a diasporic and hybrid subject. Finding a place and making a space that can be called home involves the movement of things in time, and when Bhabha suggests 'scattering' can become 'a time of gathering', he notes how 'metaphor ... transfers the meaning of home and belonging across ... distances'.³³ Possessions, things, objects that have an unchanging outward appearance are reassuring when places and people may lack consistency in the process of diaspora. Having said this, it might seem strange that I have used Bhabha and Venn's thoughts on hybridity, subjectivity and diaspora in examples of white South African migrants to Australia. The hybrid subject is usually understood as subaltern and diaspora in postcolonial studies is most frequently concerned with the spread of disadvantaged groups. The research idea upon which the paper is based was originally premised upon the expectation that a sample of mixed race and white respondents would participate in the ethnographic study but this did not happen. Therefore although this paper focussed upon the interaction and narratives of objects in new places, the fact that the new place is in Australia presents an avenue for socio-political comparison in a future paper.

The discussions and examples used in the subdivisions: 'things in time', 'signs' and 'sanctuary/security' revealed a need to retain idealistic memories of Africa and South Africa and also to reinforce some national identities such as those evident in the home bar. There did not appear to be any great sense of loss amongst the respondents but instead an attitude that ranged from determined to fluid in the way they situated themselves into their adopted country. There appeared to be a greater need for building a sense of safety and security in the families and couples with the home bar than those who did not have one. The others were more attached to particular objects or groups of objects that told various stories, and rather

than security this latter group was looking for a sanctuary, a place of intimate respite. The latter group were also less concerned with identity and national insignia from South Africa than they were with personal subjectivity. Therefore whilst there was no obvious evidence of trauma or loss, the respondents' selection of objects and spaces does reveal some level of allegiance which might stand guard against residual guilt(s) of living a post Apartheid existence outside of the South Africa. Whether this is a state of denial, a state of inverted exception, a philosophical acceptance of change or something else in the white South Africa diasporic journey, is unclear. What is clear is the power that time and distance has upon reframing spatial and personal subjectivities.

Copyright permission has been obtained from all respondents. This research has been approved by the University of South Australia's Human Research Ethics Committee.

Endnotes

- ¹ Names used in the text are pseudonyms from the seven migrant families who took part in the research. As a white South African migrant myself, I included my home and objects as part of the research material.
- ² Richard Dyer. 'The matter of whiteness,' in Les Back and J. Solomos, eds. *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader*. London: Routledge, 2000: 539-548.
- ³ Mieke Bal, *A Mieke Bal Reader*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006: 271.
- ⁴ Gayatri Spivak. *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. London: Routledge, 1988: 137.
- ⁵ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994: 246.
- ⁶ Couze Venn, 'Narrative identity, Subject Formation and the Transfiguration of Subjects,' in W. Patterson, ed. *Strategic Narrative: New Perspectives on the Power of Personal and Cultural Studies*. New York: Lexington, 2002: 29-50.
- ⁷ Maria Nemcova Banerjee. 'Viacheslav Ivanov: Culture and Memory,' *Modern Age* (48:2) (2006): 140-151.
- ⁸ Hal Foster. 'The Art of Fetishism,' *The Princeton Architectural Journal* 4 (1992): 6-19.
- ⁹ Foster, 'Art of Fetishism,' 6.
- ¹⁰ Foster, 'Art of Fetishism,' 7.
- ¹¹ Elizabeth Grosz. *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005: 132.
- ¹² Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels*, 132.
- ¹³ Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 238.
- ¹⁴ Venn, 'Narrative Identity,' 40.
- ¹⁵ Venn, 'Narrative Identity,' 40.
- ¹⁶ Henri Lefebvre. *Everyday Life in the Modern World*. trans. S. Rabinovitch. Edison: Transaction, 1984: 135.
- ¹⁷ Emmanuel Kant, *The philosophy of Kant: As contained in extracts from his own writings*. Trans. J. Watson. Glasgow: Jackson, 1927: 73.
- ¹⁸ Mieke Bal, *A Mieke Bal Reader*, 283. Although I do not use the term 'collection' as Bal does i.e. collection of a set of similar objects, but rather as the collection of objects consciously chosen by the respondents as representing their identities, but Bal's analysis still applies.
- ¹⁹ Mieke Bal, *A Mieke Bal Reader*, 284.
- ²⁰ However see, Adebe Zegeye and Pal Ahluwalia, 'Transforming Culture: Street Life in an Apartheid City.' *Social Identities* (8:3) (2002): 393-430.
- ²¹ Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*. trans. M. Waller. New York: Columbia University, 1984: 8.
- ²² Venn, 'Narrative Identity,' 36.
- ²³ Judith Butler. 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.' *Theatre Journal* (40:4) (1988): 519-531.
- ²⁴ Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,' 520.
- ²⁵ Daniel Miller. *Home Possessions: Material Culture Behind Closed Doors*. Oxford: Berg, 2001: 119.
- ²⁶ Georges Perec. *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*. London: Penguin, 1997: 61, 62.
- ²⁷ Venn, 'Narrative Identity,' 39.
- ²⁸ Gaston Bachelard. *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at how we Experience Intimate Spaces*. trans. M. Jolas. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994: 30.
- ²⁹ Venn, 'Narrative Identity,' 40.
- ³⁰ Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion: The Politics of Bodies*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1995: 112.

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- ³¹ Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion*, 114.
³² Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion*, 114.
³³ Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 291.