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. Case studies used to illustrate this paper 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 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 conference, ‘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 hope to unravel 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. The sample was taken from a sports club in the hope of obtaining broad representation.

The racial representation is relevant even if it is not surprising, there were no black or coloured South African migrants in the sample. Therefore whilst the participants are white, this presents an interesting case study because not enough is written about white diasporas. The lack of writing on white diasporas is symptomatic of what Richard Dyer calls a white ‘invisibility’. (1) 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. All the respondents have created spaces with objects which tell stories.

This is, as always a problem of subject positioning as Gayatri Spivak says ‘… who then are we (not), how are we (not)?’. (2) All respondents from the interviews were asked the same questions from an open-ended questionnaire about objects and the meaning of ‘home’. Consequently this paper is as much about human beings as it is about what they possess.

Things in time

Things that have happened are not necessarily over, and domestic objects carry identities with them which hold time moments but when placed in another place they can efface the passage of time. Consequently forgetting and remembering become conflated. Moving dislocates but also relocates, even in fictive narratives. The thing in this passage of time and
place sits at the centre of the hybrid condition. To illustrate this point, there is the example of a painting by a South African artist (see figure 1). It is an oil painting (1951) of an elderly African man, in quasi tribal attire seated and smoking a long ‘traditional’ wood and brass pipe. This was the piece selected in answer to one of the questions posed to the participants ‘What is the favourite object in the house that you brought with you?’ (e.g. ornament; bowl; book; rug; art piece; implement etc.). An alarmingly similar portrait was selected in answer to this question by a couple from another household. Although they both live in the same town in Australia, these respondents are unknown to each other, left South Africa many decades apart and have lived in other continents. Reasons for the former respondent’s choice is: ‘its evocation of Africa for me – the old man is almost a muse for me’ and the latter’s: ‘appreciate African art, reminds me of the culture we left’. This particular narrative of the ‘African’ portraits acknowledges a heritage of ‘tribal’ Africa. The respondents used words such as ‘peace’ and ‘old wisdom’ and ‘ancient’ symbol of Africa. Why did these white respondents choose a stereotypical, essentialised cultural representation of Africa to bring with them?

One explanation might be that the diasporic subject’s ‘empty’ dwelling presents an absence or gap, which can be filled with objects that perform dialogical connections (imagined and real) between the past, present and future. ‘Old Africa’ is essentialized: its grandeur, ancient wisdom, slow pace and calm watchfulness are homogenised in the sign of the old man without a name. As problematic as this essentialization is the object is genuinely held dear. 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 also akin to Bhabha’s ‘caesura in the narrative of modernity’. Therefore both the caesura or pause in time and the empty space become part of the post colonizing moment in recreated homes. Bhabha refers to de Certeau’s description of the ‘non-place’ which he expands upon as ‘the lag which all histories must encounter in order to make a beginning’. (3) The space of the vacant rooms only become home when they are benevolently colonised - 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 empty and the present is not embraced because it has no past. It can still be considered that people and especially diasporic people, 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. (4) It is not the commodity that is of concern in this paper but the objects which could give the owner/dweller status in terms of ‘cultural capital’ as espoused by Pierre Bourdieu. 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. (5) The ‘thing’, with its renegotiated meanings through time, becomes the fetish object, that which fills the space left by the absence of god/meaning. Hal Foster explains this substitution in terms of the seventeenth century Dutch still life paintings, which are early representations of western domesticity. (6) In his discussion, Foster refers to the 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’. (7) The 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” …’. (8) 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.

‘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. Things are localization of materiality, the capacity of material organization to yield to parts, Microsystems, units or entities. They express the capacity of material organization to divide itself, to be divided from without, so that they may become of use for the living’. (9)
One of the respondents in this research said that she objected to the term ‘favourite’ object, a term used to ask participants to select an object from the past and present: ‘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 whole walls filled with objects, books – walls of life, both lived and living. (See figure 2). Here and elsewhere there are objects that either resist isolated homage through their collectivity or which stay as reminders of a place of uneasy peace beside the more benign evidence of things past. But there are also those that are there to stab into comfort zones, for example there is the instance of the ink drawing discovered by a daughter who asked, ‘why don’t you put this up?’ (Figure 3).

To return to Bhabha’s ideas on the caesura: a possessively pieced together present that has been constructed as the house of belonging 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’. (10) Bhabha argues that there is a time lag in the spaces of reconstruction and in the negotiations between what came before and what follows. Residue interrupts healing by its own negation and by its presence. It sets the diasporic subject in an ambivalent narrativity, revealing ‘a fragility of the worlds that have been instituted in colonial and “postcolonial” times’. (11)

**Signs and new beginnings**

The ‘life world’ of the diasporic subject is populated with accoutrements that either sew the fissure of the past or leave it open in degrees. (12) What is of interest is a comparison of the older cherished items with recently acquired objects that are also selected as special to the owners. Examples of answers regarding new items include: ‘a wicker basket filled with grass, outdoor furniture set, new leather lounge suite, bookcases, sound system, racing bike, a camera, a bar and bar stools, painting of Paris, metal bird sculptures, a painting by a local artist’. Some additional ‘old’ items include: ‘an eighteenth century dictionary, a wall clock, a wooden bar, a pen and ink drawing of a university town, a toaster given as a wedding present, a Welsh dresser …’. (Figure 4). Objects in the domestic sphere usually operate on a haptic level in the homes of the owner. They are the subject of touch; tactile vessels that hold and emit meanings and invested narratives associated with the object’s materiality. The material composition of the majority of objects and furnishings selected are either made of wood, metal, glass, leather, cloth/paper or grass. Selective life stories are retold via an intimate installation of these ‘use-worlds’.

I see homes as use-worlds, (a dimension of Venn’s ‘life-worlds’) which are coded representations of hybrid identities. The new beginning in another place is, an empty shell until filled. And because this present time is subject to a macro-world of sign systems, the empty house is filled with signs to make it a home ‘… my journals … written record of my life … two shells I found on a beach’ are words taken from responses. (Figures 5 & 6). ‘We are surrounded by emptiness, but it is an emptiness filled with signs’. (13) 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**. (14) Kant’s ‘sensuous perception’ can be adopted and added to an understanding of how objects (even art objects) are used. ‘Use’ in this case links the sign with the signified. ‘Use’ includes ostensibly ‘non-functional’ items because all objects that are selected to have a presence in a home have a purpose. Therefore the charcoal drawing of a burning country brought out of the closet has a use because it is able to communicate with an embedded sensory perception. Merleau-Ponty explains that the body is perceived and perceives itself in relation to objects that surround it. (15) These objects can either oppress, comfort or offer space to breathe anew.

I now draw particular attention to an answer from two different respondents who chose an indoor ‘bar’ as alternatively a favourite ‘old’ object and a favourite ‘new’ object. (Figures 7 & 8). The bar in white South Africa was a (large) piece of furniture used for entertainment and
display. This is where flags were adorned and sports trophies/memorabilia arranged – a sign of patriarchal nationalism. For those who acquired the bar in their new home away from South Africa, the act is one of continuity, the ‘semiotic functioning’ of the bar ‘as a part of signifying practice … includes the agency of the symbolic’. (16) The symbol (and form) of the bar as a device for gender role play and also as an agent of national loyalties is removed from the public to the domestic domain where similar enactments operate in privacy. Seating is inscribed and performativities of gender and patriotism are difficult to avoid in an ‘encrypted’ (17) stage set such as this. ‘gender is in no way a stable identity … it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylised repetition of acts’. (18) It is a space charged with accountability but cloaked in convivial hospitality; an arena where expectations are written into the (usually) dark heavy wood, sliding glass panels, and promotional logos. ‘Gender [and national] identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo’ therefore in the case of the bar, a small gendered country can be reconstituted almost anywhere in the world. (19) In the intimacy of a domestic environment the explicit/authoritative form of the bar imposes spatial and social borders. The bar in this sense operates as an enshrined memorial to a lost nationalism, a nationalism central to the shameful Apartheid regime. The bar in these homes operates as a site of exemption, self instituted by the owner.

Sanctuary/security

At this point I move from objects to spaces. Some of the questions in this category included: ‘What is your favourite room/space in your current dwelling? Why? As an immigrant, what is your understanding of the term ‘home’? [and] Is there a particular culture that you would like to keep alive in your home, could you name it and give reasons?’

In response to these questions, it became obvious that the majority regard the home as a place of personal security. Rybcznski, writing from a western perspective, notes that the domesticity of the home was first manifested in seventeenth century Holland. (20) Those Dutch paintings of interior domestic scenes are often heralded as icons of what a home should stand for: peace, sanctuary, security, love and family; an aspect that is also prominent in the responses. In this way the culture and understanding of home-space is deeply imbricated with loved ones. Favourite spaces (such as dining areas) are chosen because of their reminders of past family gatherings and the promise of their continuation. These spaces overlap with some of the furnishings that were selected because of their potential to bring and hold people together: ‘memories of family meals around a table’ and the wooden bar ‘lots of parties around it, lots of good memories’. In this way the objects-possessed fade in their formal sense and assume a more active role in the relationships that operate in and around them.

The ‘white middle class’ ideal is well documented as being attached to material belongings and that this affects relationships which, can as a result, also become reduced to ownership. My focus is not upon the commodification of culture but rather the relationship between possessing and belonging. Friends and family rank high on the list of what makes a home amongst the respondents and the concerns with sanctuary and security are often premised upon socialised understandings of these concepts, which are built upon memories of childhood homes.

‘We must first look for centers of simplicity in houses with many rooms. For as Baudelaire said, in a palace, ‘there is no place for intimacy’. But simplicity, which at times is too rationally vaunted, is not a source of high-powered oneirism. We must therefore experience the primitiveness of refuge and, beyond situations that have been experienced, discover situations that have been dreamed’. (21)

Bachelard positions the home as a house of dreams, with places and spaces that can take one’s mind back and forth into attics, cellars, nests, garrets and huts – all places of intense privacy. But even such a ‘house’ with its metaphors can be too spacious. Bachelard says that the house needs a centre to obtain real security. The ‘favourite space’ – the term used in my questionnaire - is this centre, that place where there is a communion of people and memory. This is often a place of repast, where meals and conversation are shared. In this vein,
Bachelard’s discussion of René Cazelles’ poem De terre et d’envolée is useful because the image of the ‘white tablecloth’ becomes a pivot: ‘This bit of whiteness, this tablecloth suffices to anchor the house to its center’. (22) A visual image springs to mind: a white cloth being opened out from its folds and spread upon a surface that marks the place of gathering, the objects and spaces of the home are thus dynamically involved in the process of centring.

Bachelard encourages the poet inside ‘us’ to find solace in remembered refuges with actual lived spaces. In order to stretch this poetic further into utility, I return to the ideas of Venn and Grosz on ‘narrative identity’ and ‘subject formation’ so as to link Plato’s notion of ‘chora’ to the dwelling and its objects. Venn elucidates upon the notion of space as ‘chora’, and draws upon Kristeva and Paul Ricoeur in his explanation of ‘chora’ as emblematic of both the rupture and the join of part and whole. (23) I interpret this as the disjuncture that is experienced by the diasporic subject in her/his ambivalent state of transformation: ‘I don’t know where I belong … my answers move in circles’ (respondent). This space offers an alternate fertile ground for remaking the self. Grosz’s reading of Plato offers ‘chora’ as a generative space, which has distinctive mother-nurture qualities that facilitate becoming. A return to the meaning of ‘chora’ could be instrumental in untying what has been repressed. ‘Plato’s Timaeus, … invites a mythological bridge between the intelligible and the sensible, mind and body, which he calls chora’. (24) The space or link which is ‘chora’ exists in time and motion, it is not static. In this way the object-space (old book, painting, dining area, bookshelf) act as conduits for ‘chora’.

‘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’. (25)

Grosz also says that a ‘chora’ is a ‘mediator’. (26) The cherished object-space discussed in this article can be said to 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 and the religious icon; vehicles through which communication and identification take place. Grosz (27) 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 security and belonging.

Closing

Finding a place and making a space that can be called home involves the movement of things in time, when Bhabha suggested ‘scattering’ can become ‘a time of gathering’, he notes how ‘metaphor … transfers the meaning of home and belonging across … distances. (28) Possessions, things, objects that have an unchanging outward appearance are reassuring when places and people may lack consistency in the process of diaspora.

This paper has deliberated upon what it is to be ‘at home’ in another place, as a diasporic and hybrid subject. This hybridity is complicated by the mixture of white South Africans who are at odds with sorrow and memory. The objects, spaces and their people are bound by the stubborn fibre of essentialist longing for an idealised ‘Africa’, an allegiance which seems to stand guard against residual guilt(s) of living a post existence. Whether this is a state of denial, a state of inverted exception or something else in the white South Africa diasporic journey, is unclear.
Illustrations

Figure 1: African man

Figure 2: Interior

Figure 3: Ink drawing of Apartheid South Africa
Figure 4: Nineteenth century dictionary

Figure 5: Shells

Figure 6: Journal

Figure 7: Bar

Figure 8: Bar
Reference List

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27 Ibid., 116.
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