

A PLACE OF ONE'S OWN*

by

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A Greek city near the Turkish borders, 1980s

Place is one of the first variables in life that actually defines us. Small places, large places, city and country places, even ethnic, mental, cultural places of all kinds... A multiplicity of crossings often exists either leading to unity and harmony, or mere fragmentation and misgivings...

She grew up in a border city by the sea. The water felt like the ultimate frontier that, at the same time, gave way to all sorts of contemplations; an ethnically challenging milieu that initiated dreams, prejudices, long-established categorizations within an aura of transcultural quality filled with smells, tastes, words, sounds, pictures and memories.

And her, always standing in the middle of things absorbing past and present crossings....

Those horizon-broadening and energizing Chicana/o readings and writings took her back to that borderland place of her childhood and adolescent existence that constantly felt the need to negotiate with the given, the obvious, the parochial! The contestation of place soon became a contestation of identity through literary wanderings.... And now—decades later—she is still trying to define her selfhood along with Anaya's search for a mythic place of origin (to which her dubious ethnic self often needs to return) and Mario T. García's journey into generations (since she always felt of belonging to generations prior of her own).

She, a traveller of the mind, rearranging the significance of her reality... She found pieces of her in the poetry of Tino Villanueva; postmodern questioning, cinefile retrospection, a sense of displacement in a different—of course—context. But, most of all, she found part of herself in the words of Anzaldúa, Lugones, Moraga... All those female voices renegotiated place and identity... because place is identity! Through questioning a sense of belonging, or not belonging, a more or less shared collective memory in relation to hybrid places determines and defines one's knowledge bundle and personal conception of the world(s). It seems that for her own—totally idiosyncratic—reasons she always felt as the *space occupying the middle of the sofa...* **

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This short text has been the spontaneous outcome of a variety of ethnic and Chicana/o readings that offered an engaging look into the stages of ethnicity and identity formation in cases where a complex logarithm of time, spatial, historical and political circumstances lead to certain social and state realities. Although the context is quite different, borderland places in general by constituting crossings where countries, people, local and ethnic histories meet and mingle, provide a unique hybrid atmosphere which offers a complex understanding of the world. When this special ambience is absorbed, it produces a mental interaction of past and present moments.

The names mentioned above have not been chosen randomly. Rudolfo A. Anaya's identification with Aztlán as a point of reference and ethnic unity symbolizes the ethnic self-identification which ultimately leads to the formation of a new consciousness regarding borderland communities with strong ties to a unified ethnic history and experience. This communal belonging to a glorified ethnic past is further enhanced by a more concrete self-placement within a sequence of generations.

Mario T. García's distinction into biological, historical or political generations is the second step towards the combination of ethnic/national and personal self-definition especially in a heated Greek borderland space between the East and the West, where three countries/ethnicities live and interact next to each other as time goes by. It is García's emphasis on how groups of individuals motivated by historical forces constantly shape history that reflects a more future-oriented dynamic; which brings us to a third stage of self-definition, the most personal one.

Gloria E. Anzaldúa, María Lugones and Cherríe Moraga, all three women intellectuals contributed to a theory of multiplicity regarding both collective and personal identity formation. Either it is Anzaldúa with her abhorrence of "cultural tyranny" and the appropriation of a "new mestiza consciousness and culture" that does not eliminate in any way people's ethnic origins and cultural roots, or Lugones's multiple "worlds of senses" with no obstruction whatsoever of the ideal perspective from "inside the midst of people" promoting the "I→we" subject of both collective and personal narratives, the issue of identity formation is put on a new basis, but always in interdependence with place. Last, Moraga stresses the anxiety of ethnic survival through the ominous disappearance of her own "tribe." Still, she succeeds in meeting past and present time within her writings: "The

journey of this writing is as much a journey into the past as it is into the future, a resurrection of the ancient in order to construct the modern” (3).

*In the same contemplative mood, as I never neglect to highlight, it all ends in the love and beauty of literature. So, let’s give the floor to Tino Villanueva’s lines from **Scene from the Movie GIANT** (1993) echoing the breaking down of youth romanticism by forces of racial hatred and voices of social discrimination in the 1960s American Southwest:*

A second-skin had come over me

In a shimmer of color and light. I could

Not break free from the event that began

To inhabit me—gone was the way to dream

Outside myself. From inside, a small

Fire began to burn like deep doubt of

A world fallen...I held on. I held on.

(from “On the Subject of Staying Whole”)

*The title alludes to Virginia Woolf’s modernist essay *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) highlighting a new conception of private space for female writers in perfect accordance to her era’s complex and demanding view of selfhood.

**The phrase in italics appears more than once throughout Moraga’s prose and poetry writing in *The Last Generation* (1993) in order to emphasize on her distancing from the cultural inheritance of her people, and the view of life as communicated by her close family reality. It underlines the in-between state of belonging and non-belonging at the same time to a specific ethnic, cultural and social system of values. It constitutes a to-the-point metaphor that appropriates the very idea of space that the borderland experience as a whole intensifies.

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