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REMAAPPING THE MARGINAL IN CONTEMPORARY
AMERICAN IMMIGRANT WRITING
SUMMARY

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalization and intense intercultural exchanges, the migratory phenomenon is gaining more and more importance in our lives and in relation to the Other. In this thesis, we address the concept of alterity from a transnational perspective. As it produces a shift towards the mainstream, contemporary immigrant writing in the US goes beyond the politics of polarity and questions the boundaries of American individuality but also those of American national literature.

This research aims at providing an enhanced understanding of cultural marginality and the immigrant experience in today's America as we focus on the work of four new immigrant writers from different locations, cultures, and socio-political contexts: Aleksandar Hemon (Bosnia), Junot Díaz (Dominican Republic), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Nigeria), and Ocean Vuong (Vietnam). These four writers have more in common than their immigrant status. They are hyphenated American authors who gained international recognition, and received or were shortlisted for important accolades such as the National Book Award, National Book Critics Circle Award, Pulitzer Prize, and T.S. Eliot Prize, among others. Also, they all received the MacArthur Fellowship (Hemon in 2004, Adichie in 2008, Díaz in 2012, and Vuong in 2019) and currently hold teaching positions in American academic institutions.

Their novels have important autobiographical dimensions, while their nonfictional works, autobiographies, or memoirs contain fictional elements, blurring the line between life and narrative. Hemon, Díaz, Adichie, and Vuong engage in what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have broadly called "life writing," and more specifically, in "life narrative," which is a key element in their project of identity and self-transformation (both in fiction and in real life). They tell the story of the "other" in a multicultural era still marked by increased displacement, violence, oppression, racism, and cultural difference.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This research has international and interdisciplinary dimensions. On the one hand, it sheds light on the sociological, cultural, and ideological causes and effects of the mass migration to the USA from the beginning of the twentieth century onwards as depicted in the immigrant authors' narratives. On the other hand, we investigate how the last two decades show

a shift in marginal discourses towards a new existence, a new identity position in contemporary American writing.

Our goal is to respond to Bharati Mukherjee's invitation to come up with an appropriate theoretical framework that would provide "a more complete, more insightful entry into the 'literature of the immigrant experience'" and enable "a fuller understanding of this emerging sub-genre 'Literature of New Arrival,'" which is different in "its aims, scope, and linguistic dexterity from postcolonial literature, literature of globalization, or diasporic literature" (Mukherjee, 2011:683). Thus, the transnational study of literature provides the appropriate framework to explore the immigrant experience at this particular historical moment.

Based on such observations, our analysis aims to envision a coherent representation of contemporary American cultural marginality in immigrant writing, broad enough to include the diversity of migratory experiences as pictured in our primary bibliography.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

By combining textual analysis (literary theory) with sociocultural interpretation (social criticism), conceptual frameworks from postcolonial theory and transnational studies, we will analyze the works of the immigrant authors mentioned above in relation to power structures, space, identity, the politics of the marginal, as well as to social representations and cultural constructs such as gender, race, and ethnicity. As Pascale Casanova put it in her fundamental work on world literature, looking into the international literary space is reintroducing political history into literary theory.

However, from a methodological point of view, we distinguish world literature analysis from the transnational perspective that we will put into use. World literary critics and historians seek to describe and understand the international literary space in terms of history and geography (Casanova, 1999) beyond nations' political and linguistic boundaries. The transnational approach to literature implies a shift of focus toward the dialectical relationship between identity and culture, towards a better understanding of what is perceived as marginal or different across borders.

Ultimately, this research claims to identify patterns in contemporary American immigrant writing that would shape a new understanding of the marginal space's politics and poetics. To do so, we shall move between reality and imaginary, fiction and nonfiction, and facts and their sociocultural representations. Therefore, our framework shall be inter- and

transdisciplinary in applying the methodologies of literary theory (close reading), literary history (distant reading), and sociocultural criticism. Our research is thus positioned at the intersection of postcolonial theory, geocriticism, and digital media as space, identity, aesthetics, and mixed-media knowledge production are interconnected sections in the texts we analyze. At different times in our argumentation, we also drew on diaspora studies, queer theory, and feminist perspectives to better situate each author's place in this new typology in contemporary American literature. The goal is to illustrate that just as cultural borders between nations become increasingly porous, so do the boundaries between genres in contemporary life writing.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND PERSONAL CONTRIBUTION

In this section, we provide a short inventory of the main notions addressed in this paper and the way we have worked with concepts from a broad range of disciplines. Key concepts such as marginality, hybridity, liminality, the doubleness of the migratory consciousness, in-between-ness, translanguaging, transnationalism, the quest for belonging, uprootedness, (un)homeliness, fluid identity, displacement, and relocation, are put into use in our thesis to observe if and how one's minority status gained a complex, legitimate identity position in today's multicultural America.

1. Revisiting space theory & postcolonial critique concepts

Here are some of the concepts discussed in relation to the spatial turn in literary studies:

- Space as social formation and mental construction (Lefebvre, 1974)
- In-between spaces, Third space, Cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1990, 1994; Rutherford, 1998).
- Imaginative geographies (Said)
- Travel theories, travel and translation, returns (Clifford, 1989, 1997, 2013)
- The question of travel, postmodern discourses of displacement (Kaplan, 1996)
- Third space, trialectics of spatiality, historicity, sociality (Soja, 1996)
- Deterritorialization of American literature (Giles, 2007)
- The minority viewpoint (McLeod, 2010)

The spatial representations in the literary works we explore in this thesis, especially the juxtaposition of two different worlds (the homeland and the arrival's new home), reveal the immigrant's complex cognitive and affective mappings of the spaces he/ she experiences as a subject in movement. The homeland and the country of arrival both constitute the immigrant's identity. Thus, we argue that they are more than geographical places. They are spaces cohered through feelings and lost/ recovered memories.

Geography and literary theory also meet in this paper using actual maps in exploring the narrative routes inscribed in the novels we refer to. Inspired by a collaborative student project coordinated by David Haeselin (2018), we followed the main characters' journeys and built digital maps to visually represent their mobility between their places of origin and arrival (see Appendix A, Maps 1 & 2). This mapping process is meant to accompany our analysis of the narrators' cognitive and emotional mapping of the locations they traverse in their life narratives as juxtaposed with the authors' experience. The maps visually represent the major characters' migration and remigration movements across borders at different times as described in the authors' life narratives. In creating them, we used an open-source web tool designed for geospatial practitioners called GeoJson.io. The visual representations in our Appendices are meant to enrich our reading experience and the analysis of these migration narratives. At the same time, we added a different perspective on looking at the characters' stories of movement in space and time, in and outside the borders of the novel.

Storytelling, as much as cartography, shows David Howard in "Cartography and Visualization," is a fundamental way of representing spatial knowledge and location (Howard, 2010:142). Similarly, we could say that both novels and maps have hidden discourses, intentional and even unintentional agendas in representing the marginal, the unseen, or the unheard. In the context of immigrant writing, language, and storytelling are forceful tools used to remap the marginal. Through their narratives, public presences in the media, and activist practice, immigrant writers are able to map their transnational border-crossing sensibilities above nationalist labels and categories. They rewrite and reimagine histories to provide a counter-mapping of political, social, and cultural hegemonic narratives. Formally and metafictionally, these writers suggest that there is no final version to any story or map for that matter, revolutionizing the literary space they inhabit.

How these writers engage with space is essential in understanding how borders are fluid, destabilizing the concept of national culture and literature. As they participate in multiple

cultures and belong to more than one national space, immigrant and post-diasporic¹ authors conceive complex narratives contributing to a “deterritorialization of American Literature” (Paul Giles, 2007:).

The immigrant writers discussed in this thesis are deeply concerned with the distinction between ethnicity (given), citizenship (given, but also chosen), and national identity (complex and, at times, contradictory). These questions are central to their narratives and identity projects. These bi-national, bi-cultural, and bi-lingual authors often choose to define themselves beyond nationality as citizens of “the world republic of letters.”

2. Essential literary theory terms & concepts used in American literary criticism in relation to the aesthetics and politics of space in border-crossing narratives

Contemporary American literature is an amalgam of voices, a co-existence of identities, styles, and forms. Some of them are cross-culturally formed due to displacement, migration, and mobility. In articulating the “migratory aesthetics” and the remapping of the American national literature, we explore some of the contemporary formations of the American novel, namely the borderland and hemispheric novels as envisioned by Saldívar and Lazo.

3. Concepts related to the authors’ diasporic imagination and positionality

“Borderland” imaginings, discussed at length in our first chapter, are created by contemporary American immigrant writers from their position of transnational, diasporic subjects. In 1992, Linda Basch, Cristina Blanc-Szanton, and Nina Glick Schiller articulated the need of a “new conceptualization” regarding the experience and consciousness of the new migrant population, whose “lives cut across national boundaries and bring two societies into a single field” (1992: 1).

In 1996, Wilson and Dissanayake also drew attention to the transformations of identity and consciousness belonging to a new “transnational imaginary.” If in the ‘90s, transnationalism and diaspora theories emphasized negative aspects of displacement and decentered identities; currently, the terms are used in reference to a more positive way of constituting cultural and political identities (Steven Vertovec, Stuart Hall).

The terms transnational and diasporic are often interchangeable as they both refer to migrants who constitute hybrid political identities and deterritorialized social and cultural networks in their crossing of national borders.

¹ Postdiasporic is a term that refers to the “emancipatory metamorphosis of diaspora status” (Laguerre, 2017:V) accounting for equality of status before the law of diasporic subjects that acquired full citizenship rights.

In his essay “Diaspora,” Paul Gilroy defines this category as an “outer-national term.” He shows how immigrant writers challenge nation-state characteristics such as “temporality, fixity, rootedness and the sedentary” by disrupting space and an ordered sense of political and cultural identity through travel, itinerancy, and distance (Paul Gilroy, 1994: 207).

More recent studies enhance the spatial engagement of the diaspora, especially in relation to the concept of “home.” Rather than being placeless, Nishat Awan argues in *Diasporic Agencies - Mapping the City Otherwise* (2016), diasporic subjects are global citizens “without a home”. According to the British researcher, some spaces facilitate crucial connections to a home left behind, places of support with a special meaning in the lives of diasporic subjects.

Awan also uses the term reterritorialization, borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari, to show how diasporas affect space in their process of adapting to a new home. Looking forward to feminist theory, Awan also describes reterritorialization through Hoskyns and Petrescu’s concept of “taking place,” which addresses “a spatial politics that attends to difference whose goal is not necessarily ‘to be included’ or ‘represented’ but to participate directly from a differential position” (Awan, 2016:29). The practice of “mapping the space otherwise” involves social and political critique, as well as change, distortion, and transformation of the places the diasporic subjects inhabit. “Taking place” becomes synonymous with owning the “foreign” space in order to belong.

As regards the complex dialectic between space and literary representation, subsequently challenging the hegemonic notion of national culture, contemporary immigrant writers exhibit a new spatial sensibility that also changes “the contours of a national literature” to use the phrase of Bharati Mukherjee. The question of the immigrant writers’ national identity and Americanness is complex. The four analyzed authors are highly conscious of their ancestry, on the one hand, and their new place in the world, on the other hand. They belong to a new generation of “minority” writers that reconsider the narrative of migration. Rather than striving to settle in the place of arrival, as we will further explore in their writing, they tell the immigrant’s story beyond it, spanning multiple geographies and cross-cultural identity reconfigurations. They are concerned with the place of the minority person (the marginal) in relation to the hegemonic culture and language and with a sense of belonging. The construction of a homeland-like space beyond the narrowly circumscribed notions of nationalism (Hemon), race (Díaz, Adichie), or gender (Vuong) is one of the key features of their spatial aesthetics.

In his groundbreaking essay “The Diasporic Imaginary” (2002), Brian Kieth Axel proposes a radical change of perspective: “rather than conceiving of the homeland as something

that creates the diaspora, it may be more productive to consider the diaspora as something that creates the homeland.” The homeland is recreated through memory work, often accompanied by feelings of nostalgia. Then, we can understand it as an “affective and temporal process rather than a place” (Axel, 2002: 426). As conceptualized by Axel, the diasporic imaginary generates a third analytical category: corporeality. The homeland, he asserts, is connected to corporeal images and notions of sexuality, gender, and violence.

In our spatial inquiry, we also explored the representation of the female and queer body as alternative, multivalent spaces created in Adichie’s and Vuong’s novels, but also the distinctive corporeality of their books as actual objects whose borders were crossed by the authors’ epitextual expansion into the world wide web (websites, blogs, online annotations).

4. Concepts borrowed from social sciences & cultural criticism

Cultural marginality is a complex, sociologically based concept entangling cultural and psychological dimensions. It is situated at the juncture of divergent disciplines such as sociology, psychology, philosophy, cultural anthropology, and even linguistics and neurology and has contributed to understanding the relationship between culture, society, and identity formation. The term *marginality* was first introduced in reference to a sociological phenomenon in 1928 by Robert Park, an influential pioneer in the field of early US sociology. Park described the *marginal man* as one with a unique personality characterized by “spiritual instability, intensified self-consciousness, restlessness, and malaise” (Park, 1928: 892-893). In 1937, Everett Vern Stonequist published *The Marginal Man - A Study in Personality and Culture Conflict*, extending the social underpinning of Park’s idea beyond race or ethnicity. In the 1950s, the American sociologist Milton M. Goldberg expanded Park and Stonequist’s “marginal man” concept labeling the term “marginal culture.” Until the work of Janet Bennett in 1993, the experience of *cultural marginals* was commonly framed by states like pessimism, confusion, and isolation. Words such as “distress,” “inferiority,” “paralysis,” “tension,” and even the “marginal syndrome” were used to underpin the marginal experience as people existing between two different and antagonistic cultures had difficulties in perceiving themselves as centrally belonging to either one.

However, recent sociological and cultural studies show a tendency toward dialogism and inclusiveness, less stressing marginality’s negative connotations and more on the possibility of looking at self, culture, and society as a composite of parts. Hubert Hermans proposes such a dialogical, empirical approach to multicultural self-formation. In “The Dialogical Self: Toward a Theory of Personal and Cultural Positioning”, he provides a

theoretical framework for the mutual inclusion of self and culture. At the intersection between the psychology of the self-initiated by William James and the dialogism of Mikhail Bakhtin, the vision proposed in this study challenges the existence of a nucleus - a center, an essential culture. For Hermans, there is no essential self, just as there is no essential culture in the formation of identity. He sees the self in relation to the outside (society, culture) through the prism of a multiplicity of positions between which dialogical relations can be established.

Liminality is another central dimension of the immigrant condition. Introduced by Arnold van Gennep in anthropological studies in 1909 (“Les rites de passage”), liminality is often described as a middle-stage rite of passage, following a stage of separation and preceding a stage of reassimilation. Gennep’s idea was borrowed and expanded by Victor Turner, who defines liminal individuals as “neither here nor there; they are between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony” (Turner, 1969: 95). In immigrant literature, this status sequence is mainly observed in the transition from the immigrant condition to American citizenship, highlighting liminality as a conflicting, transformative phase in the social and cultural life of such characters/ personas.

5. New conceptualizations of space in globalization studies: towards the transnational turn in literary and cultural criticism

In *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies*, Paul Jay argues that the center-periphery model in globalization studies is complex and complicated. Globalization, Jay (2010) says, “is characterized by a complex back-and-forth flow of people and cultural forms in which the appropriation and transformation of things - music, film, food, fashion - raise questions about the rigidity of the center-periphery model” (3). He also claims that the globalization of literary studies and the shift to critical new approaches enriches this field of study, promising “new forms and expressions of coherence” (Jay, 2010: 4-5).

We have already discussed how space, in close connection with the concept of identity and, more specifically, with that of a nation, is no longer perceived as fixed and homogeneous. Identities, once confined within the boundaries of a community, are now understood as actively formed through multiple social and cultural discourses, crossing linguistic, racial, cultural, and national borders. This process of transition is at the center of what Sam Durrant and Catherine M. Lord call “the migratory aesthetics”, which suggest “processes of becoming that are triggered by the movement of people and peoples: experiences of transition as well as the transition of experience itself into new modalities, new artwork, new ways of being” (Durrant and M. Lord, 2007: 11-12).

The study of transnational phenomena and the emergence of new aesthetics in American immigrant writing called for the development of new optics in exploring the literature of transnational authors. For instance, Susan Friedman (2001) stated that “geography is providing literary studies with a new form of contextualization – a specifically spatial one that complements the long-standing methodologies of historicization” (263). Terms like “postmodern geographies” (Soja), “cultural geographies” (Carl O. Sauer), and “cognitive maps” (Edward C. Tolman) were therefore imported in literary criticism to draw attention to narrative spaces where difference is negotiated and transformed in new modes of existence and expression. This does not imply that we should abandon historicism. In this thesis, we put history in a dialectical tension with spatiality. In this fashion, Paula M. Moya and R. Saldivar (2003) defined the trans-American imaginary as a chronotope marked by historical and geographical forces and primarily by transcultural geographies.

6. Working with concepts from sociolinguistics and translation studies: the politics of language in ethnic writing

In the subchapters on the multilingual styles and registers authors use in their fiction (subchapters 2.4, 3.4, 4.4, and 5.4), we work with a variety of concepts borrowed from sociolinguistics and language politics in ethnic writing.

The notion of cultural translation has been developed in postcolonial studies in a figurative use to illustrate the condition of the contemporary immigrant in relation to the concept of in-betweenness. The in-between space is perceived by Homi Bhabha as highly charged with meaning. As formulated by Mary Louise Pratt (1992), it is a space of encounter between peoples, a space in which discursive transformations can and do occur as different groups of people seek to represent themselves to one another. The “contact zone” may be a site of violence, oppression, and resistance, or it may be a site of closer, less antagonistic exchange, but it remains a theoretical space in which cultural differences can be explored.

In her seminal book, *Lost and Found in Translation: Contemporary Ethnic Writing and the Politics of Language Diversity* (2005), Martha Cutter considers the diverse acts of translation experienced by ethnic American writers. Their linguistic diversity, she implies, makes them better translators and storytellers as new words are formed through fusion between different languages, codes, or dialects. Cutter argues that multiple discursive identities are not bound to a single voice or language. This particular aspect is essential in contemporary immigrant writing as transnational writers discursively carve new subjectivities and new sites for self-expression (14-15). Also, the fusion of languages and cultures we acknowledge in such

writings leads to a reposition and reconceptualization of the relationship between the dominant language (English) and the marginalized ones (the mother tongue).

In *Wanderwords: Language Migration in American Literature* (2014), Maria Lauret coined the term “wanderwords” in reference to the proliferation of “words and phrases in other languages that disrupt, enchant, occlude or highlight the taken-for-granted English of American literature and can thereby perform wonders of poetic signification as well as cultural critique” (2). These words and phrases occur in American literature when used by writers who crossed national and linguistic borders and refused to fully submit to the hegemony of the English language. “Wanderwords,” as the author points out, do not denote the “foreign” in American literature. Rather, they represent languages that are distinct and different from normative English but not alien to the American culture. (Lauret, 2014: 31).

The subchapters on language are important as they show the connection between multiple localities, languages, and subjectivities. They legitimize the hybrid status of new immigrants not as a temporary identitarian stage but as a fully embraced *modus vivendi*. They all share the empowerment and emancipation of the marginal through language, and by marginal, we generally refer to the immigrant experience. However, we underlined intersectionalities such as ethnicity in Hemon’s writing, race in Junot Díaz’s fiction, gender in Chimamanda Adichie’s literature, and sexuality in Vuong’s prose.

7. In-between world literature theory and transnational theoretical perspectives: remapping the world literary canon

In his *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (2005), Franco Moretti proposed quantitative methods based on models borrowed from social sciences to respond to two of the difficulties of current literary studies and historiography: the impossibility of writing a history of world literature by close reading it, along with the discrimination of a massive body of literature, of *peripheral* authors, that contributed to the emergence of canonized works. In other words, abstract models such as graphs, maps, and diagrams were used to account for areas of literature that had been discriminated against by researchers, namely writers outside the canon who have participated in structuring the literary world. Including both central and peripheral literary productions, Moretti’s methodology addresses the inequalities inherent to canonized literatures and argues for a de-hierarchization of the literary system. Therefore, behind Moretti’s theoretical framework, there is a destabilizing principle as regards canon formation.

David Damrosch's work is another vitally important contribution to the field of comparative literature and culture. By delimiting between hypercanon, countercanon, and shadow-canon, Damrosch (2006, 45) opens up an interesting discussion on the cultural "capital" canonical authors keep on growing in the global age. Contemporary American immigrant literature is salient to this discussion as we observe a *new wave* of literary professionals asserting the centrality of literature that used to be historically marginal(ized) or oppositional to some "old" canon, be it national, Western, or global. As far as a critical appraisal and market success mean something, such authors as Hemon, Adichie, Díaz, Vuong, and many more seem to perpetuate the pattern Damrosch sees in the study of comparative literature, forming a new, postcolonial/ transnational hypercanon. Is it the rise of a new canon or just a destabilization of such "popularity contests"? According to the editors of *The Latino/a Canon and the Emergence of Post-sixties Literature* (2007), such authors as Junot Díaz show how the circulation of Latino/a literature and its canonization are negotiated within the mainstream. These authors' market success tends to formulate an apolitical reading of their literature, perceived more in terms of artistry and universality value than in terms of political commitment against colonial logic (3). Such a perspective would demystify the uniqueness of "masterpieces" and place them in a system of market relations and recycling mechanisms of previous literary forms, which is a complex, multilayered process.

As Pascale Casanova pointed out in the preface to the English edition of her *World Republic of Letters* (1999), the study of literature has been generally organized along national lines (11). The change of perspective in literary studies towards a "lost" transnational dimension of literature she writes about helps us look at the world's literary phenomena outside nations' political and linguistic boundaries.

It is important, however, once again to distinguish between world literature and transnational literature. As put by Paul Jay (2022), what is specific to transnational literature as opposed to the broader historical category of world literature is the historical moment it deals with and the shared, identifiable "issues and themes associated with decolonization, globalization, postmodernity, and technology" (51). Accordingly, this thesis focuses on the reception and influence of the four analyzed immigrant authors and their writings from a transnational perspective. We explore issues of cross-cultural identity in the global age, how history shapes human experience and its narrativization, the limits of truth and authenticity in life writing, linguistic alterity, and the reformation of the American literary canon. All these aspects belong to a thematic coherence that links the texts treated as "transnational" in contemporary American immigrant writing.

8. Thoughts on the conceptualization of *life writing* through the lens of postmodern reception theory

Fictionalizing one's autobiography is a typical writing technique in postcolonial and transnational immigrant literature. Authors dealing with trauma and displacement often choose not to write about their personal experiences using the autobiographical "I." According to Benaouda Lebdaï (2015), such is the case of Salman Rushdie's *Joseph Anton*. Ocean Vuong's semi-biographical novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) exemplifies how trauma life writing leads to the dissolution of the autobiographical genre as we know it. The novel is written as a letter to his mother and showcases many writing styles, from poetic to essayistic. At the same time, it unravels personal and collective traumas, thus introducing a collective subject. Immigrant authors combine lived experience and personal storytelling while touching on larger significant cultural issues. Smith and Watson note that life writing is complex as at least five dimensions constitute autobiographical subjectivity: memory, experience, identity, embodiment, and agency (2001/2010: 15-48).

As regards the problem of authenticity and autobiographical truth that we explored in this thesis, Coetzee thinks that a writer should hope that his autobiographical project is not the story of himself but a story about himself, "a fiction of the truth in other words" (1999). The aim of this paper is not to discuss to what extent the novels of the selected authors are autobiographically true but to what degree they are true to their readers by tracing the limits of authenticity textually, metatextually, and contextually. Their prose has undeniable autobiographical implications as they draw on their immigrant and transnational experience. At the same time, their nonfictional books go beyond the boundaries of memoir as a genre, blurring the line between life and narrative. As other critics have pointed out, they engage in what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2001/2010) specifically termed "life narrative" (132). In terms of writing techniques, their works also qualify as autofiction, a term coined by the French writer Serge Doubrovsky in 1977, referring to autobiographical writing that also contains fictionalized elements. We will further use the term "life writing" instead of "autobiography" in reference to various types of self-referential writing, from autofiction (Díaz, Vuong) to personal essays (Hemon) and even TED talks (Adichie).

As Smith and Watson pointed out in their seminal work on life narratives, postcolonial authors have reframed our understanding of autobiographical writing by providing alternatives to the individual self. Such narratives introduce "collective, provisional, and mobile subjects" (Smith, Watson, 2001/2010: 135) that challenge the canon of autobiography. By questioning

the Western/ colonizer's norms of identity and experience, they often depersonalize the autobiographical genre.

So, new concepts of subjectivity arise as a result of acknowledging the hybridity of their lives in transcultural and transnational narratives that can no longer stand as "pure" - purely national or purely aesthetic.

Besides this "intervention" in changing the contours of the autobiographical Western canon, Smith and Watson also emphasized the poststructural and postmodern theorizing about the subject, underlying a paradigm shift from autobiographical *pacts* to autobiographical *acts*. Autobiography is seen as a performative act, a "self-narration" (Smith, Watson, 2001/2010:18), and an exchange of meaning between reader and writer. This pragmatic turn aligns with a broader academic interest in the discursive and performative dimensions of language and experience that began in the late '70s. According to such views, the autobiographical truth no longer lies in a factual, referential truth but in the exchange between narrator and reader that negotiate and construct meaning as co-authors of the same act. Thus, in more recent theories on autobiographical writing proposed by Gasparini (2004), Smith and Watson (2001/2010), Wagner Egelhaaf (2008), and Missine (2019), there is a strong emphasis on the role of the reader and "his/her expectations and prior knowledge as constitutive of the autobiographical genre" (Missine, 2019: 226).

There is also a debate around the differences between autobiography and autofiction as concepts that imply additional analyses. While Serge Doubrovsky believes that autofiction is the postmodern form of autobiography and this neologism allows for a distinction between the modern and postmodern sensibility in writing, Jean-Louis Jeannelle dismisses the term for its vagueness and concludes that "the only difference between the two competing models [autobiography and autofiction] is that, in the case of autofiction, the staging of the subject's identity is clearly fictional while it remains ambiguous in the case of the autobiographical novel" (Jeannelle, Violet, 2007: 26). With regards to the fictional nature of both forms, Philippe Forest considers autofiction an unnecessary term as both autobiography and autofiction are written according to the rules of literature, and thus are fictional.

Besides autofiction, for immigrant authors, there is also the temptation of autotheory. The reception of their stories is influenced by paratexts and epitexts (interviews, essays, articles, lectures, etc.) about what it means to reinvent oneself in a new geographical and cultural space. According to Ellen McCracken (2016), digital epitexts are a "necessary component of the interpretative process" (8) as they affect the reception of a book, either in print or digital version. Consequently, in this research, we cite many of the writers' interviews

and media interventions to emphasize the entire network of reception and influence strategies surrounding their texts. In our digital age, their presence in the media - YouTube videos, TED talks, personal Instagram accounts - adds a different dimension to their writing and is definitely a hermeneutic challenge for the more seasoned readers.

In reconstructing history and the self through storytelling, immigrant authors also reconstitute categories of reality, truth, authenticity, and accuracy. Here, we assert W. G. Sebald's influence and role as a precursor for Hemon's use of photographs in his fiction. His novels, *The Emigrants* (1992), *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), and *Austerlitz* (2001) combine words with photographs and fact with fiction in the mode of memoir and travel writing. Sebald is mainly known for thematizing and documenting war and post-Holocaust trauma in photo-fiction "assemblages" that make his writing difficult to categorize. His circumspect approach to historical knowledge and memory highlights the interchange between the two in postmodern writing. Hemon also explores the mechanisms of visually representing historical trauma in texts that destabilize the truth value and narrative reliability of images. Their photo fiction complicates the problem of truth in postmodern autofiction at two levels. First, they incorporate both archival and personal photos into their texts in an arbitrary fashion, and by doing this, they sabotage the value of photographs as reliable historical evidence. Second, we are aware that the narrators are fictionalized versions of the authors, which casts doubt on the mediation of historical truth, and, at a larger scale, on historiography itself as a process of archivization and transmission of human knowledge.

Self-referential storytelling that draws on the retelling of historical events in a subjective form is typical of postmodernism. In the *Politics of Postmodernism* (1989/2002), Linda Hutcheon uses the term "historiographic metafiction". She emphasizes the inevitability of distortion in such narratives where historical representation is "projectively reprocessed in terms of our own narrowly 'presentist' interests" (55). The implication of memory and archival materials such as photographs shifts the focus from the representation's truth value and accuracy to that of secondary witnessing and retelling of events. Immigrant writers merge history and fiction to the point that the problem of veracity is rendered irrelevant. As a secondary witness himself, the reader is challenged to take an active role in the reproduction of events, inventing their own version of history.

As regards the novels of the immigrant writers we focus on, many critics broke "the autobiographical pact" (as defined by Lejeune) for the sake of interpretation and highlighted the similarities between their lives and their fiction in the absence of the mandatory identification between author, narrator, and protagonist. However, both formally and

functionally, their writings imply the enactment of a transaction between the text and the reader that does not exclude truth-telling. According to Smith and Watson (2001/2010), autobiographical narration is intersubjective and can be redefined beyond the truth-falsehood binary.

By crossing this aesthetical boundary, they first subvert the conventions of autobiography as a narrative centered on a confessional “I.” The first impression in the act of reading is not that of dealing with autobiographical writing, and in some cases, not even with a novel. As already mentioned, the production of disguised autobiographies as novels or other literary forms is a pattern already identified in postcolonial literature in the work of authors such as Rushdie and Coetzee. In *Elisabeth Costello*, for example, Coetzee attributed part of his lectures to a fictional Australian author who stands as his female alter-ego. However, despite the reader’s knowledge of their fictionalized autobiographical writing, the second impression that emerges through reading is that of authenticity as the authors choose narrative techniques that create the illusion of direct communication between author and reader, a relation mediated by the author-figures that are extraordinary storytellers. As Weiner notes in *American Migrant Fictions* (2018), Junot Díaz and Aleksandar Hemon share a common obsession with the process of writing and creating narrators that double as storytellers.

Next, we think the way Brenda K. Marshall defines the cultural matrix the texts belong to is critically important to our understanding of it: “Postmodernism is about language. About how it controls, how it determines meaning, and how we try to exert control through language. (...) It’s about race, class, gender, erotic identity and practice, nationality, age, and ethnicity. It’s about difference. It’s about power and powerlessness, about empowerment, and about all the stages in between and beyond and unthought of.” (Marshall: 1992: 4).

So, the problem of receptivity is even more complex as their semi-biographical works touch on one of the most enduring problems in postcolonial studies: the politics of language, the language a postcolonial writer chooses as a medium of expression still being a subject of heated debate in postcolonial theory as it is an issue of national identity.

What is different, however, in the texts of immigrant authors at their peak of success and international recognition in the last three decades (A. Hemon, J. Díaz, C.N. Adichie, O. Vuong) is the way English is fully absorbed in their minds and writing. As explained by Hemon in his article “Pathologically bilingual” (September 2016), there is a constant chatter between his mother tongue and the acquired language, which leads to ambiguities but also to multiple possibilities in expressing himself. For Hemon, there is no pure language. “No language can have a single source,” he writes. “It is always a massively collective endeavor that does not

stop at borders or walls. All languages overlap or spill into one another, just like people.” (Hemon, 2016). These “new” immigrant writers embrace hybridity at multiple levels. Language is just one of them. Migration has made linguistic simultaneity not the exception but the norm in many societies worldwide.

CHAPTER OUTLINE & RATIONALE

In the first chapter of this thesis, titled “Space, Identity, And Aesthetics In Contemporary Migrant Literature,” we discuss contemporary theories from different disciplines to provide the theoretical context of our research, on the one hand, and emphasize the complexity of the chosen immigrant narratives, on the other.

As already presented in the Literature review section of this summary, the transnational paradigm and spatial turn in literary and cultural studies lie at the core of our research. This paper, as explored in chapter 1, examines the reconceptualization of literary hybrid forms and identities from transcultural and translingual points of view. Theoretical issues of identity, power, nation, and transnationalism are presented to provide a broader, global perspective on the politics and poetics of contemporary immigrant writing.

In Chapter 2, we focus on the work of Aleksandar Hemon, a Bosnian-born author, now an American citizen, who published five novels (*Nowhere Man*, in 2002; *The Lazarus Project*, in 2008; *The Making of Zombie Wars*, in 2015; *The World and All That It Holds*, in 2023), two short story collections (*The Question of Bruno*, in 2000; *Love, and Obstacles*, in 2009), and two works of nonfiction in English (*The Book of My Lives*, in 2013; *My Parents: an Introduction/ This Does Not Belong to You*, in 2019). His texts pay close attention to cross-cultural identity formation and hybridity and, more importantly, are representative both formally and symbolically of the empowerment of the marginal through language.

Hemon’s work also indicates how scholars and writers have re-interrogated the center versus margin relation from a more personal point of view over the last decades, proposing new ways of looking at the reconfiguration of self across cultures and social structures.

In Chapter 3, we discuss Junot Díaz’s fiction, especially his Pulitzer Prize-awarded novel (2007), as deeply rooted in the brutal history of his homeland, the Dominican Republic. Inspired by the massive amount of comic books, SF stories, and fantasy he devoured as a young reader, the author employs their techniques in a playful, unique way to craft alternative hybrid cultural spaces and histories in his literature. Through the magnifying lens of the fantastic, he

narrates a traumatic past, national, familial, and equally personal, in stories about love and violence. He rewrites history in a transcultural narrative that crosses borders and speaks to many communities and individuals scattered in the diaspora.

This chapter provides a contextual, textual, and metatextual reading of the novel focusing on formal matters. The novel is read as a meditation on historiography, outlining the mechanisms, powers, and limits of writing and rewriting histories in contemporary immigrant fiction. In this sense, we will examine how Díaz's narrator and alter-ego, Yuniors, takes control over personal and collective histories. Therefore, we argue that his oeuvre aligns with Derek Walcott's description of Antillean art as "a restoration of shattered histories" (Walcott, 1992). Díaz's reconceptualization of History is done by incorporating many genres in his novel, including magical realism, comics, fantasy, and SF, as well as by constantly shifting the narrative focalization and timeline to allow the representation of what has been silenced throughout centuries of oppression.

Chapter 4 focuses on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's third novel, *Americanah* (2013). Her work has been explored mainly in terms of diaspora and return migration (Idowu-Faith, 2014; Arabian & Rahiminezhad, 2015; Ndigirigi, 2017), national identity and representation of Africanness (Hallemeier, 2015), double conscience and the self (Sackeyfio, 2017), transnationalism and otherness (Nwanyanwu, 2017), blogging (Guarracino, 2014), and the dialectics between silencing and policing the Black female migrant in American post-race society (Ndaka, 2017). In addition to these inquiries, we offer a broad perspective on the issues of hybridity and cross-cultural identity reconfiguration in contemporary African immigrant writing. The main issues we address here concern the nuances of the immigrant experience in multiple locations and socio-cultural contexts. What emerges from the back-and-forth movement between cultures and languages is a mediated cultural translation that makes us aware of the multifaceted relationship between identity, language, and ideology in our global world.

Chapter 5 focuses on how Ocean Vuong alters space, time, genre, and language in his first novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), widening the tradition of American immigrant writing by exploring what it means to be a Vietnamese American gay writer in post-9/11 America. Our methods are inter and transdisciplinary as we explore the relationship between life, history, trauma, culture, and cross-genre writing. At the crossroads of queer theory, textual analysis, and postcolonial critique, the fifth chapter of this thesis inquires about Vuong's articulation of new modes of identity for Asian American immigrants, particularly through the queering processes of time, space, and body. Queerness, in the sense of something

less “pure”, is the new concept and perspective on alterity/ otherness we introduce in our theoretical discourse. We argue that the queer body signifies a transnational identity that carries not just what C. L. Quinan calls “hybrid anxieties” (2020) but also the power to express beauty.

Chapter 6 deals with the way transnational immigrant authors cross not just cultural and national borders but also aesthetic ones challenging our understanding of autobiographical writing. We are mainly concerned with how the postmodern context of immigrant self-referential writing alters how we perceive notions such as truth and authenticity concerning the reality-fiction binary. In investigating the construction and deconstruction of “the real” in the work of Hemon, Adichie, Vuong, and Díaz as a standard feature of their fiction, we will combine a reader-oriented analysis with a poststructuralist perspective on writing and reading.

As argued before, the blurring boundaries between fiction and reality, storytelling and truth-telling lie at the heart of a new typology in contemporary migrant (auto)fiction. Here, we want to point out that its seeds were already planted in the writing of migrant authors from previous generations, regardless of their nationalities, such as J.M. Coetzee, Salman Rushdie, and W. G. Sebald. Their works are in dialogue through their metafictional obsession with storytelling and its ethical implications and the exploration of their subjects in global settings and traumatic historical contexts.

In the last chapter of our thesis, we draw mostly on the autobiographical and essayistic work of J. M. Coetzee, a South African Nobel-prize-winning author whose literature exemplifies how “life writing” undermines the paradigms of authenticity and realism in immigrant literature. Partly autobiographical and partly fictional, his novel *Elisabeth Costello* canvases the problem of truth as strongly linked with the problem of the self and its corollary - the problem of self-expression and self-knowledge, thus the problem of identity. Therefore, Coetzee’s writing is perceived as an abstract model for this new typology in contemporary immigrant semi-biographical literature crossing the line between life and fiction. We argue that the authors we focused on in this thesis contributed to the development of a new transnational typology in immigrant writing in terms of vision, language, and identity reconfiguration.

RESULTS AND FURTHER RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This project aimed to reveal how contemporary immigrant writing challenges the boundaries of self across national borders and the cultural climate and social context in which this self evolves, rethinking geography, identity, and life writing.

We were concerned with immigrant narratives that address the tension between center and margin from multiple points of view (sociologically, politically, culturally, and linguistically), exposing the urgency of immigrant writers to retell collective traumas of displacement, dictatorship, and oppression along with telling their own stories to reinvent themselves outside their mother tongue and homeland.

Consequently, this paper explored and expanded on the following topics:

- Cross-cultural identity formation.
- Biculturalism and bilingualism in the age of globalization.
- Transnational, transcultural, and translingual narratives of self, displacement, and historical and personal trauma.
- The diasporic imagination: reimagining a new American narrative.
- The decolonial and translingual imagination in cross-genre narratives.
- Rethinking the postcolonial discourse through the rhetoric of hybridity in transnational contexts.

As mentioned before, Aleksandar Hemon, Junot Díaz, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Ocean Vuong, among other immigrant writers of different cultural backgrounds, rethink questions of identity, space, and storytelling, and offer new perspectives on the American selfhood while contributing to the emergence of new aesthetics in contemporary immigrant writing. These transnational migration narratives reconsider the nation-based premises of unity and belonging by refusing to consider migration as settlement.

We returned to Mukherjee's depiction of the "Literature of New Arrival" to reinforce the idea that the novel characteristics of this direction in contemporary immigrant writing reside exactly on the authors' importation of their cultural and linguistic heritage, on the one hand, and re-enactment of collective trauma across borders, on the other. In their insistence on confronting the past instead of leaving it behind, they create powerful multi-generic stories that challenge the hegemony of one nation, language, culture, and identity, carving out new possibilities for cross- and trans-cultural self-expression and representation.

In this paper, we investigated the life narratives of the four mentioned authors in individual chapters (one per each author), following a similar line of reasoning from one chapter to another while drawing many parallels between their works. The protagonists of their fiction reach maturity in different cultural, linguistic, racial, and ethnic contexts, yet their works

have much in common in themes, techniques, language use, and narrative structures, thus forming what we call a transnational immigrant life writing typology. Consequently, each chapter addressed the four major areas that characterize this typology:

1. The authors' particular spatial awareness and sensibility marked by processes of dislocation, migration, and return movements.
2. The hybridity of forms, genres, languages, literary traditions, and their shared sense of a hybrid cultural identity.
3. The authors' metatextual preoccupation with language and storytelling.
4. The development of a multilinguistic agency that challenges the hegemony of the English language, empowering ethnic writers in contemporary American letters to cross linguistic boundaries and form alternative modes of self-expression.

Formal and aesthetic innovations in the American novel were read against the hegemonic tendencies of the English language and culture, reinforcing the power of language to shape and transform new social and political identities. Therefore, we aimed to highlight the aesthetics and politics of these cross-genre works, which enrich the American English language through their transnational, multilingual, and multicultural forms facilitated by their authors' metaphorical "home return" to their native languages and cultures. At the same time, by "borrowing" the English language (Karpinski, 2012) as the primary language of their life narratives, immigrant authors enriched the hegemonic language in American letters and widened their audience. The inclusion of other languages into the narratives challenged us as readers of a different native language and sociocultural space, but at the same time, we greatly benefited from acknowledging the importance and power of giving voice to those silenced throughout history.

Throughout this thesis, we emphasized that authors established parallels between their lives and those of their narrators, presenting liminal spaces of identity formation and re-formation. In this context, we highlighted the importance of paratexts and epitexts in looking at immigrant writing from both aesthetical and sociocultural points of view. Their epitexts address the tension between truth and fiction in semi-biographical writing, showing how the authors break the "fictive dream" (Gardner, 1983), on the one hand, and the "autobiographical contract" (Lejeune, 1989), on the other while crossing the borders of their fiction to create

narrative spaces outside the novel: websites (Hemon), blogs (Adichie), auctorial annotations to their fiction (Díaz).

As regards the limitations of this thesis, we were aware that highlighting the similarities between the analyzed life narratives and authors' writing styles could result in an overgeneralization that would reduce the novelty and originality of each of their works. Consequently, we aimed to show the multifaceted nature of the authors' works beyond the similarities of their immigrant life narratives and to celebrate the diversity of experiences and their courage to reclaim their unique voice and place in history and world literature. Thus, we analyzed shared themes such as intergenerational tensions and the search for identity. At the same time, the many nuances of their stories were explored more in-depth in their dedicated chapters.

Alternatively, there are many more immigrant authors whose acclaimed works could have enriched our investigation, as each author brings a unique perspective on present-day cultural marginalization following what is central to their experience as immigrants. As a suggestion for further research, we consider enlarging the number of primary texts and even a more thorough comparative analysis that would rely more on network theory. To the growing list of internationally praised immigrant writers, one could add other authors from around the globe who are salient to this literary deterritorialization process, such as Marlon James from Jamaica, who got the Booker award for *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, written in 2014; Viet Thanh Nguyen from Vietnam, who was a recipient of The Pulitzer Prize for *The Sympathizer*, written in 2015; Edwidge Danticat from Haiti, winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction in 2020; Colum McCann from Ireland, who won the National Book Award in 2009 for *Let The Great World Spin*; Rabih Alameddine from Jordan, nominated for National Book Award in 2014 and National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction in 2015, who won the 2022 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction with his novel *The Wrong End of the Telescope* (2021).

Additionally, we observed how contemporary American immigrant life narratives complicate our understanding of historical truth and gender norms in different ways and sociocultural contexts. They also challenge the assumption that present-day America is committed to individual liberty, freedom of speech, diversity, and inclusion. This thesis, thus, participates in a larger discussion about rewriting historical violence and trauma into experimental cross-genre life writing. Historical violence and trauma are mirrored in the investigated works at textual, metatextual, and paratextual levels. Therefore, we also touched on the ethical implications of immigrant life writing as history rewriting and knowledge

production. The particularities of their reception at a global level indicate the importance of such discussion. The authors' prizewinning novels are far from marginal in terms of global distribution, having sold millions of copies worldwide. As works written by ethnic writers in English, the analyzed texts are also important acts of cultural translation that create sociological awareness around the issues of marginalized subjects from a wide range of minorities around the globe. By using English and not their mother tongues, the writers speak not only to members of their ethnic or diasporic communities but also address a larger audience, enlarging our perception of the fluidity and heterogeneity of languages and cultures.

Based on these observations, we aimed to contribute to the growing critical scholarship on immigrant writing addressing contemporary global inequalities that continue to expel the powerless, the weak, the poor, and the vulnerable to a marginal space. The immigrant narratives we analyzed and argued to form a typology in contemporary American immigrant literature reclaim new forms of agency by expressing and narrating personal and collective stories of historical disempowerment. Thus, we wanted to offer a non-restrictive comparative analysis of the four major aspects intertwined in the authors' works and literary identities to envision a new literary, cultural, and identitarian typology.

By exploring the remappings of margins in American literature and culture, we highlighted new ways of defining not only the world's literary system (not to mention the canon) beyond nation-state limitations but also the complexity and multiplicity of selves displaced around the States and the globe in new immigrant narratives. Migration changed America's sociocultural life, and immigrant authors defined new ways of being and expressing themselves. As put by Lowe (1996), "the question of aesthetic representation is always about political representation" (4), capturing the nature of immigrant narratives as politically charged manifestos. The 20th-century American literary canon failed to show its multicultural identity. The achievement of these immigrant writers is having challenged the canon and remapped its contours in the 21st century not by writing back to the hegemonic white and male dominance but by rightfully being part of a larger wave decentering the idea of canonization and periodization of national literatures. They provide more visibility to their communities' cultural representation and racial, sexual, and gender minorities, historically poorly represented in much American literature. However, it seems that their achievement is not so much about the representation of minorities in the nation's literary production as it is about widening the margins of American literature in their trajectory toward its center.

Given what has been said, we find Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualization of the rhizome (1980/1987) extremely appropriate in the representation of contemporary

transnational immigrant writing within the broader picture of American and world literature. The rhizome as a spatial metaphor also represents diasporas' global sociocultural, political, and economic interconnectedness in our present-day world. In this sense, our thesis aimed to show the power of literature and criticism to connect writers and readers at a global level. As emphasized in the language subchapters of this thesis, immigrant writers take the role of interpreters and cultural translators not just inside their families and ethnic communities but also in relation to readers all over the world. While they "translate" to us unheard collective histories, they chart new territories of their mind and heart in a personal attempt to make sense of their displacement and relocation. So, deterritorialization is followed by reterritorialization through the search and creation of a multivalent home outside the borders of one's nation. In other words, new immigrant writers create new homes outside their homeland and mother tongues within America and English.

CONCLUSION

Mimicking the multifaceted hybrid creation of the four chosen immigrant authors, we employed mixed methods and often self-reflected on the process of interpretation to show how, as readers and global citizens, we are all interconnected in and outside academia and national literature, fighting the "increasingly fortified world" we live in that Jacqueline Rose talks about in her essay on mothers, love, and cruelty (2018).

Ultimately, what matters most in this web-like presentation of a new typology in contemporary life writing is the outcome of the game authors' and readers play, the outcome of this intersubjective and dynamic interplay that we call reading. Concerning the authors' self-referential writing, be it fictional or real, autobiographical or essayistic, the actual result of interpretation as a process transforming the reader is the Otherness we make sense of. The most important thing about fiction is not so much making sense of other lives but making sense of ourselves through them. Once again, life writing is not so much about factual truth but about potential truths we make sense of through criticism.