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Travel and “Homing In” in Contemporary Ethnic American Short Stories

ABSTRACT

In American ethnic literature of the last three decades of the 20th century, recurrent themes of mobility, travel, and “homing in” are emblematic of the search for identity. In this essay, which discusses three short stories, Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use,” Louise Erdrich’s “The World’s Greatest Fishermen,” and Daniel Chacon’s “The Biggest City in the World,” I attempt to demonstrate that as a consequence of technological development, with travel becoming increasingly accessible to ethnic Americans, their search for identity assumes wider range, transcending national and cultural boundaries.

ABSTRACT

In our time of “endemic uncertainty,” with human lives made up of “unending series of short-term projects and episodes that do not add up to ‘career’ or ‘progress’” (Cummings), individual identities are no longer regarded as developing in a stable, linear progression. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has chosen the word “liquid” for describing the reality we live in. In the epoch of “liquid life” and “liquid fear,” in “liquid times” of “liquid modernity”¹ nothing keeps its shape and social norms are changing at great speed. This instability and unpredictability, with its roots in

¹ These terms have been used by Zygmunt Bauman in his works and constitute significant elements of his theories.

a global economy which does not restrict the mobility of capital, becomes a source of anxiety. The overturning of traditions and freedom from social conventions result in a lack of guarantees of stability, creating a heightened awareness of the risks involved in human existence. With human lives becoming fragmented, people tend to be flexible, adaptable, and mobile. Instability, travel, and migration have become global phenomena. In technologically advanced multicultural nations such as the United States, these factors manifest themselves with full force and exert powerful influence on the formation of identities in all social groups.

Historically excluded from mainstream American society, “unhomed” in the United States, perceived as alien, and as such exposed to the experiences of racism and prejudice, ethnic Americans, traditionally dislocated to social margins, have been seeking new opportunities in the global conditions of mobility, flexibility, and change. For the past several decades, since the 1960s, displaced American ethnics have made attempts to leave behind their fixed, confining positions as social minorities and to become involved in a dynamic search for “home,” a sense of belonging in the United States. The political climate created as a result of the Civil Rights Movement has been motivating them in their efforts. At the same time, unpredictable forces or events, such as the terrorist attacks of 9/11 or the current world economic crisis, have been posing obstacles on this route. Literary texts written by contemporary American ethnic authors frequently deploy the rhetoric of travel and movement, and become migration narratives. The migrants in these stories, “moving metaphorically and metaphysically, as well as physically” (Anderson 3), make the search for “home” their goal.

Since the publication of Werner Sollors’ *The Invention of Ethnicity* (1991), ethnic groups, traditionally perceived as “natural, real, eternal, stable, and static units . . . always already in existence” (x), have come to be viewed by literary and cultural critics as unstable and culturally constructed. “Invention” itself, which Sollors foregrounds in the book’s title, brings associations with change and the creation of something new. He points out that “invention” no longer refers to the technological domain. “[A] variety of voices now use the word in order to describe, analyze, or criticize such diverse phenomena as the invention of culture; of literary history; of narrative; . . . of the self, of America; of New England; of Billy the Kid and the West; of the Negro; of the Indian; of the Jew; of Jesus and Christianity; . . . of the vision of the outlaw in America; or the American way of death” (x). However, Sollors remarks, “invention” is not just a “buzzword.” Rather, its frequent use is a sign of “the recognition of the general cultural constructedness of the modern world” (x). Thus, ethnicity has to be reinvented and reinterpreted by every generation and each individual. “Do not new ethnic groups continually emerge? Even where

they exist over long time spans, do not ethnic groups change and redefine themselves?" (xiv).

The key factor in the invention of ethnicity (as in the construction of reality in general) is language. "Rhetorical devices of literature" (Sollors xi) can be compared to a scaffolding which upholds ethnic texts—biographies, historiographies, fictions. Language and rhetoric, which have "become creative forces" (xi), are responsible for the construction of ethnicity's ideological framework, as well as for the emergence of ethnic identities themselves.

Of the numerous ethnic stories available on the literary market nowadays, Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" (1973), Louise Erdrich's "The World's Greatest Fishermen" (1981), and Daniel Chacon's "The Biggest City in the World" (2000), each representative of a different stage in the development of ethnic literatures, are among those addressing the theme of pursuit of home, return home ("homing in"), and travel. The recurrent motifs of journey and home, the journey's destination, can be read as metaphors of the search for identity. In his book *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (1997), the anthropologist James Clifford sees "home" and "travel" as inherently connected rather than opposed to one another or mutually exclusive. He no longer associates home with stability, fixity or permanence, and says about the contemporary culture that it makes itself at home in motion. Clifford proposes "[a] moving picture of a world that does not stand still, that reveals itself en route." His concept of "dwelling-in-travel" emphasizes the idea that "everyone is on the move and has been for centuries" (*Routes* 6). Yet, in spite of being continually on the road, we at the same time remain deeply rooted. "[N]o one is permanently fixed by his or her 'identity'; but neither can one shed specific features of race and culture, class and caste, gender and sexuality, environment and history" (*Routes* 6). Clifford regards such "cross-cutting determinations" as "sites of worldly travel: difficult encounters and occasions for dialogue" (*Routes* 6).

In *American Indian Literature and the Southwest* (1999), Eric Gary Anderson argues that people migrate "creatively," "working toward a multicultural, multidirectional, multidisciplinary environment" and he urges "wariness in the face of . . . narratives that propose to secure all evidence inside a single, bounded thesis" (3). Anderson perceives migration as a resistance and survival strategy rather than an expansionist inevitability. The American Southwest, with its traditional historical multicultural mobility, can be seen as a regional laboratory in which the present global condition has already been tested for centuries. Emphasizing the Southwest's simultaneous physicality and textuality, Anderson says the following with reference to texts dealing with "the possibilities of personal as well as cultural movement":

Along the way, characters, authors, texts, and readers variously enter or approach states of alienation, broadly defined, but these displacements typically preserve—and sometimes move toward—the idea, if not always the actuality of home. Like Silko, to reach—let alone to understand home, many southwestern peoples from a variety of cultures must travel. (3)

In the contemporary world, bound by technological development, travel becomes a quick and seemingly simple way of covering distances between cultures. Cars, buses, airplanes, telephones and cameras, accessible to growing numbers of Americans, appear in all of the stories under discussion here as inventions that make transcultural encounters a common aspect of life in the United States. Stories about intercultural travel bridge the gap between the margin and the mainstream, expanding the American literary canon. “Global culture is typified by travel, the complex entanglement of migratory routes and genealogical roots” (Anderson 3).

The three ethnic stories mentioned above are texts of both personal and cultural travel. Their protagonists, representing different ethnic groups, leave their native homes to escape the ethnic predicament. In the stories we see them returning, “homing in,” and looking at their homes from the perspective of their intercultural experiences in the American mainstream. Troubled and confused by what they find at home, they reflect on the sense of belonging and exclusion. Their homes seem at once *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. They offer a sense of belonging to a community, with its unique spirituality, traditions, customs, rituals, and the native language; at the same time, ethnic family homes ridden with poverty, violence, abuse, gender and generational conflicts, are sites of humiliation.

The narrator of Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use,” a black middle-aged woman from the rural South of the 1960s or 70s, is the mother of two daughters—a homely one and a worldly one. Sitting in the neatly swept yard in front of her house “in the pasture,” she is expecting the arrival of her well-educated, ambitious and well-dressed daughter from the city, while the other daughter is standing behind her chair, shy and withdrawn, “a lame animal” (Walker 2389). As she is waiting, the mother daydreams about appearing on a TV show as a parent of a child who has “made it” in America, a Johnny Carson kind of show. The successful daughter comes by car, accompanied by a man named Hakim-a-barber, who exclaims “Asalamalalikim, my mother and sister!” The daughter also greets them with a foreign word: “Wa-su-zo’Teen-o!” Before she places a patronizing kiss on the mother’s forehead, she gets out a Polaroid camera from the back seat of the car and, like a tourist visiting an exotic attraction, takes snapshots all around.

She stoops down quickly and lines up picture after picture of me sitting there in front of the house, with Maggie cowering behind me. She never takes a shot without making sure the house is included. When a cow comes nibbling around the edge of the yard, she snaps it and me and Maggie *and* the house. (2390)

They are being scrutinized like objects of ethnographic interest. “[Hakim-a barber] just stood there grinning, looking down on me like somebody inspecting a Model A car. Every once in a while he and Wangero sent eye signals over my head” (2391).

The visiting daughter tells her mother that she has changed her name from Dee to Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo. “I couldn’t bear it any longer, being named after the people who oppress me” (2391), she explains, oblivious to her mother’s remark that she was actually named after her aunt and grandmother, as well as some more distant relatives.

Living and going to college in the city, Dee/Wangero, like Alice Walker herself, became involved in the urban American blacks’ search for new identities in the times following the Civil Rights Movement, associated with the charismatic Malcolm X and the idea of black people’s return to Africa promoted by the Nation of Islam. Hakim-a-barber’s futile effort to shake hands with Maggie might be a reference to the intricate way some Muslims in Indonesia shake hands as they greet people with the word “Asalamalakim.”

Meanwhile Asalamalakim is going through the motions with Maggie’s hand. Maggie’s hand is as limp as a fish, and probably as cold, despite the sweat, and she keeps trying to pull it back. It looks like Asalamalakim wants to shake hands but wants to do it fancy. Or maybe he don’t know how people shake hands. Anyhow, he soon gives up on Maggie. (2390)

Dee’s new name, Wangero, has its source in Alice Walker’s friendship with a woman from Uganda, named Constance, whom she met at Spellman College in Atlanta; this friendship began Walker’s fascination with Africa.

Asalamalakim/Hakim-a-barber is very careful about what he eats for dinner, but Wangero thoroughly enjoys collards, pork, “chitlins and corn bread, the greens and everything else” (2391), typical Southern dishes, the food she must remember from childhood. “Everything delighted her” (2391). Nourished by the homely meal and preparing to leave, she asks her mother for several objects made by their relatives, which have been in the family for a long time, such as Grandma Dee’s butter dish, the churn top and the dasher. “I can use the churn top as a centerpiece for the alcove table . . . and I’ll think of something artistic to do with the dasher” (2393).

244

However, when she demands the quilts made of scraps of material from as far back as the Civil War, the mother, her TV reverie altogether forgotten, acts in a very decisive manner. "I did something I never had done before: hugged Maggie to me, then dragged her on into the room, snatched the quilts out of Miss Wangero's hands and dumped them into Maggie's lap" (2393). Wangero will not frame the quilts and put them on her "alcove" wall for decoration; they will continue to be used every day as bed covers when Maggie marries the local boy, John Thomas. By turning the quilts over to her awkward daughter scarred by a house fire, the mother signals that black Americans' search for new identities cannot eliminate their Southern rural black heritage going back to slavery. Wangero must return to the city, where she is in the course of setting up her own home, without the symbolic quilts. As she leaves, her vision obscured by "some sunglasses that hid everything above the tip of her nose and her chin" (2393), she shows little awareness that the Southern black identity cannot simply be encapsulated in a few objects made by slaves or slave descendants, such as the dasher or the churn top, useless in itself, and put on display in fashionable urban middle-class homes in the spirit of the Black Arts Movement. With her symbolic gesture, the mother makes sure that the rural black heritage will live on, as she sits in her yard with a "dip of snuff," "just enjoying" (2394), and singing church songs to herself. Nevertheless, her two daughters, representing the rural and the urban experiences of African Americans in mid-20th century, remain unreconciled; Wangero disappears behind the dust her car raises as she drives away from the country to the modern city.

Albertine Johnson, a "half-breed" with an Indian mother and a Swedish father, a nursing student and the narrator of Louise Erdrich's story "The World's Greatest Fishermen" from *Love Medicine*, is on her way home from school to the reservation. The road she is following is as dusty and unclear as the one along which Dee/Wangero from Walker's "Everyday Use" traveled. Albertine is driving the first car she has ever owned, "with rusted wheel wells, a stick shift, and a windshield wiper only on the passenger side" (Erdrich 5).² To get to the reservation, she has to leave the city, pass by "big farms" and "blowing fields," and go off the main road. "The highway narrowed off and tangled, then turned to gravel with ruts, holes, and blue alfalfa bunching in the ditches. Small hills reared up. Dogs leaped from nowhere and ran themselves out fiercely. The dust hung thick" (11). When she finally gets to the reservation, Albertine goes up to the "main house," "communal property for the Kashpaws," built on land al-

² Unless otherwise indicated, all the references to Erdrich's work are to "The World's Greatest Fishermen" from *Love Medicine*.

lotted over a century earlier to her great-grandmother, “old Rushes Bear.” Having followed a road winding like an umbilical cord, Albertine “walk[s] into the dim, warm kitchen” (12), where her mother and aunt are cooking a big meal; the pies have already been baked and are cooling off. The family is getting together to mourn June Kashpaw, who died in a snowstorm on Easter Sunday, walking home from the city. June is a figure larger than life, and her death is in a sense her rebirth. Although absent, she holds together the Kashpaw family and the Chippewa community, as well as Erdrich’s short story cycle *Love Medicine* because there are stories to tell about how she lived and died. However, Erdrich’s is not an Indian tale celebrating spirituality, ritual, myth or the sanctity of nature in the tradition of the first writers of the Native American tradition, N. Scott Momaday or Leslie Marmon Silko. Erdrich refuses “to mythologize the reservation, which offers little in the way of spiritual nourishment” (Durczak 108). It is a site of crushing material poverty inhabited by “frustrated, jobless, alcoholic drifters” (Durczak 108). Remembered as strong and attractive, a one-time “Miss Indian America,” “a long-legged Chippewa woman aged in every way except how she moved” (Erdrich 8), June is not a traditional Indian matriarch. An orphan raised by her uncle who lived in the woods, June kept looking for love and a successful career that would allow her to advance in life. “But everything she tried fell through” (9).

When she was studying to be a beautician, I remember, word came that she had purposely burnt an unruly customer’s hair stiff green with chemicals. Other secretaries did not like her. She reported drunk for work in dime stores and swaggered out of restaurants where she’d waitressed a week, at the first wisecrack. (9)

Not a good mother or a wife, she drank and smoked heavily. Albertine has a feeling that June might have chosen to die. “Even drunk, she’d have known a storm was coming. . . . She’d have gotten that animal sinking in her bones” (10).

In the story of the family reunion, June appears in connection with a red Firebird, “a brand new sportscar” (16), which her son King bought with the insurance money he got after his mother’s death. The car is admired, envied and speculated about. In its front seat, King brings his white wife and son. Rather than strengthen a sense of a single identity, the meeting in the warm kitchen smelling of pies and potato salad becomes a site of confrontation between various Native American identities of the late 20th century. Grandma and Grandpa, “the two old ones,” no longer live in the family home but have “moved into town where things were livelier and they didn’t have to drive so far to church” (12); Grandpa, educated in

246 a boarding school, who used to be a tribal activist, cannot remember what it was like. "Elusive, pregnant with history, his thoughts finned off and vanished" (19). His brother Eli, hidden by their mother in a root cellar and never sent to boarding school, has the reputation of being the best hunter around. "Say, Albertine, did you know your Uncle Eli is the last man on the reservation that could snare himself a deer?" (29); Gordie, June's ex-husband, who drives an old Chevy, is drunk all the time and cannot stand up straight. "It was true, Gordie's feet were giving him trouble" (27). King is a war veteran; to Eli's question about "the first thing [he] ever got," King replies: "A gook. I was in the Marines" (30). Lipsha, June's second son, whom she tried to drown when he was a baby, cannot come to terms with the memory of his mother and has a difficult relationship with his half-brother King. June's cousins Amelia and Zelda attempt to be career women; unlike their mother, Grandma, they are neither dedicated mothers nor wives. Confused about whether family or profession is more important for a woman, feeling inferior to men and insecure, they are often abusive to one another. "Between my mother and myself the abuse was slow and tedious, requiring long periods, living in the blood like hepatitis" (7). "[H]usbandless, childless, driving a fall-apart car" (5), Albertine feels uneasy about going home and confronting her mother.

The family reunion ends in an outburst of frustration and violence. During the night all the pies are smashed. Urging her husband to leave the reservation immediately, Lynette, King's "full-blooded Norwegian" (32) wife, expresses the ambiguity and the "liquid" character of identity in the American society: "You always get so crazy when you're home. We'll get the baby. We'll go off. We'll go back to the Cities, go home" (42).

The red Firebird will make it possible for King and Lynette to go back to the Cities, the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, a large metropolitan area where they can mingle with the multicultural American mainstream of the mid-1980s. In an interview with Josephine Reeds, Louise Erdrich refers to cars as "vehicles of the spirit." It is not difficult to foresee that Lynette and her husband will be back to the reservation, as King has strong emotional attachment to his Uncle Eli whom he loves and his half-brother Lipsha whom he hates. King's lack of education will most likely prevent him from succeeding in the Cities, so he will keep bringing his frustrations to future family gatherings in the Kashpaw's house.

In Erdrich's story, the character most likely to advance in the city is Albertine Johnson, who is studying to be a nurse. She may not become a female version of the "Armani Indian," "a prosperous urban Indian professional of the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries" (Durczak 107) since as a nurse, she will still be serving others rather than following an independent career. Nevertheless, unlike her aunt June, Albertine will not have

to depend on men for financial support, and in time she should be able to replace her “dull black hard-driven” (Erdrich 5) Mustang with a new car.

In “The Biggest City in the World” from Chacon’s collection *Chicano Chicany*, the range of travel is much wider than in the first two stories. The writer takes his protagonist on a transnational and transcultural journey. A graduate student of history from the United States lands at the airport in Mexico City and begins a trip he has long saved for and planned. The grandson of Mexican immigrants, Harvey Gomez, with an Anglo first name and Hispanic surname, like the writer Daniel Chacon, comes from a working class California Chicano family. His father, a postal worker, could never afford to travel, so Harvey is the first one in the family to go to Mexico City, a place revered by the Mexicans and regarded as the biggest city in the world. But the capital’s cosmopolitan atmosphere makes Harvey uneasy because it undermines his sense of identity. He does not speak Spanish, as his parents, like so many Mexican Americans in the mid-20th century, believed that their son’s opportunities in the United States would be greater if he spoke only English. In the tourist areas of Mexico City, Harvey is taken either for a rich gringo or a young Mexican out of place in expensive hotels or restaurants. He does not know how to handle beggars or use the public transportation. The traffic, the noise, the churches, museums, and national monuments, such as the castle in Chapultepec Park “where jumped los niños heroes” (Chacon 22) defending the city from the American invaders in 1847, all add to the protagonist’s confusion. He wants to go back to his hotel room, where he contemplates jet lag. Helpless and childish in his uncertainty as to who he is, Harvey is confronted by his American professor of Mexican history, whom he runs into at the airport. “A foot taller” (21) than most Mexicans, with plenty of money, knowledgeable and rational, Professor David P. Rogstar has appropriated Mexico City; the professor knows his way around the museums and can deal with taxi drivers and beggars. The story also hints at “some intimate memory” (23) of his past romantic affair in Zona Rosa. Harvey, ignorant and clumsy, annoys Rogstar, who tries to avoid him. Distracted, Harvey loses all his money. Rather than further upset him, this incident motivates him to look for ways out of the awkward situation. His sudden mobility, as he desperately keeps looking for his wallet, becomes his strategy of resistance. The search for lost money turns into a search for a new identity, neither the identity of a poor Chicano, who, like his father, could never afford to visit Mexico City, nor that of a white tourist or academic, there to colonize Mexico with material wealth and historical knowledge of the city’s past, enclosed in its museums and monuments. Once Harvey becomes penniless and wholly dependent on others, he learns how to interact with people, how to share, to receive and give alms and to live in the

present moment. Thus he becomes prepared for a genuine transcultural experience. In the last scene of the story, riding in a taxi, not knowing exactly where he is going or how he will pay for the ride, Harvey at last feels free in Mexico City. He is no longer bound by the dilemma of who he is or who he is not, an American, a Mexican, a Mexican American or a Chicano, but becomes like a *flaneur*, open to what his journey to Mexico City will bring. The Mexican capital, which had frightened Harvey at first with its “large, wide avenues, the likes of which he had never seen except on postcards or in movies set in Paris” (21), becomes for Harvey Gomez a cosmopolitan metropolis of the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, an urban macrocosm, a home to modern man of any race, class or gender, any ethnicity or nationality.

Although the modern condition of liquidity, brought about by technological and economic developments, has been destabilizing tradition, upsetting conventions and becoming a source of anxiety in our time, ethnic Americans have been turning instability and mobility to their advantage. “Liquid times” have given them the opportunity to search for new “homes” in the American society. With modern means of transportation and communication at their disposal, black Americans, Native Americans and Mexican Americans are in the process of surmounting their limitations and overcoming marginalization. The language contemporary American ethnic writers use to speak about mobility, powerful in its simplicity and otherness, is meant to attract readers’ attention.

The three stories, Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use,” Louise Erdrich’s “The World’s Greatest Fishermen,” and Daniel Chacon’s “The Biggest City in the World,” reflect ethnic Americans’ increasing mobility, “metaphorical, metaphysical, as well as physical” (Cummings), facilitated by technological progress in the sphere of transportation and communication in the second half of the 20th century. Such prospects were announced as early as in the opening lines of Ernest Gaines’ 1968 story “The Sky Is Gray.” The eight-year-old narrator from a small black town in Louisiana is waiting for a bus to take him to Baton Rouge: “Go’n be coming in a few minutes. Coming round that bend there full speed. And I’m go’n get out my handkerchief and wave it down, and we go’n get on it and go” (2594).

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