

## *Stories of diaspora and domestic shrines*

Diana Simpson

Date: 2 December 2009

Hypothesis :

Post modernity is characterized by a nomadic experience. One of the ways in which the migrant links to the culture of origin is by the creation of domestic altars.

Design can tap into this ritual to create domestic functional objects and bridge the gap between sacredness and functionality.

## *Introduction*

Through the length of this essay, I will look at how the contemporary world is permeated by an experience of displacement. Amidst this border disarticulation, the cultural identity for the migrant is transformed.

These stories of diaspora become the foundations for the reconstruction of a new identity, which is nurtured and complemented by the migrant's experiences throughout the journey.

Cultural identity, in the context of the migrant's journey, needs constant ritualization and performing for it to conserve and strengthen its presence in the individual's everyday life. The importance of space in this ritualization is enormous, in particular the domestic. Because of the initial rupture brought by the departure from the original home, the enactment of identity reinforcing ceremonies through the collection, and worship of objects is performed in the new domestic space by the means of altars, which symbolically link the migrant to the lost home.

These sacred, individual and personal constructions act as receptacles for the migrant's nostalgic remembrance of their past home, and act as well as cohesion spaces for the creation of new semiotic landscapes.

## *Departure*

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

Lao Tzu

The beginning of every story about a journey starts with a departure, an abandoning of the place called and perceived as home. To talk about departures in the contemporary world involves talking about the concept of migrant<sup>1</sup> and migration. "Migration, in its endless motion, surrounds and pervades almost all aspects of contemporary life". (Papastergiadis 2000: 1) Many contemporary perspectives of modernity place the migrant, the nomad, the stranger, as a central figure to symbolize the contemporary diasporic reality. (Papastergiadis 2000: 11)

The departure stage in the nomad's journey can be seen as the beginning of an important cultural exchange process... "We need to understand the flows of cultural change from at least two perspectives: the movement of people and the circulation of symbols". (Papastergiadis 2000: 15)

Identity is as much about where we come from as it is about where we are. The constant influx of immigration in today's contemporary world, and the postulation of the nomad as a the future citizen of the world calls for an exploration of the journey of migration in terms of the impacts on cultural identity, personal histories and the possibilities derived from these bricolages of semantic values.

This outsider<sup>2</sup> brings with her<sup>3</sup> a new language, a different history. The figure of the stranger, in this context, becomes an important ingredient in the conception of new cultural discourses. "...now that (s)he was in a new land who could tell what normal was" (Chambers 1994: 18)

Identity, here, is constructed while on transit, while on the move (Chambers 1994: 25), and within the confinements and allowances of the journey's path. This identity is a transitional identity, one constructed from new experiences and new influences. The journey brings with it the revaluation of the nomad's previous cultural assumptions; while on the move, the nomad starts a cultural shedding process. "Migrancy involves a movement in which neither the point of departure nor those of arrival are immutable or certain. It calls for a dwelling in language, in histories, in identities that are constantly subjected to mutation, always in transit". (Chambers 1994: 5).

---

<sup>1</sup> A migrant is "one that moves from one region to another by chance, instinct, or plan" (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/Migrant> (Accessed 21 Nov. 09).

<sup>2</sup> The concepts of migrant, nomad, outsider and stranger, in the context of this essay, will be used as interchangeable words to describe a migrant.

<sup>3</sup> Because of the user profile for this project, I'll be using the female gender to refer to the figure of the migrant.

The concept of border is being challenged by these diasporic movements, borders are becoming organic delimitations that are in constant shift. These concepts are not only geographical and political boundaries, but rather flexible, mutable constructions. (Papastergiadis 2000: 59) This transformation of histories and identities starts with the departure, when the physical bridge between the nomad and her home land is broken by travel; the border is crossed. Thus, the journey has begun.

### *Transit*

I had dropped one form and not taken on another.

J. Rutherford

Being self-aware while on transit, while distancing from the origin, while on the journey, allows for the experience of transformation to take place. (Chambers 1994: 42)

The process of this journey, which is more an inner journey, takes place in a series of transitional stages, with each one contributing to the conformation of a new hybrid skin. This journey can be a sort of peeling process, after which a new, fresh skin is grown, and becomes the surface for the construction of new meanings that will condition the nomad's perception of her surroundings. "Our sense of belonging, our language and the myths we carry in us remain, but no longer as 'origins' or signs of 'authenticity' capable of guaranteeing the sense of our traces, voices, memories and murmurs that are mixed in with each other histories, episodes, encounters". (Chambers 1994: 19) As a result, the safekeeping, and the re-evaluation of memories and traces of the past becomes essential for the nomad during the journey. The migrant's personal history, language, cultural identity and family traditions are not destroyed during the journey, but rather anatomized, questioned and repositioned. (Chambers 1994: 24)

Furthermore, it is important to "...recognize that the migrant's relationship to the past is at best metaphorical rather than a rigid translation. The attempt to bring near what is distant is not an

example of treating space as a tabula rasa upon which predetermined desires or retroactive nostalgia are fulfilled, but is an exercise in forging a sense of continuity and meaning out of discontinuous fragments". (Papastergiadis 1996: 41-42)

Nevertheless, the evolution of a culture is generated from several unconscious "borrowings, mimetic appropriations, exchanges and inventions". (Werbner & Modood 1997: 4) So the construction of a cultural identity is always conformed by different layers of traditions and imaginations. "Traditions are forms for the articulation of memory and meaning". (Papastergiadis 1996: 8)

The importance of space in the context of construction of identity becomes more relevant when considering it as a dynamic delimitation where identities are constantly interacting. (Papastergiadis 2000: 4). "Space is both a transformative force and a field that is transformed by the interactions that occur within it" (Papastergiadis 2000: 52)

In the context of the nomad's journey it is essential "...to conceive the dwelling as a mobile habitat" (Chambers 1994: 4). The domestic space becomes an emotional construction, one that travels with the nomad. This nomadic dwelling becomes the receptacle for the nomad's memories and experiences. It becomes the space that documents and safeguards the migrant's story. The everyday and domestic spaces have become the containers of much of the "...dynamism of national identity, changing subtly as well as dramatically". (Edensor 2002: 23)

This flexibility, and ability to encourage mutation and transformation, gives the domestic space a huge importance when it comes to thinking about transitional, nomadic identities. Moreover, for national and cultural identity, the domestic becomes the stage for re-enacting itself, and consequently, conserving its power. (Edensor 2002: 65)

For this transitional stage in the migrant's journey, the private space not only documents the present, but also, predisposes for the future. "The cultural microcosm of the home, like culture in general, is not only a reflection of what people are but also moulds what they may yet become". (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981: 188)

## *Arrival*

Nothing is so awesomely unfamiliar as the familiar that discloses itself at the end of a journey.

Cynthia Ozick

The importance of the domestic space in the stage of identity construction refers to the need to make sense and create cohesion "amidst ceaseless flow". (Edensor 2002: 57)

Domestic objects help encourage emotional connections by giving familiarity to the nomad and, thus, reiterating the identity of the individual through symbols. (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981, 187) These objects act as containers of cultural values. "Objects are not static entities... they themselves are signs, objectified forms of psychic energy. Whether through action or contemplation, objects in the domestic environment are meaningful only as part of a communicative sign process and are active ingredients of that process". (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981: 173)

The construction of the domestic, and the collection of objects within the dwelling space involves a sort of 'curation' where objects are assigned a special place. (Edensor 2002: 58) The importance of objects in the personal space is related to the power of these objects to express the individual's sense of self (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981: 190), and the ability to connect with the nomad's past and memories.

Furthermore, as the complexity of everyday life becomes predominant, the need for introducing elements of narrative to the domestic space becomes 'one of absolute necessity'. (Chapman 2005: 142) The performing of narrative in the domestic space "...rather than being merely a recursive reinscription of authority, myth, magic and ritual... use aesthetic hybrid forms to juxtapose unlike images to play out implicit social conflicts, challenge authority and subvert everyday morality". (Werbner & Modood 1997: 7)

These ceremonies are "...a highly condensed, symbolic model of connection by bringing together sacred images and ritual objects, pictures, mementos, natural materials, and decorative effects which

represent different realms of meaning and experience-heaven and earth, family and deities, nature and culture..." (Turner 1999: 27)

By the same token, these sacred spaces in the domestic are perceived as "sites of cosmic conjunction" (Salvo 1997: 38), private 'domestic devotions' inflamed with "...spiritual wealth and visual opulence". (Salvo 1997: 1) These domestic spiritual niches "...tell intimate personal histories" (Salvo 1997: 18) and by means of them "...the holy is conjured through the conjunction of space, objects and time". (Salvo 1997: 37)

The domestic shrine is not only a representation of memories and traditions, but the material reflection of the nomad's values and personal history. (Turner 1999: 21) However, at arrival, the iconography of these altars of devotion can be infused with new and foreign meanings, creating as a result, an aesthetic hybrid. (Olalquiaga 2009: 398) and thus, representing the nomad's own story of transformation.

The domestic altar "...makes visible that which is far away; it works the potential for communication and exchange between different but necessarily connected worlds, the human and the divine". (Turner 1999: 7)

Every culture throughout history has a particular sense of the sacred, the objects that relate and embody it, the spaces where it dwells, the new experiences it can induce and the ways in which the conjunction of the sacred and the mundane can transform and reshape the individuals. (Salvo 1997: 37)

## *Within space*

Within the sacred space, the borders between reality and symbolism become momentarily suspended (Olalquiaga 2009: 401). The sacred space and the artefacts within it, conform a mnemonic construction that helps mediate between the nomad and the feeling of nostalgia for the past left behind. (Edensor 2002: 116)

Domestic *altars*<sup>4</sup> reflect individual histories, memories of the past and desires, and by engaging in the ritual of the altar, the owner reiterates a sense of belonging. (Olalquiaga 2009: 398) The props that constitute the altar act as stabilizers of identity (Edensor 2002: 113), since “objects are prosthetic extensions of persons; persons materiality constituted by objects”. (Werbner & Modood 1997: 20)

Objects, like language, possess the power to express meanings (Edensor 2002: 113). “We explore memory through the material objects that acquire meanings and resources through embodied practice...” (Hallam & Hockey 2001: 1) This group of unique symbolic practices are the result of particular cultural and individual traditions and lifestyles (Olalquiaga 2009: 393) that find expression through the performing of the altar ritual. Altars “... familiarize transcendental experience by creating a personal universe from mainly domestic resources”. (Olalquiaga 2009: 393)

These kind of mnemonic practices give new perspectives and meanings to the past, while at the same time communicating new possibilities for the future. (Hallam & Hockey 2001: 2) The enactment of the domestic altar ritual is a liberating one, one that is free to imagine new relationships with the sacred symbols, which, in turn, require no legitimization. (Turner 1999: 27) In the context of the domestic, private devotions become rich symbolic constructions, free from authoritative approval. Also, the importance of the performance relies on the fact that “...it is at these moments that they believe that they stand at the intersection of the matrices of the cosmic order,” (Salvo 1997: 38) and as part of such, are able to communicate with the divine.

---

<sup>4</sup> The author refers to the Spanish term *altares*, which is a direct translation for the English word altars.

The construction of personal identity is metaphorical, (Papastergiadis 1996: 41-42) and is constituted by memory. (Hallam & Hockey 2001: 25) "...memories operate to render present that which absent." (Hallam & Hockey 2001: 3) So, objects within the domestic shrine become the symbolic links between the nomad and her culture, her memories and her past, because a domestic altar is 'unique and unrepeatable' and is embedded with the personal, and individual experience of the person that assembled it. (Olalquiaga 2009: 392)

Personal history and identity, for the nomad, is built on the journey. Its collected objects and heirlooms become amulets and charms that strengthen the cultural identity of the nomad, while assisting the creation of new meanings, which are products of new interpretations and influences from the wanderer's experience.

This almost natural and unconscious subverting of cultural symbols is the essence of the journey, and from which the diasporic identity is formed. "The stranger's identity is defined through the oscillation between being inside and outside of the group," (Papastergiadis 2000: 67) so the domestic becomes the space where identity is reinforced. "As displacement, rupture and fragmentation become the dominant motifs for articulating the prevalent forms of experience in the modern world, it becomes vital to think again about how such experiences can be communicated". (Papastergiadis 2000: 95)

## *Bibliography*

- Appadurai, A. 1996. *Modernity\_at Large. Cultural Dimensions of globalization*. Minnesota: Public Worlds.
- Chapman, Jonathan. 2005. *Emotionally Durable Design. Objects, Experiences and Empathy*. London: Earthscan.
- Chambers, I. 1994. *Migrancy, Culture, Identity*. London: Routledge.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M & Rochberg-Halton E. 1981. *The meaning of things. Domestic symbols and the self*. Cambridge: Cambridge Press.
- Edensor, Tim. 2002. *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday life*. New York: Berg.
- Hallam, E. & Hockey J. 2001. *Death, Memory and Material Culture*. London: Berg.
- Hobsbawm, E. & Ranger, T. 1983. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Olalquiaga, C., Candlin, F. & Guins, R. 2009 *The Object Reader*. New York: Routledge.
- Papastergiadis, N.1996. *Dialogues in the diaspora : essays and conversations on cultural identity*. London: Rivers Oram
- Papastergiadis, N. 2000. *The Turbulence of Migration*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Rutherford, J. 1990. *Identity : community, culture, difference* . London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Salvo,D. 1997. *Home altars of Mexico*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Turner, Kay. 1999. *Beautiful Necessity. The art and meaning of women's altars*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Werbner P. & Modood T. 1997. *Debating Cultural Hybridity*. London: ZED Books.
- Williams, G. 2009. *Telling Tales. Fantasy and Fear in Contemporary Design*. London: V&A Publishing

## *Conclusion*

To conclude, the domestic is a highly emotional space, which, as it deconstructs while on transit, is reconstructed once more upon arrival. The importance of the dwelling in the cohesion mechanisms in the migrant's journey is enormous. This private space becomes the receptacle of the story, the past and the memories of the individual. Like such, the domestic sacred qualities are enhanced as the ritual of the altar is performed, and developed. The organic and flexible nature of domestic altars creates visually and symbolically rich nooks that reflect the migrant's personal life, which is in constant transformation.

The conservation of cultural identity requires constant ritualization, and by the means of the private altar and the collection of objects within it, the nomad conjures the essence of the journey, the ancestors that came before her and the home left behind. Therefore, these objects help ease the nostalgia brought about by the displacement in the beginning of the wanderer's journey. Altar objects assist in rites of passage, and act as guides in transitional stages.

These sacred objects- both family heirlooms and new acquisitions, and their place in the enactment of the altar ritual, or the mnemonic ceremony that the home altar embodies- help re establish traditional cultural structures and create new awareness of the contemporary everyday life, "... (altar building) is both a recovery of and a challenge to her family tradition and cultural identity." (Olalquiaga 2009: 399). As a result, these objects help in the construction of new sets of semiotic bodies.

In the context of the domestic sacred space, the relationships between material objects and imaginative processes are of extreme importance, and the introduction of fiction and narrative processes to daily life are essential. "Common to all tales is the fact that they have a beginning, a middle and an end. Linguistics and historians describe these as the essential characteristics of a narrative." (Williams 2009:15) In the overall story of the migrant, these stages are translated as the departure, the transit, and the arrival, which involves the scrutiny of the new domestic environment.

Altars are individual formulas that help digest the intricacies of the emotional challenges in the diaspora. By placing an object in the context of the altar, it automatically becomes a sacred object.

The personal becomes the sacred. The everyday, domestic, taken for granted, here, takes the shape of

a sacred and magical object. The everyday, functional objects that surround us in the domestic space can be reinterpreted and rediscovered in the context of a ritual or a sacred ceremony. And, as a result, revamp their semiotic contents. Nevertheless, it's important to underline the centrality of function in the hypothesis for this project, and the relationship between sacredness and functionality are to be considered crucial.

As a response to this issue, for my project I chose an object that can be used both as an altar where objects of value can be placed, and as well a sort of heirloom in-itself; an object valued by its emotional attachment to the owner, and as a result, could be potentially inherited or passed on.

During the first stages of the research for this project, I noticed an important similarity between the behaviour of domestic altars and other behaviours at home, that in themselves are very ritualistic, such as bookcases, dressing tables and boudoirs, food display and banqueting, and lastly work spaces.

I decided to choose one of these domestic behaviours and merge it with the concept of the altar, thus enhancing its ritualistic aspects. The dressing table became, in this context, a kind of altar to the user. The centrality of the individual in the enactment of this behaviour, and the personal qualities surrounding it, made, the dressing table, the best choice for the further development of the project.

As the analysis of my hypothesis went on, it seemed evident that the importance of these altars and the collected objects displayed on them, were central to the migrant's daily life, and the relationships with these could be encouraged by making the altar space an object of devotion in-itself.

The development of the mannequin shape as the choice for the piece, sought to emphasize the centrality of the individual, the migrant, in the process of sacralisation of mnemonic objects. The mannequin, then, would become a literal reflection of the nomad's journey and experiences collected, while safekeeping the most revered and sacred objects and memories within its own body, just as a locked chest would do.