

UTOPIAS OF SELF IN IMAGINARY HOMELANDS

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Moving between different homelands involves constructing utopias of place and self. Such mythical past, present and future selves are intertwined with the construction of imaginary homelands in the writings of transnational Canadians, for whom the quintessential questions of the Canadian imagination - Who am I? and Where is here? – continue to be unsolvable dilemmas.

Keywords: Transnational Writing, Identity, Utopia

Utopie del sé in patrie immaginarie

L'intrecciarsi di rappresentazioni utopiche di sé passati, presenti e futuri con la costruzione di patrie immaginarie emerge in modo prominente nella scrittura di soggetti canadesi transnazionali, per i quali le domande centrali dell'immaginario canadese – chi sono? e dove è qui? – continuano ad essere dilemmi irrisolvibili.

Parole chiave: scrittura transnazionale, identità, utopia

Introduction

In the master narrative of migration, utopia in its classical meaning of “good place – no place” is not uncoupled from issues of identity (crisis) triggered by displacement. Moving between different spaces, whether physically or imaginatively, triggers, indeed, a utopian construction of both imaginary homelands and imaginary selves. However, rather than simply build an anachronistically idealized mythical place and self, migrant utopias embrace a revisited notion of utopianism that elicits critical thinking and offers alternative viewpoints in contemporaneous debates, such as those concerning national identity and related issues of home and belonging.

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In postmodern times the concept of utopia, like that of identity, has undergone a profound reconceptualization and has come to be understood in terms of process rather than product. Just as identity is redefined as fluid, shifting and dialogic rather than fixed and static, utopia is reformulated as a provisional, reflexive and pluralistic space from whence to attempt the kind of critical thinking that enables «a paradigm shift of consciousness» (Sargisson 2002: 3). Instead of focusing on utopia as the blueprint for a perfect society, utopianism as process generates, in other words, a space in which new and different ways of relating to the world are possible. Its strongest function is, as Levitas claims, «its capacity to inspire the pursuit of a world transformed, to embody hope rather than simple desire» (28). Lucy Sargisson emphasizes this transformative potential with her notion of «transgressive utopianism», which is «subversive», «critical» and «creative» in that it questions values and systems, gestures towards alternative ways of living and being, and permits us to radically change the way we think (2002: 1-3). Utopias, she contends, are “no places” wherein to challenge paradigms, break rules, confront boundaries, «play with alternatives, explore ideas to their limits [...] approach the world with a fresh viewpoint» and ultimately «be different» (Sargisson 2001:140).

Central to this new idea of utopia(nism) is the focus on alterity, difference, diversity and political agency. In their discussions of contemporary feminist utopianism both Sargisson (1996) and Wagner-Lawlor (2013) highlight, for instance, how women deploy utopia to confront and readmit their otherness, to catalyze socio-political transformation and aspire toward multiple possibilities of female subjectivity beyond the confines of sameness. Utopian thinking becomes for them an expression of feminist resistance through which they can adopt a «speculative standpoint» (Wagner-Lawlor 14) to invent new images of themselves and of a world in which they can be active agents.

In a similar fashion, nomadic subjects embrace utopia as part of their search for “multi-identity”, so as to reclaim a renewed sense of self that not only accommodates their difference and diversity vis-à-vis the old and new socio-political contexts in which they are located, but also readmits their agency as political and imaginative subjects. The utopias of migrants, it is argued here, have the transgressive and transformative power to rethink the definition of self beyond the categories of ethnic identity and to ultimately imagine the construction of a transnational, cosmopolitan subjectivity.

The Utopian / Dystopian Continuum

The migratory experience is no doubt fraught with the (de/)construction of multiple utopias. On one hand, there is the utopian projection of the promised land

as a blissful Eden, a safe haven and an Eldorado in which to settle, prosper and enjoy an easy life. On the other, there is the utopian envisioning of the lost homeland as a nostalgically longed-for idealized mythical space which preserves remnants of past selves and kindles the dream / hope of future return. In between there is the construction of the ideal ethnic community in the new country, which is an often anachronistic miniature replica of the motherland that both shelters migrants and traps them in stereotyped representations of self.

Arising from a dissatisfaction with the socio-temporal reality in which they are created, all these utopias mirror aspirations and dreams for the future, but also encompass the darker side of utopian dreaming and can easily mute into dystopias. In the narratives of transnational Canadians, for example, we come across the recurring representation of Canada as a utopian / dystopian space, an ambivalent non-place / place which first kindles and then dissipates the migrant's hopes for a new life of freedom and prosperity. This movement from promised land to *unheimlich* host land is well-exemplified in Dionne Brand's novel *In Another Place, Not Here*, where the Trinidadian-Canadian writer debunks the myth of Canada as a welcoming country of immigrants and denounces the ethno-racial premises of its multiculturalism. For Elizete, the young Caribbean protagonist, Canada initially represents the utopia of freedom and escape from her slave-like existence; it is imagined as the place in which she can be a free Black lesbian woman and no longer suffer the physical, sexual and psychological abuse inflicted on her by her husband. Upon arrival in Ontario, however, her utopian vision is dramatically shattered when she is raped by her white employer in Toronto. While re-establishing gender, racial and class hierarchies, the abusive act triggers an erasure of Black identity which is upheld by the city's erasure of ethnic difference and by its treatment of Afro-Canadians as sub-humans: «it wraps them in the same skin and slides them to the side like so much meat wrapped in brown paper» (182). Although Toronto becomes a dystopian space for Elizete, Brand's narrative embraces an alternative conception of utopia which opens up possibilities for the Black female lesbian self. As the title suggests, utopia is located elsewhere, it a nowhere that is not-yet, not-now, «which is to say», as Wagner-Lawlor claims, «non-existent» (14); yet, by seeking alternative ways of being nowhere, the migrant can challenge existing reality and yearn for an ongoing re-invention of self.

The loss of identity that immigrants face when their utopia of the promised land is dissipated by the hardships of settlement and assimilation often fosters feelings of nostalgia and the construction of the lost homeland as a mythical Eden, a lost paradise which preserves traces of the lost self and of cultural and linguistic identity. Being intrinsically bound to the need to retrieve the former pre-immigrant self, this utopian homeland is the projection of the immigrants'

desire for home, rootedness and belonging. Yet, since it is construed on memories which are elusive and shifting, it too may turn into a dystopian anti-Eden, especially when immigrants return to their native country and are confronted with an estranged reality. Italian-Canadians, for instance, for whom the return journey is a collective obsession, acknowledge that the romanticized motherland of utopian dreaming is rather a stepmother that neglects its immigrant children: instead of welcoming them home, she considers them foreigners, exiles to another land who are no longer fellow nationals¹. The utopia of Italy as a mythical home which emerges in their writings has, thus, the critical function of challenging the very notions of home and national identity, which are re-imagined in pluralistic terms in the utopian nowhere.

An example of such a questioning of nationalism is found in Caterina Edwards' creative autobiography *Finding Rosa*, where she wrestles with her multiple national alliances – the Italian, Venetian, Istrian, British and Canadian – and emphasizes the need to redefine her sense of self beyond conventional nationalist paradigms. Her narrative, which is a postmodern attempt to reconstruct her Venetian-Istrian past through her senile mother's fragmented memories, historical documents and other people's stories, deploys utopia's ironic critical edge² to re-inscribe her immigrant identity from the altered perspective of transnationalism. Indeed, the unexpected discovery that her mother was part of the Italian enclave in Istria, and not simply from the province of Venice as she had always believed, leads her to question her sense of belonging and the illusory nature of her former self-construction as Venetian. Moreover, her uncovering of the troubled history of Istria, a multicultural region that alternatively belonged to three nations in the span of a just a few decades, dissipates the ideal of nation as a marker of identity and conversely posits the possibility of envisioning nation, home and citizenship as imaginative spaces beyond political and geographical boundaries. The utopian self she yearns for is a transnational and translingual subject who can co-belong to multiple spaces and feel at home somewhere therein.

The possibility of thinking a transnational and transcultural subject into being allows Canada's immigrants to imagine new ways of inscribing their ethnic presence and provide alternative answers to the 'Who am I?' dilemma. Ukrainian-Canadian writer Janice Kulyk Keefer, for instance, argues that, in-

- 1 See, for instance, Grohovaz (1974), a first-generation Istrian-Italian immigrant who ambivalently sees Italy as a loving mother and a cruel stepmother.
- 2 Cf. Wagner-Lawlor (2013) who argues that feminist utopian / dysoptian and speculative narratives are structured by what Linda Hutcheon calls «irony's edge» in the title of her 1994 book; being Janus-faced irony looks both backward, criticizing past actions and ideas, and forward toward the future (Wagner-Lawlor 5-6).

stead of trying to explain *the* Canadian identity in fixed, unitary terms, it is more productive to acknowledge Canada's diversity and multiplicity by recognizing «a truly national vision in our ongoing struggle to create and sustain a country which locates its distinctive ethos in the dynamic reality of its multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-cultural population» (1995, 180-181). In both her fictional and non-fictional writings³, Kulyk Keefer confronts the transgenerational legacy of ethnic (un)belonging and addresses the problems of being Janus-faced, of looking out, that is, in two directions, to two homelands. Her realization is that, while immigrants and their descendants cannot neglect or erase their ethnic backgrounds, their hyphenated condition can nevertheless be transformed into an advantage, as it opens up new possibilities of self-definition and agency for ethnic subjects. Indeed, her utopia of a transcultural Canada, which accommodates ethnic differences while establishing bridges with other groups, redefines Canadian identity beyond old European models of nationhood and reimagines Canada as the common ground in which all its «disparate voices» can be joined in «a polylogue» (1995: 197).

Utopias of the Nomadic Self

A key feature that postmodern utopias and migration narratives have in common is the notion of travel. As Wagner-Lawlor explains, the «speculative witness» we find in feminist utopias is a dynamic, future-oriented traveller who is «always projecting a farther horizon» and «while never reaching it» she yearns to continue travelling because it is only by travelling that she can «grow a narrative of her own» (15). Her achievement «will be the invention of the journey itself; her assurance that while the journey will be incomplete, she is that much closer to her (moving) horizon» (22).

In their utopian search for selfhood migrants are also endlessly embarking on journeys, so much so that the journey becomes equivalent to identity. In her travelogue *Tracks*, Genni Gunn explains how her obsession for travel is a «yearning for metamorphosis» (8), a need to recreate herself elsewhere, to explore «new landscapes and emotional terrains» (8), to ensure «the possibility of discovery versus the claustrophobia of continuity» (9) and to ultimately re-invent herself anew with every new voyage. Motion and movement elicit the construction of her identity as an ongoing process in which her past, present

3 Like Edwards, Kulyk Keefer reconstructs her Ukrainian-Polish lineage in her family memoir *Honey and Ashes* (1998) but also addresses ethnic-related issues in various essays.

and future selves are not only mythical utopian idealizations but are constantly changing like the elements of the natural world. Describing her journeys to Italy, her mythical home, she admits, for instance, that each return involves «an adjustment, a re-evaluation, both of myself and others», since both place and self are altered by memory. The mythical home becomes a ghost town, an imaginary home / not home, where past selves are elusive, imaginary recollections.

As a speculative traveller Gunn imagines an identity that rejects the ethnic subject's obsession for roots and locates it instead in the possibility of exploring ever-new routes⁴. According to Woodward, while «[r]oots offer a means of marking ourselves out as different from others and the same as those who share the same stories of origin» (144), routes are open to diversity and possibilities; they are a process that equates the «potential for change and the desire to look forwards as well as backwards» (136). Gunn's engagement with travel is thus a rejection of the ethnic subject's need for rootedness and an acceptance of rootlessness as part of identity. Rooting herself in travel, rather than in a specific place, she situates herself in a «multidimensional locatedness» (Wagner-Lawlor 14) that shatters the boundaries of ethnic constructions of self and posits her as a cosmopolitan subject, a standpoint from which we become «better citizens, more aware of the inequalities present» (9). Conceiving this cosmopolitan utopian self implies not only a moving away from ethnicity as the immigrant's main identity marker, but also a calling forth of a new agency not only at the community or national level, but also worldwide.

Conclusion

For *displaced* people utopia is an unreal space of hope and desire, a no-place of imagination and invention where they can seek some sort of temporary, elusive emplacement. What is imagined in this creative and critical no-place are the possibilities of new identities and alternative ways of being (situated) in the world. Indeed, as they look both backward to imagined home(land)s, which are never as they used to be, and forward to the future, in search of ever-new horizons, migrants embark on an endless journey of self-reinvention, in the hope of arriving home somewhere. Utopia is thus a constant search, an aspirational yearning for a shimmering but enticing mirage, an imaginative travelling toward new dimensions.

4 Gunn has spent most of her life “on the road”, following the routes of train tracks that crisscrossed the Italian landscapes during her childhood, or those of highways across Canada when she was on tour with her rock band.

Utopia is also a space in which to catalyze change. The transgressive utopianism that emerges in the writings and experiences of these nomadic subjects aims to subvert those notions of ethnicity that either uphold ethno-cultural stigmas of identity or require the erasure of ethnic difference in order to transit toward a post-ethnic condition. The ideal of self that is imagined is that of a transnational and transcultural being who does not deny ethnicity but accommodates ethno-cultural difference as part of a fluid, dialogic and processual selfhood. Situated beyond borders, this new utopian transnational, cosmopolitan self can escape the restrictions of nation and home which hinge on the myth of a stable identity and embrace ways of being plural, diverse, ironical and inventive.

In the context of migration utopia is, ultimately, a strategy of resistance. By embracing utopian thinking migrants can indeed confront and imagine ways of countering the deep loss of identity they experience as displaced subjects, as well as envisage new socio-political realities that value their difference and otherness.

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