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ABSTRACT OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

SPACES OF APORIA IN TONI MORRISON'S AND SANDRA CISNEROS' FICTION

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

Keywords: space, heterotopias, utopias, time, aporia, identity, mestiza consciousness, impasse, paradox, blockage

The aim of the present research has been to analyze the extent to which mental, real and fictional space could represent a source of psychic, physical or virtual impasse, restlessness and paradox, which may create various states of aporia. As the title suggests, the research has revolved around the concept *spaces of aporia*, which we have considered relevant and useful in our exploration of the characters' mind in the fictional texts under scrutiny.

The two major terms this thesis has been constructed on (space and aporia) have been discussed in the theoretical chapter and considered two pivot concepts whose meanings have been extended with the introduction of various dimensions and other synonymous terms. While exploring the concept of space, for instance, its relation to time has also been touched upon, likewise Lefebvre's anthropological views on space, Beavers' concept of "tight space," Foucault's definitions of *utopia* and *heterotopia* and especially, and most importantly, Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of "mestiza consciousness" which has served us to support the basic meaning of aporic states.

In our analysis of space, in the theoretical chapter, we have looked at its three dimensions – physical (social), mental, and hybrid, both from Lefebvre's anthropological view and from Edward Soja's description of space as First-, Second- and Third-. The shift of space from the physical, including the social dimension, to the virtual (or mental) form has been connected to the space of consciousness and, by extension, to the space of memory.

Herman Beavers' concept of "tight space," which he applied to Toni Morrison's characters, has helped us discuss the mental and spiritual estrangement of the consciousness from the community in Morrison's novels. The estrangement Beavers describes is also identified as a form of physical seclusion within the micro- or macro-space of the community. The reason for bringing into discussion Beavers' concept of 'tight space' lies in the meaning of the adjective, 'tight', which denotes an uncomfortable feeling of pressure mainly if it is connected to space. In line of this argument, Nicholas Rescher's study (2009) contributes with his use of the plural form of "aporetic," which takes us back to Plato and his definition of aporia.

What has also caught our attention is the intriguing interaction between the physical and the mental spaces. This has led us to the hybrid forms which Foucault describes as *utopias* and *heterotopias*. Both spatial forms prove to be genuine hybrid forms which emerge from the physical space to the mental one. During this process it seems that the spatial hybridity that is being shaped plays with the real world, it juggles it and tosses the fragments that it produces. *Heterotopias* are generated the moment when one single place is attributed different spatial perceptions; hence the possibility of heterotopias to convey more meanings, usually different from the physical immediacy of the real place in which the meanings are generally juxtaposed. Although reaching a transcendental level of existence, *heterotopias* are still grounded in reality, utopias do not benefit from a real ground, their genesis being based on a process of negating reality, of constructing a completely imaginary one which usually remains at the level of consciousness or at the mental level.

Michel Foucault's description of hybrid spatial forms, mainly in the case of heterotopias, strives to reach a kind of balance between the physical space and its imaginary counterpart. However, this allegedly balanced co-habitation proves almost impossible in the case of utopias

since the mental dimension ends up by completely taking over the physical space, left with no real ground to be anchored to.

No space can be discussed, or understood, outside the concept of *time*. Henri Bergson's distinction between *time* and *duration*, as early as the beginning of the twentieth century has enhanced the meaning of subjectivity as regards consciousness. To this, we can add all the psychoanalytical approaches to consciousness from Freud onwards. Once granted duration, time gains its own space at the level of consciousness where temporal coordinates are ranked side by side, allowing retrospective movements, otherwise impossible in the objective dimension of time, to come to the surface.

As regards the other pole of the conceptual phrase that our research has addressed, *aporia*, we have considered it to denote a mental and spiritual state of blockage and impasse caused by the simultaneous encounter of two or more individually consistent, but collectively incompatible, references. We have grounded the definition, and use, of aporia on both Plato's philosophical and rhetorical understanding of the term in the dialogues and on Derrida's reconsideration of the concept in his *Of Grammatology*. While with Plato, aporia means both blockage and confusion, with Derrida it enlarges its meaning in the sense that the mind which reaches an aporic state is well-aware of the contradicting ends and accepts them as such. Instead of looking for the real meaning and not being able to decide which is real and which is false, the individual mind may accept all meanings as possibly real. This annuls any hierarchical distinction in the choice of meanings. Grounding her analysis on Plato's understanding of aporia, Andrea Nightingale describes a *sine qua non* condition of *aporia* which means that one must be aware of both the blockage and the impossibility to pass it. To this, we can also add Stephen Ross' theory of one's identity threatened by dividing multiplicity, which may lead to the forming of aporia at the level of consciousness.

Without using the term aporia, Gloria Anzaldúa describes the state of "mestiza consciousness" as a hybrid social and cultural consciousness of Chicanos/Chicanas, who are always split between two worlds: their own by birth and the adopted one by choice. At theoretical level, "mestiza consciousness" could be seen as the embodiment of an aporic state, first, because it functions as an inner battlefield where cultural voices fight for allegiance or priority. They speak both simultaneously and chaotically, leading to the *mestiza* become trapped at the juncture of disorienting and highly incompatible frames of reference, despite their individual consistency. Second, the *mestiza*, who in Anzaldúa's interpretation of the concept is female, meets the requirement of self-awareness: she is aware of the blockage she faces and, realizing the impossibility of passing it, she develops a hybrid identity. On a similar note, Homi Bhabha sees this hybrid state as camouflage, as a way to survive the chaos. Thus, the *mestiza* becomes an illustrative example of a type of aporia in which identity is divided or becomes multiple, creating confusion and blockage.

Returning to the first research question that we have addressed in the theoretical chapter (whether the physical space produces the mental one or the other way round), we have argued that, in its transcendence, space does not necessarily occur from the physical to the mental; it may first occur in the mind and be later transformed into a physical version of space. If transcendence starts from the mental utopias are created. The mental space born in the context of utopia is always asking for physical embodiment, but due to the fact that it has no ground on reality, the quest for physicality is never-ending.

In the subsequent chapters we have applied the concepts described in the theoretical chapter to a selection of literary works by Toni Morrison and Sandra Cisneros. In doing so, we

have also attempted to provide consistent answers to the research questions addressed in "Introduction".

The second chapter, titled "When Heterotopia and Utopia Meet Aporia," has aimed at answering two questions: *How does the consciousness react to the hybridity of utopias and heterotopias? –* and *– Can both utopias and heterotopias be considered proper sources of mental aporic states?* In order to explore the two concepts and, hence, provide proper answers to the questions above, we have divided the second chapter into two sections. The former, "*Beloved* – Heterotopia of Deviation," has brought to the fore Morrison's novel in the attempt to describe the space of house 124 as heterotopic and coin it "a heterotopia of deviation" in Foucauldian terms. The house proves to be an example of heterotopia in the sense that the physical space of the house gradually manages to exceed its strictly social function and convey more meanings and functions than the ones provided by reality. Therefore, the house manages to transcend its social or physical immediacy and to function as a *topos*, in which other spaces may be formed.

Applied to Morrison's text, the moment Sethe kills her daughter, the house is perceived as a cemetery, because both the protagonist, responsible for the crime, and the other characters associate the house with the image of the dead child. Following the general law, according to which everything is based on a *cause-effect* rule, the reader is aware of another perception taking over the physical space of 124: the ordinary social purpose of the house is replaced with a strongly ethical one aimed to punish the author of the crime. As a result, the house starts functioning as a prison in which the characters are sentenced to isolation from the rest of the community. Furthermore, and step-by-step, the house gathers the features of an asylum when the state of madness, which the protagonist becomes a victim of, is revealed. Thus, a simple house has the power to transcend its immediacy and stand for a cemetery, a prison and even for an asylum in the end. Taking into account the meanings which the cemetery, the prison and the asylum share, we consider the house 124 to be a heterotopia of deviation, since all these spaces which juxtapose within the physical space of 124 are intended to isolate the protagonist, whose behavior is perceived as deviant from the ethical norms of the community.

Interestingly, in a heterotopic space, the consciousness uses the social or physical dimension of space to generate hybrid, mental spaces which, if destabilized and disoriented, may lead to aporic states of mind. In Sethe's case, the heterotopic space of deviation (cemetery, prison, asylum) is based on the contrasting dialogue between the community blame and the individual consciousness's motivation. The simultaneous existence of guilt and relief in Sethe's mind generates an aporic state which she cannot control or leave. The blockage her consciousness is facing increases the moment Beloved turns up. We have argued that Beloved stands for the power of time to transcend its social immediacy. Our analysis has revealed a temporal entanglement within which the past (Beloved) haunts the present (Sethe) and tries to co-exist with it while the future (Denver) is too scared to take over. From this point of view, Morrison's novel does not only reveal the *heterotopia* of 124, but also its *heterochronia*. The aporia Sethe is facing is also the result of her past traumas that continue to torment her, which proves that she is still struggling to cross the invisible borders of slavery. By borrowing Bergson's term, Beloved functions as Sethe's subjective time always dragging her back into the past.

In the other section of the chapter, "*The House on Mango Street* – A Utopian House of One's Own," we have analyzed space as hybrid utopia. While, as we have previously shown, heterotopias are fertile spaces for aporic states, in this section we have focused our attention on utopias aiming at their ability to shelter aporias as well. Therefore, we started from the premise

that utopias also represent a type of hybrid space since they extract elements from the reality realm and use them in a distorted form. Therefore, utopias are generally regarded as mental spaces able to offer the individual consciousness what reality fails to do. Consequently, they are perceived as spaces of harmony, stability and satisfaction.

In our analysis we have come to the conclusion that the mental and spiritual stability in utopias is questionable. Esperanza, the protagonist of *The House on Mango Street*, is the character whose consciousness is doomed to stretch between the social space, which does not satisfy her, and the mental one, which she projects from the distorted elements of the former. The physical space she lives in proves to be a space in which limitation is to be recognized everywhere, from the narrowness of windows and the strictness of fences to the wives locked inside by their husbands. In this context, she starts dreaming about an ideal house, which would stand for both self-accomplishment as a writer and her freedom as a woman. What she continually refers to as her *own house* bears deeper meanings: it stands not only for an ideal habitat which would finally be able to provide her with the so-much-desired privacy, but also for the space of independence and self-accomplishment, away from all the constraints imposed by the excessive patriarchal society she witnesses on Mango Street. However, the more the protagonist distorts reality in order to shape the house of her dreams, the more the relation between the two grows adversative. And we, as readers, find out that what becomes the most affected by this clash is her own consciousness. Esperanza may become an independent woman with a successful career as a writer, but escaping Mango Street and leaving behind all it means is impossible. No matter what happens, she will always be anchored there, on Mango Street, by her roots as a Chicana and as a woman.

Returning to the research questions that we have attached to the chapter, we argue that the relationship established between the consciousness and the hybridity of heterotopias and utopias is grippingly mutual. First, because in both cases it is the consciousness that cuts sequences from the reality realm and then transfers them to the mental level. In the case of the heterotopia of 124, Sethe's consciousness cuts sequences from her slavery past which, being granted absolute existence at the level of her consciousness, eventually turn into the motivation of her murder. Once the physical murder is committed, the private consciousness is added the public one of the community, who uses the act itself to convey the house other spatial meanings: cemetery, prison, asylum. In the case of Esperanza's utopia, it is the consciousness again that facilitates the blending of the dissatisfying reality with its upside-down version. However, the final hybridity of both *heterotopia* and *utopia* starts rebelling against the same consciousness to which it owes its formation and existence. This hybridity seems to be so disorienting and tormenting that it irreversibly plagues the consciousness which becomes torn between the physical and the mental. Sethe's consciousness cannot find her consistency anymore as it gets scattered within the highly confusing frames of reference she is assaulted by (the cemetery, the prison, the asylum). Esperanza's consciousness undergoes the same state of blockage between the physical and the mental, because the space she is dreaming about proves to resemble a utopian one, which she would never be able to inhabit unless she escapes from the reality she is still anchored to. While heterotopias create distortions because of the various perceptions of reality which disorients the consciousness, utopias prove to be tormenting spaces for the consciousness due to their tendency to distort reality to such an extent that the individual finds himself/herself in the position of negating the reality it intrinsically bears.

While in the second chapter our main focus has been on the blending of the physical and the mental in the form of hybrid spaces with a view to revealing one possible way of aporia

creation, in the third chapter titled "Spaces of Social and Moral Decay in *Jazz*," the perspective has been slightly changed. We have considered the physical and the mental separately, with the precise aim to find out whether either of the two spaces may lead to aporic states or whether it is necessary for them to blend and mix to generate aporias. The analysis has been based on Toni Morrison's *Jazz*, which, we argue, disassociates the physical coordinates and the social space of the City from the moral dimensions and the inner space of Joe's and Violet's consciousness. In our analysis we have shown that the City may be read as a genuine social aporia and as a space based on dichotomies. It plays with the citizens' social consciousness like a puppeteer, placing them in social situations that are collectively incompatible. It seems to offer freedom, but it actually lures the citizens into misconduct and it enslaves them. It functions as a chaotic jungle in which individuals are given only two options: to hunt or be hunted, with no other possibility in-between. And within this urban maze, they function either as a predator or as a prey. Paradoxically, the key to survive is to know how and when to handle two mutually exclusive weapons: hospitality and offence. The citizens are caught in-between and they must prove capable of versatility, because only by being ready to change the technique at any time needed, can they survive. The City requires flexibility, because stability would mean social death.

Moreover, it is within this space of contradictions in which Joe and Violet are seeking social integration and stability. But gaining it means being absorbed by this space and embracing its reversed values, which is exactly what turns the citizens from ordinary social individuals into predators and criminals. Being assaulted by strikingly different social frames of reference, they develop a consciousness as hybrid as the social realm in which they live: it blends innocence and evil. The social dichotomy becomes recognizable at the level of their own consciousness: the same Joe who politely sells beauty products also kills an eighteen-year-old girl whom he has had a love affair with, and the same Violet who does women's hair in the neighborhood attempts to attack the already dead body of the girl inside the church. The physical decay of the City is transferred to the citizens' consciousness. Therefore, we may assert that the physical space proves strong enough to distort the individual's mind.

The conclusion we have reached at the end of the chapter is that even in isolation, both the physical and the mental space can create aporic states of consciousness. They do not necessarily have to act together in order to generate aporia, but in the process of intensifying impasse and restlessness, their blending becomes essential. It is in the decayed space of the City that the two protagonists, whose consciousness has already been damaged, are burnt to their ashes.

The fourth chapter "*Song of Solomon* – A challenge to the Concept of Space" has focused on the challenging process of space decoding. In this way we have used the concept of space in its very complex meanings that we have described in the theoretical chapter. Our analysis has led us to the assertion that the protagonist of the novel, *Song of Solomon*, reveals more subtle dimensions than those expected from a character pursuing his coming-of-age process. First, Milkman seems to be so much anchored to the ground that he may be described as a *ground character*. First, because of his tendency to limp and second, because of his regret of not being able to fly. Taking into account these characteristics, Milkman seems to share the features of the ground. Not only is he constantly called by the ground as if it intended to swallow him, but also he is called by the past, especially by the past of his family and the family's ancestors whose traumas are poured into his consciousness, as if it were a cauldron. Therefore, the phrase *his past* does not strictly imply the life experiences lived by Milkman, but mainly the experiences lived by the other characters.

Milkman proves to function as a mental space which slowly swallows all the other characters' *aporias* in the form of past sufferings and traumas. Therefore, he functions not only as a private mental space sheltering his own dilemmas and impasses, but also as a collective one. Interestingly, the exterior aporias dumped on him seem to pair the personal ones in the sense that they either clarify or are clarified by them. What has also caught our attention is the way in which his own aporic space behaves when it encounters the ones belonging to the others. Although, at first, Milkman rejects any interaction with them, his consciousness becomes emphatic and accepts them all. At some point in the novel Milkman's consciousness gets caught between a desperate need to escape the aporic space that traps him and the sense of responsibility towards his family and ancestors. However, Milkman decides to follow the routes which finally lead him to his own roots. By unifying his self, he releases the other characters from their own tormenting aporic states.

In the last chapter "*Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* – A Collection of Aporic Spaces" we have focused on the broad conceptual power of space and have attempted to convert other concepts into spatiality by analyzing Sandra Cisneros' collection of short stories. We have come to the conclusion that other concepts can also function as mental spaces which either generate or heal aporias. The first concept subjected to a spatial interpretation has been time. Leaving aside its objective (social) meaning, we have focused on it as a mental space mainly based on the process of continuous accumulation of personal experiences which may include reversible time or regress. If the temporal synchronization with social time is annulled, one of the most common sources of mental aporia is abolished. Thus, time may become a mental space which shelters and protects the individual from experiencing (social) dissatisfaction.

In this respect, Sandra Cisneros' protagonists are the victims of a cultural clash which sends its vibrations at the level of the consciousness where they are perceived as traumas, resulting in psychic ruptures. Within the space of culture, the Chicana finds herself trapped between two loud voices (Mexican and American) which speak to her simultaneously, leading to a never-ending chaotic space or, as Anzaldúa describes, to *mestiza consciousness*.

Moreover, in Cisneros' selected stories under scrutiny, there is a clear distinction between the masculine and the feminine space, which we have referred to as *womanness* and *machoness*. While the former seems to dominate the latter through violence and intimidation, by the end of the collection of stories, things take a radical turn. What may be called *womanness* proves to be something more than a space of naivety and weakness; it becomes a *sui generis* space which does not need any masculine presence to rely on. The space the Chicana moves in exceeds the border of her house. Rejected and badly treated, the Chicana starts exploring other spaces, such as art and culture in her constant search for the peaceful space of love which she seems to be doomed not to find.

Summing up the reaction of Cisneros' protagonists, we may conclude that they genuinely and inherently embrace the characteristics of the *mestiza consciousness*. The first struggle they undergo is the struggle of being torn between the voice of their Mexican roots and the voice of American escapism. Comparing Morrison's protagonists to Cisneros', we have found out strong mental and psychological resemblance with both, which supports our argument that *mestiza consciousness* can also be applied to non-mestiza individuals.

Sethe is not a Chicana or a mestiza, but her consciousness is as torn as Esperanza's. The former is blocked in a continuous retrospective space and the latter in a prospective one, both living in a mental aporic state of impasse and impossibility. Joe and Violet's search for social integration mirrors the identity consistency which Cisneros' Chicana aims at, while exploring a

number of spaces (culture, race, gender, art, love) in order to eventually find one able to shelter her divided self. Just as Joe and Violet enter the City, try to immerse by converting to its jungle rules, hunt, kill and eventually heal themselves of all these, so does Cisneros' Chicana throughout the spaces she explores: she fights for allegiance (gender), struggles to take shelter (love) and finally finds the space where she feels she completely belongs to (art). However, what we have called *mental aporia* reaches its peak in Milkman's case. The state of mental and spiritual chaos Morrison's character is subjected to is the result of the clash of frames of reference which are not all directly connected to Milkman's reality realm. Some of them are simultaneously and suddenly passed on him by all the other characters; hence the depth of the aporia he is facing. Therefore, Milkman's consciousness becomes both vertically and horizontally torn as we witness his consciousness stuck between the sense of moral responsibility towards his ancestors (horizontal aporia) and the desire for escapism (vertical aporia). Besides his own state of aporia, he also has to face an inherited one whose eventual solving would bring not only his reintegration in the family chain, but also his own healing.

Taking all this into account, this research has demonstrated that that within its inexhaustible metamorphoses, physical (social), mental, heterotopic and utopian spaces may generate aporic states at the level of the individual consciousness. These states are mainly translated as states of mental or spiritual blockage caused by various present and past traumatic experiences which create disorientation, impasse, the impossibility of moving on without a proper healing. Through our analysis we have also proved that the mental rupture and insecurity which normally characterize the *mestiza consciousness* can be applied not only to Cisneros' Chicana, but also to Morison's protagonists as mental aporic spaces.

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