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## Memory and the Flows of Identity in Hatoum's Amazon

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### Abstract

Geopolitical national borders have long created homogenous, stereotypical, and fixed identities in order to serve a nation-building myth. In this paper I analyze the (de) construction of fixed notions of identity, region and nation through the use of memory in the short stories "Um oriental na vastidão" [An Eastern Man in the Vastitude] and "A Casa Ilhada" [The Island House] of the book *A Cidade Ilhada* [The Island City] by Milton Hatoum. In these short stories the homodiegetic narrators present characters from various parts of the world (Japan, England, and Switzerland). Milton Hatoum, an immigrant descendent, intertwines fiction and childhood memories. He undoes the homogeneity of identity traditional of the regionalist writing of the Amazons by touching upon the theme of immigration in his native city of Manaus and the integration of this new community into Brazilian society. This analysis will work with the premises of Albuquerque Jr.'s theory in the book *A invenção do Nordeste* [The invention of the Brazilian Northeast]: the region is an "invention". In "Um Oriental na Vastidão" and "A Casa Ilhada", these inventions consist of memories that bring different regions and subjects together and engender 'world nets' that promote "cultural global flows" (Appadurai). I argue that Hatoum's narratives challenge not only the normative discourse of *mestiçagem* (mixing) in the foundational discussion about Latin American identity (Lund, Joshua) but also imply a simultaneously local and global construction of this identity. These stories provide new insights into the notions of the national body and the national subject not only by setting their narratives in the naturally transnational region of the Amazon jungle but also by depicting the complex cultural and social networks of the Amazon as memory (de)constructions.

### Keywords

Amazon; Milton Hatoum; Identity; Memory; Region

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"Ever-newer waters flow on those who step into the same rivers."  
Heraclitus.

National identity is often forged by a rhetorical discourse that emphasizes homogeneity and fixed identities. In the case of Brazil, a country with continental dimensions, this process has implied a regionalization of the country and a microscopic homogenization of the corresponding regional identities. Therefore, the construction of the Amazon in literature walks a tightrope, always facing an imminent danger of falling on a net of stereotypes. In this paper, I analyze the short stories "Um Oriental na Vastidão" [An Eastern Man in the

Vastitude] and “A Casa Ilhada” [The Island House] of the book *A Cidade Ilhada* [The Island City] by Milton Hatoum to assert their (de)construction of fixed notions of identity, region and nation through the use of memory in the space of the Amazon.

The literary oeuvre on the space of the Amazon has been largely told by foreigners who often used a Manichean perspective, either portraying it as a Green Hell or as a Paradise. Milton Hatoum alternatively has a distinct perspective from the traditional regional writing about the space of the Amazon due to his ambiguous outlook as a ‘migrant insider’. He was born in Manaus, capital of the state of Amazonas in 1952. His father was a Lebanese immigrant who married a Brazilian woman of Lebanese descent. Hatoum (1993) credits his perspective of the Amazon as a multicultural city partially to this migrant status of his family:

During my childhood, living with the foreign Other occurred in my own household. As a son of an Eastern immigrant married to an Eastern descended Brazilian woman, I was able to discover the Others inside of me since I was a child. The presence and passage of foreigners in my own childhood home contributed to increase my multicultural horizon (“Escrever à Margem da História”, n.d., para. 3. Own translation).

Hatoum also seems to have been doomed to be a migrant himself. In 1967, he moved to Brasília. Later, he moved to São Paulo and, subsequently, lived in Spain, Paris and the United States. Despite his migrant life, Milton Hatoum believes that the memories from childhood and adolescence are decisive for an author (Hatoum, 2012). Indeed, the childhood memories of the Amazon and its liquid space became the *topos* for Hatoum’s literature.

His first published fictional text was a poetry book called: *Amazon: um Rio entre Ruínas* [The Amazon: a River in the Midst of Ruins]; and all of his subsequent fictional writings have the liquid space of the Amazon as the primary setting for their narratives. According to Hardman (2007), the poetics of the water in Hatoum’s books functions very similarly to Gaston Bachelard’s concepts on the relationship between water and reverie for a writer’s creative process (Bachelard, 1998). As Bachelard (1969) explained:

[...] the further one goes toward the past, the more indissoluble the psychological memory-imagination mixture appears[...]Memory-imagination makes us live non-event situations[...]in our reverie which imagines while remembering, our past takes on substance again (p.119).

Truly, Milton Hatoum articulates the *motif* of the waters of Manaus and the process of memory in order to construct the fictional liquid Amazon grounding his creative process on three vertexes: remembering, forgetting and imagining. In a personal interview I had with Hatoum, he used the words of Borges to confirm the flux of remembering and forgetting the Amazon in the creation of this literature: “Forgetfulness is one of the forms of memory, its empty basement” (personal communication, May 27, 2011) For Hatoum, the imagination corresponds to the time of re-appropriation of memory, filled by forgetfulness.

Strongly influenced by Flaubert, Milton Hatoum believes that “working with words” must be an extensive and arduous process; therefore, he is known for taking a long time to publish his books. Besides, the long intervals between his publications allow the process of oblivion and remembering to thrive. Indeed, *A Cidade Ilhada*, a collection of short stories, is the result of 18 years of work. The short stories were written between 1990 through 2008.

These stories have characters from different parts of the world: migrants and travelers that are interconnected through the cosmopolitan space of Manaus. Hatoum has taken advantage of his own experience to recreate a Manaus very familiar to him. In our personal interview, he talked about his experience growing up in Manaus:

My childhood consisted heavily in listening to the stories of the people who passed by Manaus: migrants' stories, indigenous maids' stories, foreign shipmen's stories... [stories of] all those people who arrived and left Manaus...worlds that were very different and, at the same time, interwoven (personal communication, May 27, 2011).

As a matter of fact, in Hatoum's literature Manaus functions as a transitional place, an in-between space, where different worlds come together and the different characters create their unique dynamic web. The theorist Homi Bhabha (1994) calls these subjects who live in such in-between spaces liminal subjects. These liminal subjects are products of cultural hybridity capable of provoking moments of historical transformation and defying the notions of fixed identities often used to support nation-building discourses.

*A Cidade Ilhada* is not only a portrayal of the diversity of Manaus but also it testifies to the transformational power of a hybrid society. The travelers and migrants are not merely seen as foreigners. They are personally/emotionally/ metaphysically intertwined with the Amazonian space. In order to make assertions about the hybrid space of Manaus in *A Cidade Ilhada*, two short stories from this books will be analyzed: a) "A Casa Ilhada" [The Island House], which had been published in the newspaper *Estado de São Paulo* with a different title: *Encontro no Bosque* [Meeting in a Forest] in 1998; and b) "Um Oriental na Vastidão" [An Eastern Man in the Vastitude], previously published in France. These two stories will help us to reflect upon the construction of liminal subjects in the book and, therefore, upon the notion of national and regional subjects.

In "A Casa Ilhada", an unknown Amazonian homodiegetic narrator tells the story and proceeds to describe the trip of Lavedan, an ichthyologist from Switzerland, and his girlfriend to a house surrounded by water on the outskirts of Manaus. Although Lavedan's foreignness to the space of the Amazon is heavily emphasized, this character has peculiar qualities that prevents us from considering him a mere visitor.

At first, the narrator describes Lavedan as a dislocated foreigner in the Amazonian society: "Some children laughed when they saw that tall, very skinny, bald, pinkish face man awkwardly placed in our canoe." (p.71, own translation)

Throughout the narrative, one can notice that, despite Lavedan's description as a foreign character dislocated from the region, he is recognized by locals as having a profound knowledge of the Amazonian nature. Therefore, the awkward character is somehow also considered to be deeply connected to the locale. The Swiss ichthyologist Lavedan of *A Casa Ilhada* was a "foreign voice" (p. 70) that explained the aquatic life of the Amazon River and that had seven fishes from the equatorial zone named after him (p. 75). Lavedan has an ambiguous relationship with the local because he is an outsider, for being a foreigner, and at the same time he has an inside knowledge of the locale. This ambiguous relationship between Lavedan and the tropical space contributes to feature Lavedan as a liminal character.

As a symbolic “in-between the lines metaphor” of this liminality, the author compares Lavedan to the *tralhoto* fish (a fish native to the Amazon). The *tralhoto*, also known as the “four eyed fish”, is capable of seeing below and above the water surface simultaneously.



Figure 2: The Tralhoto Fish

In the short story, Lavedan explains to the narrator the uniqueness of the *tralhoto*'s eyes. While explaining the *tralhoto* to the narrator, Lavedan looked at the fish, mesmerized by the mirror-like image that seemed to multiply his own eyes. The narrator describes this moment as follows: “Lavedan’s eyes meet the *tralhoto*’s, and both remain just like this: fish and man, quiet, enchanted by the magnetism of so many eyes looking to the inside and to the outside world”. (p. 70, own translation) Similarly to the *tralhoto*, Lavedan’s knowledge of the Amazon and personal connection to the region make his European Self a *tralhoto* fish. Therefore, Lavedan is able to have this dual perspective of the inside world, the Amazon, and the outside world, the European.

The fluidity between the Self and the Other is also explored in the most decisive episode of the short story. Retelling the memories of his trip to the island house with Lavedan and his girlfriend Harriet, the narrator describes the appearance of a Dervish dancer at the bar called *Shangri-lá*. The name *Shangri-lá* is a reference to a fictional place described in the 1933 novel *Lost horizon* by British author James Hilton. *Shangri-lá* has become a synonym for any earthly paradise, isolated from the outside world. Evoking an atmosphere of a mythical Orient, the space was the setting for a mambo dance between the supposed Dervish man and Harriet: “To the surprise of the bohemians, he danced so well that the orchestra played only for him and Harriet, who let herself be taken by the swirls of the Dervish” (p. 74, own translation).

This sensual dance caused the jealousy of Lavedan and, later, his departure to Europe without Harriet. After that dance, “Lavedan understood everything was over. The three years of their relationship and the two months living in the Amazon became an atrocious memory of the only night at *Shangri-lá*.” (p. 74, own translation)

The identity of the Dervish dancer remained an enigma, a riddle to which I would propose the following answer: the Dervish dancer is the representation of Lavedan’s tropical

alter ego. This hypothesis is based on the ambiguity of both identities sustained throughout the short story. Both characters have subtly similar physical descriptions. The Dervish dancer is described as a “tronco de pau-de-ferro” (p. 74). The translation of this expression requires some explanations. The literal meaning would be “trunk of ironed wood” and the real translation would refer to a person too stiff for dancing. The description of the Dervish dancer leaves the reader with the same impression of awkwardness left initially by Lavedan.

Besides the similarity in the physical description of the characters, the unclear subjects on Harriet's letters to Lavedan (sent after he had left her) also maintain the ambiguity of identity in the short story. In her first letter, Harriet says: “*Shangri-lá* has closed but we danced on that small island: our residence.” (p. 74, own translation) Who are the subjects referred by the pronoun “we”? In the aquatic world of the island house, could the Dervish dancer be the representation of the Lavedan's Other Self in the tropical space? As in a state of trance, such as the experience of the Sufi dance, has Lavedan transformed himself? Has he connected to his Oriental/Amazonian Other through his European Self?

The liquid space of the narrative does not pose any answers; on the contrary, it suggests reverie and fluidity of identity. As G. Bachelard asserts: “The water is a type of destiny, the simple destiny that transforms itself into the essence of Being.” (1969, p. 6) Thus, duality of the poetic space of Manaus, also known as “the floating city”, relates to the duality of the Self (Lavedan and the dancer), which enables the establishment of a connection between the space of Manaus and the foreign characters on a metaphysical level.

In “Um Oriental na Vastidão”, the metaphysical transformation of a character also suggests the encounter of the Self and the Other through the element of water in the space of the Amazon. A female narrator, professor at the University of Amazonas, fulfills the function of the homodiegetic narrator of the story. She constructs her narrative with the memories of when she was invited by the university to accompany a Japanese biology professor, Kazuki Kurokawa, on his first trip to the Amazon. Kurokawa traveled the Negro River with the female professor and the boat rider, Américo. Kurokawa was realizing a childhood dream: getting to know the Negro River. Like Lavedan, Kurokawa is not portrayed simply as a tourist. The narrator acknowledges that he knew more about the region than herself and the boat rider, Américo, did”. The narrator describes Kurokawa as the following:

[...] he had read about the fauna and flora of the Negro River: he was familiar with Ducke's, O'Reilly Sternberg's and Vanzolini's researches. And he explained, using scientific terms, why the waters of the Negro River were as dark as the night[...] I had the impression that he knew more than I did, than Américo did, and that trip was just to confirm his previous knowledge (p. 32, own translation).

Indeed, Kurokawa also undergoes a transformation after he travels alone on the Negro River. Américo, who saw the Japanese after this trip, described Kurokawa's transformation to the narrator:

Darkish, he looked like a *caboclo* [mestizo] with white hair. Also he learned some words from our region. He told me: “Thank you, bro, your boat is *pai d'égua* [cool] [...] He nodded his head and thanked me in Japanese and said “good-bye” with a small smile (p. 33, own translation).



As with Lavedan, an epiphanic and transformational experience happened to Kurokawa. Kurokawa's transformation is subtly symbolized by the metaphor of the natural phenomenon of the confluence of waters from the Negro's and the Solimões' Rivers. The meeting of the waters is a natural phenomenon caused by the Solimões River's muddy and tan-colored waters and Negro River's dark waters. The two Rivers seem to flow parallel to each other without mixing for about 5 miles to form the Amazon River.



Figure 2: Solimões River at the confluence with Negro River

Kurokawa had already pointed out how apparently such different Rivers ultimately transform themselves into one: "After crossing the Negro River... we are going to reach the clear water lakes, aren't we? The same River with different names." (p.31,. Own translation) A clear parallel is established by the author between the confluence of the Rivers and the transformation of the Japanese character Kurokawa, who is first seen as a foreigner, merged into a different Self, capable of containing both the Oriental and the tropical world.

His deep connection to the Amazon is confirmed by his last wish. After his lonely trip to the Negro River, Kurokawa went back to Japan to die. However, his last desire was that his ashes could flow in the waters of the Negro River. Two government officials of Japan went to the Amazon and had the female professor that accompanied Kurokawa in his first trip scatter his ashes at Paran  da Paz, an area in the Negro River. A ceremony was carried out and Kurokawa's final wish came true. At this very moment, the narrator remembered the words of the ideogram Kurokawa had given her as a gift during his first trip: "In the unknown space resides the desire." (p. 30, own translation)

Kurokawa's desire of experiencing other cultures is very similar to the description of Milton Hatoum (1993) of his own experience as a migrant:

[...] the desire of knowledge is also the desire of traveling[...] As a philosopher of alterity affirmed: "this very same desire is the desire of traveling, expatriation, getting out of my own place."[...] It's as if a traveler distanced himself from

the “Margins of History”, in order to assimilate other cultures, without losing the compass that points to his own North [...] It is less a geography than a place what I look for. A place that doesn't exist anymore, a utopic place that only exists in memory. (“Escrever à Margem da História”, n.d., para. 8. own translation)

In search of his desire, Kurokawa dies to find himself in confluence with the utopic place that unites his Japanese and Amazonian Selves. Kurokawa and Lavedan were foreigners, in Kristeva's terms: “torn between here and elsewhere, now and before” (1991, p. 10). The desire and the connection of these characters to their different Selves occurred through the ambiguity of their own transient identities.

From these two stories some conclusions can be made: As the relationship between memory, history and imagination becomes inseparable, the borders of the Amazon touch far regions through a process of cultural plurality symbolized by the cultures and languages brought by the migrants and travelers of the stories. Therefore the idea of homogenous nations has been dissolved (Anderson, 1991) by the premise that there is no homogenous region.

It is important to perceive that the ‘region’ in Brazil has strongly sustained the idea of the national homogeneity. (Albuquerque Jr., 1999) In a country with continental proportions, diversity within unity is a concept largely used to patch leaks of the myth of national unity. Going one step further from Gilberto Freyre's (1952) assertions, who considered the region as an element of diversity in the national discourse, Albuquerque Jr. (1999, p. 26. Own translation). argues that the regions also go through a process of homogenization and in order to sustain the speech of diversity they become monolithic blocks of discourse: “The region is the product of a battle...it is not a unity that contains diversity; instead, it is the product of a process of homogeneization”.

Therefore, the Amazon has been used as a symbol of nature (either a lost Paradise or a Green Hell), but never as a cosmopolitan hub. Taking this premise as a bulwark to understand Hatoum's stories set in the Amazon, his non-fixed characters, created by the ink of memory and imagination, imply a simultaneously local and global construction of identity. Setting the narratives in the naturally transnational region of the Amazon, Hatoum depicts the complex cultural and social networks of the Amazon as memory deconstructions.

The metaphors of nature to symbolize these cultural encounters are definitely overtly explored in the stories. The use of landscape in the process of memory was a topic of reflection for Simon Schama's in the book *Landscape and Memory*. Schama (1995) asserts:

For although we are accustomed to separate nature and human perception into two realms, they are, in fact, indivisible. Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock (p. 6-7).

The natural transnational space of the Amazon is not only used to connect the characters with nature but also to build a more complex construction of their own identity. Hatoum's stories imply mobility of culture and society as well as mobility of identity. Hence, when analyzing contemporary travel/writings, Graham Huggan observed there is not a place for the post-modern travelers looking for a refuge of authenticity. Huggan (2012, p. 5) affirms that: “...the increasingly normative recognition that cultures are sites of travel, and are

themselves constituted through different kinds of “travel practice”, requires a rather different understanding of travel writing that has usually obtained until now.” Huggan’s reflection goes along with Kristeva’s take on the symbolic meaning of the transient foreigner. Kristeva (1991, p.7) believes that the transient foreigner represents: “A lost origin, the impossibility to take root, a rummaging memory, the presence in abeyance. The space of the foreigner is a moving train, a plane in flight, the very transition that precludes stopping. As to landmarks, there are none” .

It is through the manipulation of the genre of “travel writing” and “the traveler” that Milton Hatoum revises the genre and, therefore, the discourse that has been “constructing” the Amazon throughout the years. The foreign traveler produces the process of deterritorialization which according to Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 508) means “the movement by which one leaves the territory” . This process causes ruptures and interruptions emerging with differences and changes.

Since the colonial period the Amazon has been a theme for European travelers, colonizers, explorers, and scientists for either economic or scientific purposes. However all these writings had in common the supremacy of the European narrator “I” in their texts. It seems that by using the *motif* of European traveler, Hatoum is revising the canonical literature produced about the region and inserting new relevant concerns. Hatoum seems to be creating a new discourse about the region through the local memories of a migrant Amazonian writer.

In the globalized world, the production of the local memories has been not only reexamining colonial discourses but also functioning as a counterbalance factor to the homogenization promoted by the process of globalization. Andreas Huyssen (2001) believes that this process has a profound contribution in the construction of memory of a globalized world:

Slowing down rather than speeding up, expanding the nature of public debate, trying to heal the wounds inflicted in the past, nurturing and expanding livable space rather than destroying it for the sake of some future promise, securing “quality time” – these seem to be unmet cultural needs in a globalizing world, and local memories are intimately linked to their articulation (p.75)

The local memories brought by the stories of Milton Hatoum ‘waves’ back into the heart of the Amazonian discourse the perception of the locale about the foreigners and the history of marginal migrants that ended up living in the outskirts of Manaus (such as the northeastern workers who migrated in the period of the rubber boom). Moreover, it brings a more conscientious attitude towards the region and its inhabitants. The easily forgotten ‘human factor’ is part of the plots that reinforce diversity and the difference of the region.

The stories in *A Cidade Ilhada* show the cultural “global flows” and the plurality of the region without a utopic/idyllic perception. Globalization and plurality do not necessarily mean success and cannot be seen through romantic eyes. In a pungent and revealing episode of “A Casa Ilhada”, the narrator described how the poor stilt houses surrounded the island house, a region only accessible by boat during the flooding period:

The residents of the stilt houses looked at us in surprise, as if we were two foreigners lost in a place in Manaus that could never be considered a touristic attraction. However, the scientist Lavedan, before leaving to Zurich, insisted that we go with him to the island house, stubbornly persisting on canoeing in a place surrounded by poor houses (p. 69. Own translation).



Therefore, the Amazonian space is portrayed as culturally diverse but far from being part of an egalitarian social system; Hatoum exposes its hierarchical power structure. Renato Ortiz (2000) believes that cultural diversity does not necessarily establish an equal system because the institutions that take part in society occupy different hierarchical power status. In order to complement this idea, Ortiz makes a distinction between “diversity and plurality” where diversity is produced socially.

A plural society does not imply that a more democratic or more inclusive way of living is in place. The author argues that a plural society does not mean a diverse society because it does not imply that the power hierarchy transforms society with the same validity. According to him, it is crucial to be conscious about this aspect in the discourse of diversity because at times it could serve to hide inequalities and lack of inclusion in the power realms of society Ortiz (2000) affirms:

Cultural diversity is different and unequal because the various authorities and institutions that create this diversity have distinct hierarchical positions of power and legitimation (strong countries or weak countries, transnational, national governments, western civilization or Muslim world, national state or indigenous groups) (p. 51-52, own translation).

Therefore, Hatoum does not portray “diversity” naturally fomenting equality as the theory of Bhabha (1994) may suggest. However, the social recognition of the impact of a plural society impelled by the transnational economies does not efface the humanistic perspective of the stories.

Moreover, this humanistic perspective defies the simplistic concept of the European Other that neutrally mirrored a society through his observations or that manipulated mythic construction of the new places to suffice his own colonizing purposes. Both of these images portray the foreigners/travelers as unaltered entities and reinforce the superiority of the European traveler/narrator over an impotent tropical Other. Hatoum's stories do not naively efface the fact that the foreigner had the linguistic power of conceptualizing the forest, however this is not a discourse of Amazonian victimization. Indeed the Amazon is capable of transforming the foreigner into an Other. The process does not necessarily imply a Manichean and/or determinist corruption very common in the naturalistic novels of the nineteenth century. Instead, the process brings about the humanization of the foreigner and, therefore, enables to see him/her from a less stereotypical perspective.

Counterbalancing the realistic perception of the oppression in the encounter of global and local, the humanistic perspective in the union of the two rivers to form one is decisive in the making of *A Cidade Ilhada* a complex and intriguing book. The waters of identity are not crystal clear; they are primarily bleary as the Negro River. The reconceptualization of these identities contribute to the reflection of the literary genres and their past representations of the region as well as the new dynamics established by globalized interactions. Identities, regions and nations are concepts not easily defined but certainly truly fluid for being in a constant process of change.

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