

## In Search of an Open Space Among Two Migrant Writers: Ying Chen and Dany Laferrière. For A Theoretical Reflection On Migrant Literature and Space

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**ABSTRACT:** *The contamination between hermeneutical tools of geography and literature, at the basis of a 'cartographical turn' underway in the humanistic disciplines, has allowed us to analyze reality from a different perspective, renewing the epistemological approach to literary texts. It is a particularly fruitful analysis for migrant literature that bears its inscription with space in the adjective that defines it and which expresses nomadism and wandering, mobility and the idea of crossing boundaries that characterize its works. In this study, we will analyze the native places, revisited as places of return, by juxtaposing them with the places of reception in Ying Chen's *Quatre mille marches* (2004) and Dany Laferrière's *L'énigme du retour* (2009). Chen, of Chinese origin, narrates her return to Shanghai in this book and seizes this opportunity to reflect on the significance of this hometown for her, as well as that of her new adopted world. Her return to this place of origin inevitably involves a return to the past, which, in her view, exists solely to shed light on the present. On the other hand, Laferrière allows for a temporal coexistence of the past and the present in his book. This return to the original space appears to be a favorable opportunity that effectively transports him through time, enabling a convergence of two poles that initially seem marked by conflict rather than reconciliation.*

**KEYWORDS:** Migration, Literature, Space, Origin, Return, Dany Laferrière, Ying Chen.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The tendency to prioritize spatial representation is central in the texts of migrant literature, one of the most significant trends in literary production that emerged in Québec since the 1980s. Its contours were defined by critics in pioneering research that contributed to establishing it as a field of study in Québec, and then exporting the notion to other linguistic and national contexts. In 1994, Pierre L'Hérault identified the prioritization of spatiality over temporality as the peculiar characteristic of migrant literature. The critic noted, in fact, that there had been a “changement de perspective intervenu dans les années quatre-vingt, caractérisé par une priorité accordée à la spatialité sur la temporalité”. (L'Hérault 1994: 46)

The adjective 'migrant', which has prevailed in the Francophone context as opposed to, for example, 'ethnic' or 'allophone' or 'Italo-Canadian', 'Helleno-Canadian', etc., expresses nomadism and wandering, mobility, and the idea of crossing borders, characteristics of the works of this trend. In defining the concept of migrant literature, critics have primarily drawn on certain elements of the thought of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Examining the case of Kafka, the two philosophers note that “une littérature mineure n'est pas celle d'une langue mineure, plutôt celle qu'une minorité fait dans une langue majeure”. (Deleuze et Guattari 1996: 30)

It is known that migrant writers write in the language of the host country, but in Québec and Canada, migrant writers, while using French and English, do so from an eccentric perspective and inject the otherness they carry into these great languages of Western civilization. According to Homi Bhabha, the eccentricity of the migrant writer, being straddled between multiple spaces and cultures, leads him to conceive a hybrid, liminal space of continuous identity negotiation, a 'third space' inclusive of difference, which represents the premise for an encounter between cultures without predefined and imposed hierarchies.

The spatial metaphors used by Guattari, Deleuze, and Bhabha – 'deterritorialization', 'nomadism', 'third space' – to define a new relationship of the contemporary subject with the world, testify to the importance of spatial representation in the search for a new identity. In this initiatory journey, carried out by dismantling stereotypical imaginaries and hybridizing language, the migrant writer is one of the main actors. In the works of contemporary migrant writers, the multiplication of overlapping spaces dissolves the tension between here and there, between before and now, between the world left behind and the new space to inhabit, to give voice to characters who negotiate their identity in a global and polyglot way. It is a quest whose main characteristic seems to be that it must never end. In this study and from this perspective, we will analyze the native places, revisited as places of return, paralleling them with places of reception in Ying Chen and Dany Laferrière.

## 2. THE DETACHMENT

Dany Laferrière, a Canadian writer of Haitian origin, showed in his autobiographical novel *Je suis un écrivain Japonais* (2009) how his narrator gets entangled in unexpected affairs after making such a declaration. While Laferrière chose this provocative and expansionist title regarding the identity assertion of his autodiegetic character, Ying Chen seems to move in the direction of diminution, even disappearance, in this matter. The latter, a Canadian writer of Chinese origin, indeed introduced us to novelistic settings that are anchored in no territory in her literary imagination since *La Mémoire de l'eau* (1992). In the seven consecutive novels, from *Immobile* (1992), her fourth novel, to *La rive est loin* (2013), her literary space presents no real or concrete place and is devoid of any local colors, whether those of her homeland or those of her adopted land, just as there is no temporal clue whatsoever. *Quatre mille marches, le rêve chinois* (2004), a collection of essays, is the only exception to this general tendency of the writer. Despite their apparent divergence in identity expressions, these two quintessential migrant Canadian writers converge in

their effort to reach a transcendental space unrestrained by any territorial label. *Quatre mille marches* by Ying Chen takes the form of a collection of thirteen essays, beginning with "Carnet de voyage en Chine", written in 1997 during a trip the writer made with filmmaker Georges Dufaux's crew, who accompanied her to capture her return to Shanghai on film. Meanwhile, *L'énigme du retour* presents itself as a first-person novel adopting a non-conventional fictional form of mixed free verse and prose. For both writers, who have experienced the separation from their homeland and the reception on a new land, there is a recognition of the benefit of the voluntary or forced break, which becomes the driving force for a certain crossing that Simon Harel would call "un acte de déappropriation". (Harel 1992: 383)

First, Ying Chen immigrated to Québec in 1989 at the age of twenty-eight. The uprooting that the young writer of Chinese origin conscientiously chose became the trigger for her writing. In *Quatre mille marches*, she affirms her inescapable need to distance herself from her origin, an experience that proves beneficial as it allows her to forge her identity as a writer while providing her with a "distanciation physique":

La solitude qui résulte de ce détachement, de cet effort pour m'écarter un peu de ma terre natale, me semble essentielle au travail. Elle crée en moi, la conscience de mes limites, me fait rendre compte de la relativité des valeurs, de la multiplicité des vérités. (Chen 2004: 27)

The return to her homeland, organized for work purposes rather than personal reasons, becomes an opportunity to solidify her resolution to detach from her native land. This distancing, however, does not seem to result in rooting in her new host country. Thus, Chen seems to prefer to remain apart, between the two spaces, a characteristic trait of hers that Gabrielle Parker analyzes in her chapter "Ying Chen: an écart indicible" from the book *Traits chinois/lignes francophones*. According to Parker, "Ying Chen use fréquemment du symbole de la parallèle pour structurer l'écart qui sépare les parcours mis en scène entre deux mondes physiques, ou temporels". (Parker 2012: 147) Furthermore, according to Parker, Chen "réfléchit à ces problèmes depuis une position 'entre mondes' – 'between worlds'<sup>1</sup>, via une série de dichotomies opposant passé et présent, Orient et Occident, horizontal et vertical, chacune d'entre elles s'inscrivant dans la tension permanente qui réagit l'individuel et l'universel" (Parker 2012: 160). The writer's will not to belong to a territory arranged by any geographical name becomes evident.

The narrator of *L'énigme du retour* first experienced the desire for detachment when he went to live with his grandmother in Petit-Goâve on his native island, thus separating from his mother at the age of four and then again when he returned to his mother in Port-au-Prince at eleven. It's important to remember the importance of his grandmother Da in his life, as he testified in *L'Odeur du Café* (1991), and his relative detachment from his mother, whose almost insignificant presence in his childhood universe is a significant contrasting aspect. This detachment from the maternal bond partly explains the gesture of the narrator of *L'énigme du retour*, who prefers to stay in a hotel room rather than his mother's house when he returns to bury his father in Port-au-Prince. The image of this mother is doubled by that of the motherland, which has also experienced the distancing of its nationals. The narrator harbors a feeling of guilt towards these two existences. Since he is doubly indebted to this mother and to the motherland, his return to his homeland constitutes an opportunity to appease these two expectations. Unlike Chen, the distancing for Laferrière is the result of external circumstances. For Laferrière, distancing himself from his origin seems to have

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<sup>1</sup>The author specifies that this term comes from the title of a book, *Between Worlds. Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry*, Amy Ling, New York, Pergamon Press, 1990.

provided him with the necessary perspective to better contemplate and savor it, until it becomes the fertile ground for his literary creativity. Thus, the apparent detachment does not eliminate his inherent attachment to these two existences. In the book *Dany Laferrière, l'autodidacte et le processus de création* (2008), Beniamin Vasile analyzes this duality and proposes the following interpretation:

L'écrivain relie son expérience de voyageur et d'immigrant à la capacité de créer avec un angle de vue renouvelé. La connaissance autant des codes d'autres cultures que celle de son origine semble l'avoir aidé à ne pas se reposer sur les représentations collectives haïtiennes (forcément ethnocentrique) et de trouver un langage qui puisse transcender les cultures (Vasile 2008: 232).

### 3. REVISITED PLACES OF ORIGIN

The places of origin revisited by the two writers are marked by the divergences in their significance in the two books. For Laferrière, the place of origin he left against his will has not experienced a psychic detachment despite its evident physical reality. While Ying Chen attempted a psychic and physical distancing by leaving her homeland, Laferrière has never detached himself from his homeland despite his physical distance. This attachment of the author to his homeland is notably expressed through his timeless inclination in the book. Just as this temporal confusion of past and present exists for the narrator, the places of origin and reception are often intertwined. The narrator experiences an apparent confusion of the two places whether he is on the soil of exile or on that of his homeland. In the narrator's novelistic universe, the two antipodes are strangely close. The most virulent cold of Québec proves the most favorable for resurrecting his homeland with a tropical face, and once in Haiti, he has a strange need for the Québec cold to shelter from the stifling heat. Moreover, it is interesting to note that the chapters are intertwined with time and places in a single descriptive frame: memories are described in the present, and throughout the chapters, there are no clear indications of the places where his memories take place. The present mixes with the past and the here with the elsewhere. Fiction and reality also blend together. "Je prend conscience que je n'ai pas écrit ces livres simplement pour décrire un paysage, mais pour en faire partie". (Laferrière 2009: 155). According to this confession, the narrator was able to maintain his close connection with his homeland through his literary creation, which has, admittedly, often preferred to set its fictional scenes on the native island, thus allowing him to prolong his psychic stay there. In this sense, the distancing from the homeland becomes the *leitmotif* of literary creation, which is an effective means of counterbalancing the absence. In the case of Ying Chen, the return is first orchestrated in the context of a film shoot. The first essay in this collection, "Carnet de voyage en Chine", expresses the author's anxiety about a certain implicit expectation of this return to Shanghai. The lack of attachment to her place of origin where she has "simplement dormi la plupart du temps" (Chen 2004: 19) before her departure, is felt from the beginning, with Chen. She compares her relationship with her homeland to that of the two protagonists in a classic Chinese story titled *Rêve dans le pavillon rouge*, who, according to her, should stop searching for each other in an impossible melancholy. She refuses to cultivate such a sentimental relationship with her country of origin and wants her travel diary to be "exempt des éléments fictifs, qu'il serve de point final à une tristesse usée". (Chen 2004: 9) According to this observation, this trip is an opportunity to solidify her distancing from her homeland, or at least a resolution in that direction. This effort by the writer seems essential to us in order to build a space unrestricted by any cultural or linguistic reference, an essential condition for writing in the case of Chen.

#### 4. PLACES OF RECEPTION SEEN FROM AFAR

The fictional space in Laferrière's work seems to prefer the proximity of two places, those of origin and reception. In *L'énigme du retour*, the story begins in Montréal but takes place largely in Haiti, as indicated by the title of the novel. Nevertheless, we note the insertion of numerous anecdotes set in Montréal or Québec. The narrator's return to his homeland allows him to reflect on the significance of his situation between two places and two cultures that have become indispensable to the composition of his identity:

je pense tout à coup à Montréal

comme il m'arrivait de penser

à Port-au-Prince quand je suis à Montréal.

On pense à ce qui nous manque. (Laferrière 2009: 153)

The two places, although presented as antipodes of north and south, of cold and heat, also possess strange common points: their carceral tendency, one through political power, the other through the cold:

Je me suis échappé de l'île

Qui me semblait une prison

Pour me retrouver enfermé

Dans une chambre à Montréal. (Laferrière 2009: 53)

Ying Chen takes an ambiguous position towards the place of reception. The return to China gives her a feeling of unease, akin to encountering an old love by chance. Unlike Laferrière, who has two spaces to situate his fictional narrative, Ying Chen seems to need to distance herself from both places to affirm her existence free from all attachments:

Il y a quelques années, j'ai quitté Shanghai. Je voulais sortir d'une réalité qui m'était trop proche, d'une existence qui me semblait réglée dès avant ma naissance. Je me suis engagé dans une voie qui devait me mener ailleurs et à une vie sans attaches. Mais aujourd'hui je réalise, non sans Bonheur, que je me suis trompée, que je suis partie mais ne suis pas arrivée. Et peut-être n'arriverai-je jamais. L'ailleurs est cette étoile infiniment lointaine dont la lumière seulement vient caresser le visage usé du voyageur. Je me retourne alors en arrière, mais je ne vois plus mes traces. Elles ont été vite brouillées par les tourbillons du temps. Je me trouve à mi-chemin entre mon point de départ et mon ailleurs. Ma destinée est cassée en morceaux. Je suis et je ne suis pas. (Chen 2004: 35)



## 5. WRITING AS A VITAL SPACE OF UNBLOCKING

For both writers, the act of writing becomes an essential means to understand the experience of migration and to report the experience of emancipation. This is why both place the act of writing at the center of their narrative. In Laferrière's work, the narrator's return to his homeland is triggered by the death of his father in New York. The narrator, who had to grow up without a father, superimposes himself on the image of his homeland, Haiti, which is also "sans père". (Laferrière 2009: 34) In this parallel of images, the country abandoned to its fate, whether by colonization or dictatorship, takes on the metaphorical symbol of a person deprived of paternal presence. This return to the homeland is accompanied by Césaire's poems, which he reads throughout his journey like an amulet that gives meaning to this double quest: that of the father and that of the country. The comfort to which Laferrière's narrator resorts inevitably contains a strong symbolism of the being abandoned in solitude. He drinks rum in a hot bath with Césaire's collection in one hand: "Tout se passe au ralenti. Dans mon rêve, Césaire se superpose à mon père. Le même sourire fané et cette façon de se croiser les jambes qui rappellent les dandys d'après-guerre". (Laferrière 2009: 33)

Césaire becomes a symbol of reconnection between the past and the present, as well as of all the confusions that reigned in the narrator's life. The absence of the father in his life, as well as the lack of meaning in the country of origin deprived of national coherence (the country that has no father), become two now tamed chimeras. The predominant role that the symbolism of writing plays in *L'énigme du retour* is also observed in *Quatre mille marches*. Chen admits to having found a new homeland as soon as she started learning foreign languages, notably French. A language that one speaks and writes is a homeland capable of welcoming anyone who wants to live or take refuge there, according to Chen. In this sense, her true departure dates back to the moment when the writer embraced the French language during her university studies in China. In an interview with Dinah Assouline Stillman in 2009, Chen noted that writing in this foreign language provides her with a sort of "liberation" and an opportunity to bring "quelque chose de nouveau" (Stillman 2009: 36) to the literature already in place. Nevertheless, the fertile ground she cultivates in French through literary creation does not seem to have completely severed the emotional bond she had with her mother tongue. The notion of belonging, for Chen, must be considered separately from tangible and geographical reality and remains an intangible and aesthetic domain. Thus, the choice of exile made at the age of twenty-eight by Ying Chen is not a choice for another language or another territory but rather a choice for the freedom to exist fully without any barrier. The past and the place of origin, as well as the present and the place of existence, must thus remain in an aesthetic framework that does not prevent a certain timeless navigation, free of hindrances, which would be transmigrated "vers des territoires non balisés par la fiction de l'origine". (Benalil et Dupuis 2005: 13)

## 6. CONCLUSION

Ying Chen and Dany Laferrière, two of the most important Canadian migrant writers, approach their place of origin and their place of reception differently in their literary imagination. Chen left her homeland to find a space conducive to the freedom to write and to be. In this quest, the place of origin and the place of reception cannot be presented as a space of attachment, but as one to transcend in order to reach a space favorable to her literary creation, free from all cultural and territorial constraints. Meanwhile, Laferrière seems attached to both places, which constitute a fused space in his novel. As we have observed, despite their initial differences regarding the significance of places of origin and reception, the two writers converge in their need for an interstitial space that is anchored neither in one nor the other but constructed by a certain transcendence, thus creating an unbounded space. Through this study, we have observed that migrant writers, necessarily straddling two cultures and two places, prefer to transcend these traits to find a space free of constraints, providing them with more freedom of existence and literary creation.

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