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In “An Anonymous Elsewhere”: An Exploration of Identities in the Postcolonial Spaces of Kim Thúy’s *Mãn*

Abstract

“If you want to survive, get rid of your identity”². From then on, Mãn and her Maman came to a resolution. In this violent state, they “learned above all was how to become flexible, imperceptible, invisible even”³. The event when these words were spoken, would come to mark a significant turn not just in the history of Vietnam but the legacy of the postcolonial state. Be it, the state of origin to the land of settlement, the militant surge by the Communist army to the Québécois under the perceptual threat to its French identity, the cities of Saigon and Montreal surrounding the spaces of the text, remain imperceptible well within their legacy of imperial centres and their evolution into metropolitans through modernity principles. What else keeps disappearing in the narrative, along with the identities, are the places and their sign of times. It is because the places and the times feared “the unknown and, even more, the known”⁴ in their forms of state-based conflict. Along with examining a scholarly turn in the space discourse, prudently brought by movement and scepticism of the place-identity, the tangents of spatial identities are explored. A ‘symbolic’ space forms, invisible and unaccounted for, as one’s sense of self resigns from the markers of time and place entrenched in instability and postcolonial violence. Kim Thúy’s *Mãn*, breaking away from an inherent sense of place, exists in spaces created and intendedly

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² Thúy 2015, p. 20.

³ Ivi, p. 17.

⁴ Ivi, p. 21.

disassociated from the temporal and historical complexities of either her home or the host nation. However, identity is an occurrence weaving itself from the frayed fabric of state and sociality. The current study examines the turfs of postcolonial spaces and formation of identity in Kim Thúy's *Mãn*, lending the nature of space, a look through the lenses of spatial socialisation, place-identity and the transnation.

Riassunto

“Se vuoi sopravvivere, liberati della tua identità”². Da quel momento, *Mãn* e la sua Maman presero una decisione. In questo stato di violenza, “impararono soprattutto a diventare flessibili, impercettibili, persino invisibili”³. Questo evento, segnato da tali parole, rappresentò una svolta significativa non solo nella storia del Vietnam, ma anche nell’eredità dello stato postcoloniale. Dalla patria alla terra di insediamento, dal fervore militante dell’esercito comunista alla vulnerabilità del Québec minacciato nella sua identità francofona, le città di Saigon e Montreal, scenari del testo, rimangono impercettibili all’interno dei loro retaggi imperiali e della loro evoluzione in metropoli attraverso i principi della modernità. Oltre alle identità, ciò che continua a svanire nella narrazione sono i luoghi stessi e i loro segni del tempo. Questo avviene perché i luoghi e i tempi temevano “l’ignoto e, ancor di più, il noto”⁴ nelle forme di conflitto statale. Oltre a un’analisi della svolta accademica nel discorso sullo spazio, prudentemente ispirata dal movimento e dal dubbio sull’identità del luogo, vengono esplorate le tangenti di tale identità spaziale. Questo spazio “simbolico” creato assume una forma invisibile e indefinibile, mentre il senso di sé si allontana dai segni temporali e del luogo radicati nell’instabilità e nella violenza postcoloniale. *Mãn* di Kim Thúy, distaccandosi da un senso di appartenenza innato, esiste in spazi creati e volutamente dissociati dalle complessità temporali e storiche sia della patria sia della nazione ospitante. Tuttavia, l’identità emerge come un fenomeno che si intreccia nel tessuto dello stato e della socialità. Il presente studio esamina, dunque, gli spazi postcoloniali e la formazione dell’identità in *Mãn* di Kim Thúy ed offre uno sguardo sulla natura dello spazio attraverso le lenti della socializzazione spaziale, dell’identità del luogo e degli spazi transnazionali.

Keywords: Space, Mobility, Migrant Identity, Quebecois Nationalism

Parole chiave: Spazio, mobilità, identità migrante, nazionalismo quebecchese

Introduction

"If you want to survive, get rid of your identity"⁵. The identity becomes a bane to survival when a regime comes to demarcate identities outside the realm of its comprehended plane. There are several facets to this identity, but none more ponderous than its locations in the edgings of this plane. Imagining this geography in a Cartesian plane, identity as a point of intersection sees an interplay between the point of objectivity and markings of multiple subjectivities. This identity location constitutes axes of subjectivities of place and time, and going through them is a third vertical axis, that of a space in one's consciousness. The first two axes follow the concept of identity in modernity principle, with time serving the ideology and the place embodying the state. The conscious space, interacting with the two axes, capacitates itself to transcend the ideological state point to attain an individualistic perspective shunned away by the collectivist imagination to form a symbolic and transnational identity.

Kim Thúy's novel *Mãn*, based on the experiences of forced migration during the Vietnam War, particularly the South Vietnamese people escaping the insurgency by the Communist North, is the text under analysis for exploring this 'symbolic space' and transnational identity. The migratory fleet across the Atlantic to the Québécois is one of the most devastating renditions of a world post Cold War. The narrowing concentricity of the East-West conflict post the imperial era sharpened the interstate conflict between North and South Vietnam through the imposition of the construct of the postcolonial state and consequent process of nation-building. The violence sits right at the centre of this harrowing pit, that throws in its way all other crises of the individual and collective identity. *Mãn*, the protagonist with the same name as the title of the novel, embodies the calm of the periphery, and her *maman*, the afflicted centre. *Maman* lived through the insurgency and was displaced from the acquired South to train under the Communist army,

⁵ Thúy 2015, p. 20.

whereas Mãn migrated to the Québécois as result of her marriage. The movements in both situations become involuntary and premature for their self-concept to embrace the place of departure or the one of their arrival. The concept of place itself becomes transient in the very makeup of this self-conception. In the centre of torments, the two protagonists, Mãn and her Maman, created a space on the margins surrounded by history and spatiality of the place of conflict. These peripheries reside in the novel as an unnamed Vietnam, an unacknowledged Canadian soil, unrelated to the journey across the Atlantic. Like her Maman, Mãn found a living in “divided space again in Montreal in [her] husband’s restaurant’s kitchen”⁶.

An elderly man advised the protagonist’s Maman to remove signs of her identity when South Vietnam was under attack by the communist army from North Vietnam. Those who were killed died under the attack of their own state. Those who migrated, had generations who had experienced Japanese invasion extended along the French colonial rule before the interstate conflicts began due to impositions of oppressive histories ruling through imperial agency of time. The Paris Peace Accords ending the war and American interference, led to a decision of unification of Vietnam into a postcolonial nation-state. The identity then had to be shed in survival amidst the violence of postcolonial nation building. The state within borders becomes functional to undertake the assignment of authorising a collective identity to the individuals. The borders operate concomitant to the state discarding the efficacy of an individual identity, luring them into the only collectivist structure legitimate to attach the lone entity.

The absence of sense of self gave way to one “influenced by the constant dialogue with the outside cultural world and their ideas about the concept of self-identities they present” (*Drum Magazine*). The ideas propagated by the hegemonic state confine identities within the conceptual and literal borders of the place materially different from other spaces. “Place identity is formed after the place has achieved an established status in

⁶ Thúy 2015, p. 29.

both the spatial structure of the society and its social consciousness" (Peng *et al.* 2020). This identity is then formed and re-formed in places in order to serve state structure and ideology. One of the ways for state structure to achieve this legitimacy is through constructing state subjects. The verity of time and corporeality of the territory makes these subjects identify with the collectivistic notion, proving efficacious in nation building. The formation of identity becomes a mode of legitimising the state and state narrative, and forming place identities reinforces territorial boundaries, state symbolism, and its institutions.

Modernity discourses of place identity represent past memories, visuals of the present and utopias of future (Paasi 2001). Postmodernity glimpses at making space outside the places of the state's bygone time, its present conflicts and the future of nation building. "While retaining the utopian element that Ernst Bloch claims is a paradoxical presence in all ideology", Mān's movement signifies a stateless identity⁷. The element of movement challenges the doctrine of stasis and its notion of fixed identity established by the state, making place-identity into an increasingly dynamic process (Paasi 2001). Ashcroft proposes "the term 'transnation', to describe the movement of peoples within (and only sometimes across) the geographical boundaries of the nation-state yet who circulate around the boundaries of the state in ways that render the nation less and less instrumental in the framing of identity"⁸. Transnation as a concept allows individualisation and propinquity for migrating outside and within the nation-state. "It is the mark of interpellated subjects flowing through and around ideology itself"⁹. According to Chiang, as "the diasporic 'in-betweenness'" moves beyond the binary categories of centre-periphery resisting the hegemony of Western modernization; transnationalism moves beyond the modernity constructions of the state and the borders, inside and the outside, to base the format of identity creation¹⁰.

⁷ Ashcroft 2017, p. 56.

⁸ Ivi, p. 46.

⁹ Ashcroft 2017, p. 47

¹⁰ Chiang 2010, p. 42.

The place-based identity under-serves a framework refuting the provisional basis of identity, especially in the era of hyper-mobility, forced or voluntary. It is the conception of the state holding onto the principles of modernity, imposed in place/s of prior imperial colonies leading to the disillusionment of the place. The journey while steps away from the canon, identity still becomes a pawn of the place and time location it is positioned. The space then, is seen as an only escape, an abstract concept unruly in its loyalties to the disciplines and unfettered from complex temporalities of philosophical and political doctrines. The voyage of this current paper becomes more complex than just the discovery of space, escaping the platoon of place and time designated as forerunners in the formation of identity. Yet the exploration of place and time is more complex today, post the synthesis of the nature of postcolonial spatiality and “contemporary global mobility” compressing the factor of time¹¹.

“From my in-laws, all I got was an envelope that must have been worth its weight in gold because the papers in it offered me another elsewhere and an unknown life with a stranger”¹². The lack of agency in decisions of movement from one place to another, from crossing over from one mother to another, subsequent movement with her *maman*, is directed by the inherent systemic violence of the place under the state operations. Her passage from Saigon to Montreal was without recognition and realisation of the places for herself, but decided upon by her mother and the husband’s family. “I did not look at the face of the man even when I set the cup in front of him. My gaze wasn’t required, it was only his that mattered”¹³. Premature mobility around or across the state affects one’s identification with their own surroundings and their perception of their environment. This kind of continued violence leads to formation of ‘symbolic spaces’, and contributes in the formation of identity, the outside and inside of one’s self-concept made up of this symbolic space. Creation of symbolic space in a transnation is

¹¹ Ashcroft 2017, p. 46.

¹² Thúy 2015, p. 46.

¹³ Ivi, p. 6.

an act of power. "While subjects may be interpellated as subjects by ideology, the transnation suggests that such interpellation does not obviate agency"¹⁴. A person who can manipulate symbols and attain influence over legitimising exercises of power, inherently owns processes of identification (Monnet).

1. Placing the State: Migrant Space and Identity of the movement

"Identity is formed by various cultural formations and different definitions of place and community" but what happens when both remain unnamed, unable to be continually tracked to define oneself¹⁵. The places here are the places of halt and transmission and the community consists of people connected on the journey of transient stoppages. The only space of reliability to form a sense of self remains in one's consciousness, affected and shaped by these places and people. But where does one locate consciousness when "moving messages meet deterritorialised viewers". Designating place-identity in a state and to a time bygone, by imposing an agreed upon region and its pages in history, is the process that the state insists on following without a doubt of an alternative. According to Appadurai, all that remains mutual in such space-time positioning is "contextualising of motion and mediation"¹⁶, and the space of one's self-recognition then can no longer be placed in the state. Forced migration in South Vietnam resulted due to the state-inflicted violence and inability to shift authority from colonial agency to that of the postcolonial state. "Maman saw her life turned upside down when the first shot was heard in an ambush between two shores, between East and West"¹⁷. The event marked the beginning of the perception of breaking away from security of the state to relying on one's own movement. Yet, the ongoing perception that spaces do not ground identifications, but plac-

¹⁴ Ashcroft 2017, p. 47.

¹⁵ Chiang 2010, p. 31.

¹⁶ Appadurai 1996, p. 5.

¹⁷ Thúy 2015, p. 20.

es do, still assumes prerogative especially in sovereigntist imaginations. Despite extensive research and discourse on place identity, the theory does not fare well in favour of the concept of symbolic space. Even when the concept of place contains symbols of “social categories and personal meanings”, it still serves the model of territorialised attachment to the symbols of the ‘imagined community’ (Peng et al. 2020). This reality postulates the limitation of the concept of place or its usage in the identity discourse. “In other words, place is a component of diverse sub-identity categories, which makes the term ‘place identity’ difficult to operate” (Peng *et al.* 2020).

Anssi Paasi (1996), a geographer theorising the dynamics of Territories and Boundaries, approaches consciousness as “a way to move beyond statist approaches that either reify the state or dismiss its significance”. But contrary to the assumption, this very approach makes “place-based identity narratives” “central to naturalising the state”¹⁸. After having lived long enough in the entrapments of the Communist army camp, Maman continued to stay there for her own sake avoiding living. The creation of this symbolic space “overlooks the psychological dimension of place identification, which does not necessarily follow a pragmatic or demographic logic”¹⁹. She even felt ashamed to have never felt an unconditional love for the country she was supposed to be hers. “The formation of identity as a process of identification can be closely related to the space where it takes place. However, it leads to the creation of symbolic spaces instead of always adopting established ones” (Khademi-Vidra 2014). Giddens (1991) characterised ‘late modernity’ as ridden by uncertainties and ruptures being parallel characteristic to the progression of the self and revisions in narratives of self-identity (Khademi-Vidra 2014). The character of Mān remains almost invisible from the places she has been, hidden behind spaces created for herself. In such situations, even mobility might pose obstructions. Migrants may often spend their time confined as settlers in spaces too afraid to venture outside their own perceptual demarcations. After

¹⁸ Koch 2014, pp. 29-31.

¹⁹ Hopkins, Dixon 2006, p. 173.

moving to Montreal all she did was “climb up and down the stairs that connected my oven to my bed. My husband built the stairwell to protect me from the cold in winter and the vagaries of life outside in any weather”²⁰. What it might imply is the particular atmospheric elements that make up someone’s space in a demographically labelled place and the two might never intersect. The intention to make the place align with the one’s idea of familial space, may also lead to cease in movement or entrapment due to one’s own consciousness.

Mãn, unquestioning, worked day and night in that kitchen confined from any movement outside this periphery. Having crossed borders from across the globe, oceans and boundaries murky with the dangers of a world in transition, after being travelled to a country strange from all she had known since her birth, the confinement didn’t deter her in any way. The narrative barely acknowledges the move, or the idiosyncrasies of the place that seemed like the beginning of the narrator’s whole life. The transnational ways “combine action and an awareness of the kind of identity that action signifies”²¹. The kitchen remains the space of action, no different from the space of her labours before marriage, on the other side of the world. “In winter, the fire door that opened onto the yard was permanently closed, turning the kitchen into a strongbox”²². The ‘symbolic space’ constituted the kitchen Mãn comes to identify with, even when she admits that certain tastes have unique identity and unalterable borders. “In South Vietnam, we never talk about the weather. We never make comments, perhaps because there are no seasons, no changes, like in this kitchen”²³. The isolation and boundaries are acknowledged without expressing an urgent need to escape them. “Once, through the little square opening for serving the plates”, she heard her client’s dispensing advice that “you should only ask questions to which you already know the answers”²⁴. Mãn’s silence and

²⁰ Thúy 2015, p. 30.

²¹ Vorobeva, Jauhiainen 2023, p. 3391.

²² Thúy 2015, p. 29.

²³ Ivi, p. 30.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

her created space is validated in its own perceived boundaries from the world outside, beyond a desire to step out of it. “We accept things as they are, as they happen to us, never asking why or how”²⁵.

2. *The Symbolic Space*

The phenomenon of the symbolic space accounts for the ways in which a place is remembered and space is accounted for in one’s own self-identification. She describes her space and daily actions in the kitchen as proceeding without requiring any cues from the time coherence. Hernández et al. (2010) “argued that place attachment is an affective–emotional bond with residence places, whereas place identity is a cognitive mechanism, a component of self-concept and/or of personal identity in relation to the place one belongs to”. People’s consciousness of a place should not be overlooked for understanding the identity of that place. Place identity comprises not only a material basis but also a “mental sphere” (Knapp 2006).

In an emerging de-stabilized and deterritorialized political geography in postcolonial nation-building, the space has a dimension other than the socio-economic and political upheaval. In Thúy’s narrative, the resurgence in space discourse, its classification and clear distinction from the place discourse, frames the identity. It is a symbolic space where one’s sense of self resides to escape the dimensions of the place. Thúy’s narrator Mãn gains her primary agency in this ‘symbolic space’, created from frayed fragments of all the places she exists in transience, cultivated in movement. Jerome Monnet, a professor of urban planning, theorises space as “separated out from the latent powers of temporal and spatial complexities of post-colonial severity and modern realities, embracing the active forces of movement and border crossing activities to make up the symbolic space” (Monnet 2011). It enables gesturing at the conventions of meaning making and identifying oneself within

²⁵ *Ibidem.*

that space, employing the conventional protocols of spatial socialisation like maintaining belongings, making attachments. "The symbolic dimension is a vital and unavoidable need of human existence, because it enables the establishment of ties, and makes it possible to give a meaning to the environment, and to appropriate reality and render it intelligible" (Monnet 2011). Though, this space favourable for mobility and circulation, is important to be examined in communicating individual and collective identity, e.g. Lauren Berlant's (1997) construction of the symbolic national; it should be clarified that the narrative and the study concerns itself with the making of individual identities, though vulnerable to the sociality and public sphere infiltrating the space.

As a child, Mãn seems averse to socialising with the merchant who with an inkling to inquire about the "scandalous story hinted" about her parentage, when she asks Maman, "What do you feed that child to give her such red lips?"²⁶. Mãn's fascination remained with how fast the lady could grate the coconut, while being aware of the intention behind the question. The unconscious acceptance of being identified and subsequently excluded on the basis of one's origins' territorial associations and parental attachment, formed a pliable perception of the place. The symbolic space then formed as an act of self-preservation, was one's conscious sphere of belonging and attachment. Though cogent to the sociality, it came to include facets that existed in either private space with her maman or those she chose to focus on. "Culinary traditions are passed on secretly, like magic tricks between master and apprentice, one movement at a time, following the rhythms of each day"²⁷. One's agency in a symbolic space is not just found but discovered prior to the space. What she chose to take from her 'hometown' is the fascination with the techniques and prescriptions of culinary and cultural history of the region. Moreover, movement, let her create this space.

According to Doreen Massey (1995) "by rejecting the notion that a sense of home (or place)", one's conscious space

²⁶ Thúy 2015, p. 47.

²⁷ Ivi, p. 4.

“must necessarily be constructed out of an introverted, inward-looking history”²⁸. The symbolic space belongs to and immerses in one’s consciousness, learning lessons and acquiring skills to navigate the outside. In Montreal, the recipes are replicated playing out one’s confined history in Vietnam, and the secrets from maman’s culinary wisdom guide Mãn to create her space from her journey to Montreal. The formation of this space derives from the teachings of the ways of belonging in places they do not belong. “In the natural order, then, girls, learned [...] to cut ‘vicious peppers’ (ớt hiểm) with the point of the knife to transform them into harmless flowers”²⁹. Embodying her culinary history in circulation of not just recipes but herself, teaches her more about the world she navigates. “Between the resistance clamouring for independence [...] the current regime [...] taught Vietnamese students to say ‘our ancestors the Gauls’ without seeing any inconsistency”³⁰. The imposition of a certain political system in transient space disrupts the system of governance, chaining lives and communities to a demographic and time. The irony of forcing identities to places struck in an abyss of time, creates a gaping void replaced by the recognition of oneself and an identity beyond the places themselves. The concept of transnation brings truce to the dilemma of significance of the nation and the factors of movement, by not placing identities in the territory of the state. “Ashcroft articulates the idea of the transnation as the space occupied by local, mobile subjects, whose experiences in an increasingly globalized world assert the ambiguous relation between the nation and the state”³¹. When *La Palanche*, her cookbook of Vietnamese dishes, crosses provinces through exposures in varied forms of media, the media became the mode of circulation of not just the culinary advice but of Mãn’s identity, expanding her symbolic space.

²⁸ Morley 2001, p. 441.

²⁹ Thúy 2015, p. 4.

³⁰ Ivi, p. 20.

³¹ Wilson 2010, p. 20.

3. *The state*

No matter how far we go “to claim that the nation has become an absent structure in globalisation”, we still find its hegemonic traces in categories “with which concepts of identity must first contend” along with its legacy violence³². Creation of such symbolic spaces hypothesize resistance against assimilation into the state narrative, propaganda based nation-building and an identity institutionally allotted. The symbolic space intends to liberate individuals from the confinements of institutions of time, territory and power of the state and the state boundaries. Mãn, embodies a sense of self created in abstract spaces, disparate from the temporal complexities of the places her life was spent in, yet arising a question regarding what remains repressed in her invisibility coloured by fear, apathy and numbness of the conflict penetrating her and her Maman. “She learned above all [...] to become flexible, imperceptible, invisible even”³³. The state might never stabilise to be without violence of the postcolonial nation-construction but “the state effect” need not accompany “territory effect” to form what is “popularly called the Westphalian state system”³⁴. Identity positions in these spaces coloured by the unstable times will not be tainted enough to fall victim to ethno-nationalist assimilation.

This nature of belonging to an abstract space inherently rejects the need for ‘imagined community’ and “politically regressive form of reactionary nostalgia” to acknowledge and suffer for one’s place in the larger world³⁵. Yet, the western imagination and legacy of imperial rule hides the critique of self and feeling lost. “I will never find answers to my questions, and that may be why I’ve never asked one”³⁶. The idea of self and need for identification with the security, stability and roots of origin emerges out of the larger narrative of “the newly destabilized West” dire-

³² Ashcroft 2017, p. 54.

³³ Thúy 2015, p. 17.

³⁴ Koch 2014, p. 31.

³⁵ Morley 2001, p. 441.

³⁶ Thúy 2015, p. 30.

ly needing to “step back into a rose-tinted mythical past, where modernity and migration have yet to be imagined”³⁷.

Mãn lurks in the absence of place-identity. Amidst the departing mothers, no known paternity and no nation, the reality she was born into was of war torn instability in South Vietnam. Mãn, almost routinely narrates her third mother’s story, stating that, “The conflicts lay in the cracks of normality”³⁸. The life her maman gave her was of movement, within the state and then across state-borders. In the centre of movement and emotional unrest, the need for belongingness and a “search for a sense of place-based identity must necessarily be reactionary”³⁹. Mãn never defines any place as home. “Transnational belonging has been discussed as a way to overcome unipolarity in understanding belonging”⁴⁰. Even when she found belongingness in Luc, his confounded absence kept her ‘symbolic space’ intact in her culinary skills and a kitchen. “My safe haven lay in cooking elaborate, time-consuming dishes”⁴¹. Luc’s family was forced to leave Vietnam at the end of war and with awakened memories of Saigon through Mãn, the French-origin Luc found a connection with his birth place, and the family found their reactionary belongingness. The family seemed nothing without the legacy of their altruistic history in Vietnam, yet it had nothing to do with Vietnam. Mãn, having spent a life in the country, told of its tradition as disparate from its history. As her memories and learnings lay in the intricacies of everyday life of a war torn state, she was unable to associate them with a place called Saigon. Yet, she mourned the loss of traditions between the Southerners moving to the North, and vice versa. The movement within the state lost more than one across several borders. The transnation and transnational existence “represents a constant realignment of contingent associations that transcend any political orientation”⁴².

³⁷ Morley 2001, pp. 428-429.

³⁸ Thúy 2015, p. 21.

³⁹ Morley 2001, p. 441.

⁴⁰ Vorobeva and Jauhiainen 2023, p. 3389.

⁴¹ Thúy 2015, p. 133.

⁴² Ashcroft 2017, p. 47.

4. *Postcolonial city*

Transnationality detaches one from the idea of development, ceasing the understanding of nation-building as a process of one's own advancement. Ashcroft "redirect[s] our attention to a much deeper destabilisation of the power of the nation state. This diminishing of the power of the state in the lives of people can be traced to the city, but most strategically, to the function of the postcolonial city"⁴³. A big city bifurcates itself from the statute position of the rest of the urban spaces, in agreement with the structure and in service of the state ideology threatening the nature of movement. It is the big postcolonial city, that marks the centre of the very postcoloniality campaigned in the insurgence of regimes to end imperial rule. "She gave me a second birth by bringing me up in a big city, an anonymous elsewhere"⁴⁴. The city of Saigon was her first 'anonymous elsewhere', before moving to Montreal. The postcolonial city, defied this difference between the place and the space created by the structure of the modern state, by becoming the centre of movement, inwards and outwards, into heterogeneity. "Inevitably, the dynamics of global mobility involve people moving from city to city. So the city is a key factor [...] in the navigation of the transnation around the structures of the state. But the unruliness of cities is an historical consequence of imperialism"⁴⁵. It in its action supplicates the place of the territorial state and symbolically adheres to the meaning making simultaneously for and against the state ideology. The action of this place identifying as the space for transnationality, defies the crux of the state. "In other words, place identity can be anything that makes a place identifiable within the spatial system. There are no fixed components of place identity" (Peng et al. 2020). In the lieu of extensive postcoloniality of place, Ien Ang argues that othering takes place through myriad modes, including seemingly inclusionary act in multicultural discours-

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ Thúy 2015, p. 1.

⁴⁵ Ashcroft 2017, p. 49.

es⁴⁶. It then becomes important to understand that national categorizations through forced assimilation lead to provocation of ethno-national and inter-state conflicts.

5. *The language of belonging and Movement of Assimilation*

“Everybody in the world belongs somewhere. Although the first impression an individual gives to others is always his or her physical appearance, such an impression would often coincide with the assumption of the place one comes from” (Peng *et al.* 2020). Mãn did not look like her maman. She did not look like a typical Vietnamese, and her Maman often said that “she’d always wanted that whiteness for [her]”⁴⁷. This whiteness signifies the centre. “By recognising this we overcome the centripetal tendency of migrant-diasporic-cosmopolitan-global studies in which the unassailable centre is whiteness”⁴⁸. It is the centre of power in an ongoing transnational movement across and within the structure of the states. Maman and Mãn, in terms of Ashcroft’s distinction, “are neither denizens nor citizens yet they are quite decidedly on the move”, as Denizens are those “who inhabit places precariously” and citizens “are free to stay or go”⁴⁹. The positions they acquire forces the nation into a state of precarity. Transmigrants “draw a line between aspects previously merged together: social or emotional belonging, which is defined by culture, and legal belonging, which is defined by the state”⁵⁰. The alienation with these structural mergers is further concretised through the gaze of the people from her home country at slight alterities in her appearance. “They envied my slender legs, but they feared the scandalous story hinted at by my overly pronounced curves”⁵¹. Unsure and hesitant about her origins, the narrator asserted what others

⁴⁶ Ang 1996, p. 37.

⁴⁷ Thúy 2015, p. 27.

⁴⁸ Ashcroft 2017, p. 48.

⁴⁹ Ivi, p. 49.

⁵⁰ Anthias 2010 *quoted in*. Vorobeva and Jauhiainen 2023, p. 3392.

⁵¹ Thúy 2015, p. 47.

said about her. "I never knew who my father was. Mean-spirited gossips suspect that he is white, tall and a coloniser because I have a delicate nose and luminous, pale skin"⁵². Habituation to the glances excluding her from belonging to the place, became a form of resistance against the place-identity.

5.1. *Langue d'oil*

Mãn's word for her own mother, whose origins associate her with Vietnam, is in French. French is the language of Vietnamese colonial history and of Québécois, their land of settlement. Her whole identity revolves around familiarity of the beloved word, a name specifically for her third mother who "became Maman, My Maman"⁵³. Language appears to play an important role in identity formation, especially when it comes to multicultural discourse. Spaces of Québécois nationalism, in its bilingualism, becomes contentious for the speakers of the two languages and their associated sense of self with those languages. For those who spoke a third language along with one or both, the space can soon come to signify exclusion, discrimination or worse, forced assimilation. Mãn remained unswayed by provincial politics because of this familiarity with the French language that later came to divide the nation in the same contentious manner, as the North and South of her home country. In the 1960s, South Vietnam was under attack by the Communist regimes, at the same time Québécois saw the emergence of the perception of threat to itself. The 1960s marked a violent turn in the turmoils of South Vietnam, with National Liberation Front (NLF) organising resistance against the communist regime, while far across the Atlantic saw the 'Quiet Revolution'. Both led to a "rapid and dramatic development of government institutions and the vastly increased role of the state" which inevitably sustained consequences yet to reveal themselves in full force (Durocher, Millette 2016). Cultural content is the last keeper of place identity, even before the in-

⁵² Ivi, p. 27.

⁵³ Ivi, p. 1.

trusion of the state and the international policy system making itself a feature of the ruling state (Kunzmann 2004). Quebec's latent bilingual polarisation activated a political undertaking to position French language as a tool for territorial identification serving a state-induced threat to Québécois nationalism. "Prosperity for French-speaking Québécois grew, and nationalist consciousness expanded" (Durocher, Millette 2016).

Duality exists in identifying with the language and deriving one's subjectivities from it. On one hand, it exists in the legacy of French imperialism in the Mekong and a rebellion against the formation of communist state in South Vietnam, on the other, as an immigrant knowing the intended language of the Québécois. Oppressive colonial history of the two territories, Canada and Vietnam, written by the French, drew a correlation in their formation of the postcolonial state. In the Communist camp, "she [maman] would walk for weeks to translate chemistry textbooks from French to Vietnamese for workers who manufactured mines in the heart of the tropical forest"⁵⁴. Vietnamese migrants in Quebecois, were the migrants escaping the state-conflict between the North and South Vietnam, placed again in the middle of polarising movement between the north and south of Canada. For instance, immigrants in Quebec are required to apply for public services only in French, six months after their arrival. By being openly suggestive of its agenda of assimilation, "the new political regime ensured that nationalist sentiment would be wedded to the imperative of French survival on North American soil" (*The Canadian Encyclopedia*). Forcing regulations to serve the nationalistic agenda as the host country demonstrates not just a linguistic siege of all other languages but of spaces they carry within themselves. This might claim one's origins and their journey undertaken to escape the same violent impediment and to amalgamate into the region's liberating multiculturalism. Instead, these transnational identities fall victim to an upsurge of the Québécois Nationalism.

⁵⁴ Thúy 2015, p. 24.

Assimilation of ethnic identities in the territoriality of place is about controlling how a space is imagined, emptied and repopulated. This violence of forcing a particular vision of a socially permeable space has put the concept of place far back bringing up the need for symbolic space to rescue (Sack 1986). Through assimilating identities into place-identity, "the modernist planners [are] not just creating depopulated (i.e. governable) spaces, but [...] newly-governable political subjects"⁵⁵.

Conclusion

The nature of space, symbolic and transnational, opens the perception of the places in relation to identity. Even within their containing and confining nature, the place becomes stateless. Transmigrants, in these spaces that do not belong to the boundaries of the nation-state of Vietnam or Canada, even though Mãn's kitchen in Montreal coincides with the restrictions similar to her placelessness in Saigon.

Places, commonly categorised in the arena of the public sphere, came to define agency of movement and spatiality of identity formation. Places like culinary workshops and galleries in New York, Paris, were discovered and created along with voluntary movement within and across the state borders. These places came to be created by the 'symbolic space' carried within Mãn's, from Mekong to Montreal. "How does a person transport a work of art twenty times bigger than my kitchen? How does a person think so big?"⁵⁶. Mãn asked the question that she was always capable of answering for herself. The expanse of the places created for mobility is derived from the spaces formed within, as an act of survival, self-preservation and even as an escape from the structures of the state. When shifting focus to the 'host nation', for the identities are designated from a statist's point of view, she was consequently labelled as Vietnamese, and capitulated to the Québec region. The separate mention of Québécois under sovereignty of Can-

⁵⁵ Koch 2014, p. 32.

⁵⁶ Thúy 2015, p. 58.

ada and the South prefixed to Vietnam, challenges the stability of the statist's approach to unified space, along with drawing critical attention to the concept of 'place identity'. Simply put, "Place is a portion of geographical space. Sometimes defined as 'territories of meaning'"⁵⁷. Place, in this context plays a more direct role in meaning making through collective memory, gradually forming social relations and sense of self as a result of intersection. Space, on the other hand, can break away from the layers of constraints, despite the sociality of memories and connections, in not just meaning making but in forming one's self-concept. Mãn and Maman become more Saigoneses than Vietnamese, partly due to internal instability in Vietnam, more Québécois than Montréalais due to speaking French in addition to Vietnamese and yet more transnational accessing movement beyond the conventional restriction of the state.

"*La Palanche* was winning over Paris, where many readers had a close relationship with Vietnam"⁵⁸. A widespread reach of the recipe book by Mãn, was also due to accessing more of the world encompassed into their space, a space about struggles, about beliefs, about food, and ambiguity of the origins of all coming together in history. When Mãn says, that "Maman had been able to create a peaceful life for us between two worlds"⁵⁹, she refers to the space of her perceived reality and that of fulfilment of dreams and hopes, between which she remained satiated in her Maman's quiet embrace. The nature of the space, of void dreams, the quietude of boundaries and that of fulfilment, remains the same between the two, in Montreal as that of Saigon. "Unlike Guy de Maupassant's Jeanne, who dreamed of grasping all the joys in life when she left the convent, I grew up without dreams"⁶⁰. Eluding nostalgic dreams of one's home country, and in turn the concept of identifying with the state, is what Virginia Woolf referred to when she talked about "freedom from unreal loyalties" in *Three Guineas* (1938). All that protagonist grieves is being

⁵⁷ Holt-Jensen 1999, p. 224.

⁵⁸ Thúy 2015, p. 76.

⁵⁹ Ivi, p. 29.

⁶⁰ Ivi, p. 28.

away from her Maman. Once she was able to bring Maman to Montreal, she, for the first time in her life, assumed a state of contentment. "That's why my name is Mān, which means 'perfectly fulfilled,' or 'may there be nothing left to desire,' or 'may all wishes be granted.' I can ask for nothing more because my name imposes on me that state of satisfaction and satiety"⁶¹. The text comes alive in its descriptions of lives lived in spaces of consciousness, amidst the political realities of a world in transition, from modernity to globalisation, from late 1970s to the 2000s. The study of these multiaxial and layered identities asserts the inevitable expansion of the lens of social spatialisation, and an approach to the concept of identity, no longer limited and confined in territorial geography but in spaces symbolic and transnational.

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⁶¹ Ivi, pp. 27-28.

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