# The Forms of Ithaca


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My maternal grandfather was an Italian immigrant who arrived in Latin America with his parents and siblings after experiencing the catastrophe of the Great War. With the help of a monastic community, he traveled by boat with a group of cousins and friends and reached the American continent, where they all wished to start a more prosperous life for their offspring. They were not alone; a large Italian group had decided to travel with them, especially families with young children, in the hope of finding a plot of land to work and a community that would settle down in the American continent and build a harmonious life together. Their final destination was Colombia. The Colombian Caribbean coast was, and still is, a favored commercial port that received trade from different countries. It also received numerous immigrants. Its privileged location near the sea and its fertile soil, good for farming, led many people to adopt it as their new home.

My maternal grandfather came from a peasant family. Over time, he, his siblings, cousins, and traveling companions chose different occupations. Some worked the land, while others raised cattle or became small businessmen. Those who decided to travel to the heart of the country, in the Andean region, and settle there to farm, far away from the sea, had probably chosen Colombia as their final stop. My mother was born in this region and, by a quirk of fate (which, as analysts know, has little to do with chance), returned to the Caribbean coast when she decided to marry a sailor – my father.

Thanks to my grandfather's stories, I understood that migration was linked to life and was prompted by fear and the struggle for survival. Moreover, it involved uprooting oneself from the place experienced as one's place of origin. To make such uprooting bearable, one had to leave in the company of others (relatives and close friends) and choose a place where the know-how one already had (in this case, working the land) would make it possible to start again. It is a strange experience, in which the life and death drives vie for dominance and Eros prevails, an Eros that never forgets that its tendency toward movement has found in uprootedness and loss part of its strength.

My father's travels belonged largely in the realm of adventure. His journeys into the high seas were part of a lifestyle that seemed fascinating to me. They spoke of the companionship of a crew on board of a ship, of the brotherhood that develops among sailors despite the lack of blood ties. Although my father and his shipmates were not related, since they traveled together, they took care of each other. One thing was always clear to my father. Once he left his ship forever, he would spend the rest of his life in the land where he was born, far from the sea. He wished to go back to his origins, to the place he knew best, the safest in the world. He always meant to return to the place where he wanted to be. He had embarked on a trip knowing that he carried a return ticket with him. Yet now he had two families – the one he felt part of because of blood ties, and the one made up of his traveling companions, the other sailors.

According to León and Rebeca Grinberg (1984), migration, the act of moving from one country or region to a reasonably different or distant one for a period of time long enough to make it necessary to engage in everyday life activities, is a multifaceted experience. We need to consider, for instance, if it was a voluntary or a forced migration. These authors reflect on the difficulty to distinguish clearly between these two categories, which, in my view, are somewhat closely related. In any case, to understand migration, it is essential to know whether or not migrants are able to return to their home country.

Latin America has always received immigrants. The Uruguayan psychoanalyst Marcelo Viñar stated in a lecture that the origin of many Latin Americans should be traced to the ships that had transported them here. I would add that we come from the encounter, the conflict, the battles, the tension between natives and foreigners and, ultimately, from their attempts to live together. Latin Americans' place of birth is the melting pot where various traditions met.

History has shown us time and time again that there is no cultural purity, and that dialogue and exchange have been part of human life since its inceptions (Vega, 2002). At the same time, in countries like Colombia we are still experiencing the forced internal displacement of many of our people. The different wars that are still being fought here compel them to leave their homes to protect their lives. Most of these are group migrations; families must leave their land and move to the big cities, which are surrounded by poverty belts.

This is also an intense, unexpected experience. While migration creates a fertile ground for dialogue among cultures, it is prompted by fear; flight becomes the only way to ensure that we will be alive to tell the story of our uprootedness. We are hence faced with the emergence of an uncanny element, as Freud (1919) pointed out. On the one hand, migration is familiar to us, and has made us what we are (since the beginning). On the other, it becomes foreign and terrifying when we are confronted, once again, with an other who has just arrived. We greet foreigners with fear, we arouse fear in them, and we deprive them of their land.

What elements of our intergenerational psychic history are tied to migration processes? Rene Kaës (1983) states that if we overcome the opposition individual-group, we can see that the subject of the unconscious is the subject of heritage, the subject of the group. What did we inherit thanks to the arrival of the other/foreigner/immigrant/displaced? Do we understand that this other constitutes us in our history?

I will look at two phenomena tied to migration that are part of Latin American and psychoanalytic history. The first one is the exile to different European or North American countries suffered by many of our colleagues due to the various dictatorships that ruled in our lands for many years. Edmundo Gómez-Mango (2011), who has looked at the aftermath of this process, reminds us that the effects of state terror never go away, and that it is almost a categorical imperative to evoke, analyze, and reminisce about these periods in our history in order to make sure that the new generations recognize them as part of their own origin and extend their solidarity and hospitality to those who left as well as to the newly arrived.

The Cuban writer Leonardo Padura developed the script for the movie *Return to Ithaca* (2015). This movie narrates the meeting of a group of friends in Cuba to welcome Amadeo, a friend who had left for Spain with his theater group and had never come back until now, fifteen years later. We find out that he had stayed abroad out of fear. He had thus been able to keep some secrets regarding precisely this group of friends. If the regime had learned of their plans, his friends would have fallen out of favor, and he did not want to betray them. Now he is back and is more confident. He feels free, and is planning on staying, a decision that causes perplexity in the group. Amadeo has not come back to the Promised Land or to his past life in Cuba, and he knows it. Yet he is returning to the land where he feels he can be himself, and his friends will be there to take care of him.

The other phenomenon I would like to recall here is described in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939). Freud discusses his ideas about the Egyptian origin of the figure of Moses – the foreign subject who is essential to the identity of a people to which he is not tied by kinship but of which he becomes a founding figure. Once again, we are dealing with the role of an other who is simultaneously familiar/necessary and strange/foreign.

In his lecture "Freud and the Non-Europeans," Edward Said (2003) reaches two conclusions concerning Freud's Moses that should be added to the ideas discussed above. First, the founder of psychoanalysis makes clear that the identity of a subject or a group is not reduced to their political or religious beliefs. Second, a shared identity is in no way homogenous or integrated; it cannot be perceived as a consistent, organic whole. As Jaqueline Rose (2003) remarks in her response to Edward Said, we are, instead, in the presence of fragmented identities; the other/immigrant constitutes us and is assimilated, precisely, in his or her foreignness, so that fragments of other origins eventually become part of us.
I wonder, then, if it is precisely newcomers' uncanny nature that provokes anti-immigrant reactions. Are we afraid because we assume that we know nothing about them? Paulo Nazareth, a Brazilian artist, decided to embark on a journey by foot across Latin America. In every country he visited he talked to the local residents. Sometimes he would stay at their homes and then move on. His idea was to let himself be "contaminated" by the local habits and customs; he wanted his body to become part of the lands he crossed.

What follows is one of his reflections about his experience:
“My notion of fatherland expands day by day (...) having been born in Brazil, I am Latin American, and being Latin American, I am also Mexican (...) I'm part of each country where I set foot (...) there is no way to separate these lands by an imaginary line called border (...) perhaps that's why they have built a wall up north: it's an attempt to prevent Mexico from continuing to be Mexico inside the United States” (Paulo Nazareth, 2012, no pagination).

Perhaps we should rethink the apparent lack of familiarity that we experience in front of immigrants. Maybe what we are reluctant to grasp is the fact that we equate their existence with a fragmented/split part of our psyche that we refuse to assimilate again and that has become foreign to us. Perhaps, if we make the mental effort, we may continue to ask, as Cavafis suggests, for the road to Ithaca to be long so that when we reach the end we will be able to understand what our own Ithacas mean to each of us.

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