

Georgeta Matei

# Remapping *the* Marginal

*in Contemporary American Immigrant Writing*

Presă Universitară Clujeană

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Since the thesis was completed, the socio-cultural context in the United States has continued to evolve in ways that render its subject matter even more pressing. The questions addressed here, regarding marginality, representation, and narrative voice, remain deeply relevant, underscoring the need for sustained critical engagement with contemporary American immigrant writing.

Finally, this book is written with the conviction that the continued defense of freedom of expression, critical inquiry, and plural voices remains essential, particularly in times of heightened social and cultural polarization.



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</i> .....	5
<i>INTRODUCTION</i> .....	11
<b>CHAPTER 1.</b>	
<i>SPACE, IDENTITY, AND AESTHETICS</i>	
<i>IN CONTEMPORARY MIGRANT LITERATURE</i> .....	19
1.1. The Reconceptualization of Space: Contemporary Theories.....	19
1.2. <i>Nation and Narration: Writing Alternative Histories</i> in Contemporary Immigrant Literature .....	22
1.3. Reframing Cultural Marginality in Contemporary Immigrant Literature.....	31
1.4. Transcending Polarization: Cultural Pluralism, Multilingualism, and Transnational Narrativization of the Self in New Immigrant Writing .....	34
1.4.1. Spatial Sensibility .....	36
1.4.2. Hybrid Identities, Hybrid Forms .....	42
1.4.3. Self-consciousness & Storytelling .....	43
1.4.4. Language & Cultural Translation .....	45
1.5. National Literatures Versus World Literature: from National to Transnational in Literary Studies.....	48
<b>CHAPTER 2.</b>	
<i>ALEKSANDAR HEMON: RECONFIGURATIONS</i>	
<i>OF THE SELF IN THE GLOBAL AGE</i> .....	53
2.1. Aleksandar Hemon: Essential Biobibliographical Details .....	54
2.2. Fictionalizing the Self in <i>The Lazarus Project</i> .....	57

2.3. Cross-cultural Identity Reformation in Hemon's Nonfictional Writing .....	61
2.4. From Bilingualism to Translingualism in Hemon's Writing.....	63

**CHAPTER 3.**

<b><i>JUNOT DIAZ: TRANSCULTURAL NARRATIVES OF DECOLONIAL LOVE AND VIOLENCE IN THE BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO</i></b> .....	73
3.1. Junot Díaz: Essential Biobibliographical Details .....	75
3.2. Fiction and History: A Poststructuralist Approach .....	79
3.2.1. Footnotes as a Conversational Metatext on Historiography.....	84
3.2.2. Identity & Ideology in the Use of SF References.....	88
3.2.3. Subverting the Latin-American Tradition of Magical Realism & Romance .....	92
3.3. Towards a New Theory of Justice .....	95
3.4. Reframing the Marginal Through Language.....	98

**CHAPTER 4.**

<b><i>CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE: RETHINKING HYBRIDITY IN AMERICANAH</i></b> .....	107
4.1. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: Essential Biobibliographical Details....	110
4.2. Hybridity, Return Migration & Transcultural Identity Formation in <i>Americanah</i> .....	112
4.2.1. The Narrative of Dislocation & Identity Reconfiguration... 116	
4.2.2. Positionality and The Question of Self-development in Transnational Female Migrant Fiction .....	128
4.2.3. Rewriting Autobiography: Ifemelu's Blogs as Alternative Expressive Devices.....	139
4.2.4. #blackhairmatters: The Black Body as Space and The "Hairitage" Issue in <i>Americanah</i> .....	147
4.3. From Achebe to Adichie: Old vs. New in Postcolonial African Writing .....	154

4.3.1. Towards a Hybrid Literary Identity .....	156
4.3.2. The Question of Americanness: How American is Americanah? .....	158
4.4. “Translating the Self”: Identity, Language & Cultural Politics in <i>Americanah</i> .....	159
4.4.1. Beyond Standard English: A Translingual Approach to Americanah .....	160
4.4.2. Fake Accents: The Issue of Mimicry and Voluntary Assimilation .....	163
4.4.3. Fake Names & the Issue of Identity Alteration .....	165
4.4.4. Love & Cultural Politics: The Issue of Translatability .....	166

**CHAPTER 5.**

<b><i>OCEAN VUONG: REWRITING THE WAR. TRANSNATIONAL NARRATIVES OF PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE TRAUMA</i> .....</b>	<b>171</b>
5.1. Ocean Vuong: Essential Biobibliographical Details.....	172
5.2. Rewriting the War: Trauma, Queer Desire, and Change of Perspective in Vuong’s Fiction .....	174
5.2.1. Queering Time: Trauma Writing & The Question of History .....	175
5.2.2. Queering History: Revision & Reinvention in Vuong’s Writing .....	180
5.2.3. Queering Space: The Yellow Body In-between Shame, Desire, and Empathy .....	183
5.3. Queering Genre & Legacy: Hybrid Forms & Identities in O. Vuong’s Prose .....	194
5.4. Speaking the Language of Vulnerability: Alternative Languages in Ocean Vuong’s Writing .....	202

**CHAPTER 6.**

<b><i>BORDER CROSSINGS TOWARDS A NEW TYPOLOGY IN CONTEMPORARY IMMIGRANT WRITING</i> .....</b>	<b>211</b>
6.1. Crossing National & Aesthetic Borders in Contemporary Immigrant Literature .....	212

6.2. Breaking the <i>Autobiographical Pact</i> : Life Writing & the Limits of Authenticity in Migrant Literature .....	216
6.3. "Writing the Self": Identity, Memory & Language in Contemporary Immigrant Writing .....	222
<b>CONCLUSIONS AND PERSONAL CONTRIBUTION .....</b>	<b>225</b>
<b>WORKS CITED .....</b>	<b>235</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES .....</b>	<b>257</b>
<b>APPENDICES .....</b>	<b>259</b>
<b>INDEX .....</b>	<b>267</b>

# INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalization and intense intercultural exchanges, the migratory phenomenon is gaining more and more importance in our lives and in relation to the *other*<sup>1</sup>. In this thesis, we employ the concept of alterity from a transnational perspective. As it produces a shift towards the mainstream, contemporary immigrant writing in the US today goes beyond the politics of polarity and questions the boundaries of American individuality but also those of American national literature. Eight decades ago, Oscar Handlin suggested that American history is a history of immigrants (1951/ 1973: 3). President John F. Kennedy repeatedly quoted Handlin in his 1959 essay, “A Nation of Immigrants” (1959/ 2017). American history and literature, seen only from a pro-immigrant perspective, are, to an extent, incomplete and undoubtedly open to controversy (Gerber, 2013). However, it is undeniable that the immigrants’ role in defining American cultural identity is not marginal, and they continue to add new dimensions to contemporary American individuality.

This research aims at providing an enhanced understanding of cultural marginality and the immigrant experience in today’s America as we focus on the work of four immigrant writers from different locations, cultures, and socio-political contexts: Aleksandar Hemon (Bosnia), Junot Díaz (Dominican Republic), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Nigeria), and Ocean Vuong (Vietnam). These four writers have more in common than their immigrant status. Their novels have significant autobiographical dimensions, while their nonfictional works, autobiographies, or memoirs contain fictional elements, blurring the line between life and narrative. Hemon, Díaz, Adichie, and Vuong engage in what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have broadly called “life writing” (biographical, novelistic, historical, or explicit self-referential writing), and more specifically, in “life narrative,” which is a crucial element in their project of identity and self-transformation (both in

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<sup>1</sup> The *other* - the immigrant, the marginal - is defined by the relationship with the language and culture of adoption as well as with aspects related to race, gender, class, sexuality, and ethnicity.

fiction and in real life). They tell the story of the “other” in a multicultural era still marked by increased displacement, violence, oppression, racism, and cultural difference. Their texts were chosen for their attention to form, the spectacular cultural, linguistic, and textual hybridity, and, more importantly, the empowerment of the marginal through language. Using English in their narratives, immigrant authors make their voices heard in America and worldwide. They internationalize their stories as they deterritorialize American literature, which is one of the key features of the transnational aesthetics in immigrant writing, as articulated in this thesis.

## **Research Objectives**

This research has international and interdisciplinary dimensions. On the one hand, it sheds light on the sociological, cultural, and ideological causes and effects of the mass migration to the USA from the beginning of the twentieth century onwards (such as political instability, poverty, oppression, difference, dislocation, trauma, etc.). On the other hand, we look into how the last two decades show a shift in marginal discourses towards a new existence, a new identity position in contemporary American writing.

Our goal is to respond to Bharati Mukherjee’s invitation to come up with an appropriate theoretical framework that would provide “a more complete, more insightful entry into the ‘literature of the immigrant experience’” and enable “a fuller understanding of this emerging sub-genre ‘Literature of New Arrival,’” which is different in “its aims, scope, and linguistic dexterity from postcolonial literature, literature of globalization, or diasporic literature” (Mukherjee, 2011:683). Thus, the transnational study of literature provides the appropriate framework to explore the immigrant experience at this particular historical moment.

Based on such observations, our analysis aims to envision a coherent representation of contemporary American cultural marginality in immigrant writing, broad enough to include the diversity of migratory experiences as pictured in our primary bibliography. Is it challenging to conciliate individual and specific cultural aspects with common traits of the immigrant experience? Yes. However, such representation would stress the dialectical link between narrative, space, and identity in a transnational context. In this

regard, each chapter dedicated to the writers chosen for analysis begins with a subchapter providing a few essential bio-bibliographical details. We believe it is important to get a broader picture of the context of their writing, the way fact (history) and fiction (imagination) intermingle in their literature, and how they construct their identity through storytelling.

Key concepts such as marginality, hybridity, liminality, the doubleness of the migratory consciousness, in-between-ness, translingualism, transnationalism, the quest for belonging, uprootedness, (un)homeliness, fluid identity, displacement, and relocation, will be put into use to observe if and how one's minority status gained a complex, legitimate identity position in today's multicultural America. Alternatively, we will draw on a diverse body of literature from convergent yet different fields of study.

## **Research Methodology**

By combining textual analysis (literary theory) with sociocultural interpretation (social criticism), conceptual frameworks from postcolonial theory and transnational studies, we will analyze the works of the immigrant authors mentioned above in relation to power structures, space, identity, the politics of the marginal, as well as to social representations and cultural constructs such as gender, race, and ethnicity. As Pascale Casanova put it in her fundamental work on world literature, looking into the international literary space is reintroducing political history into literary theory.

From a methodological point of view, we must distinguish world literature analysis from the transnational perspective we will use. World literary critics and historians seek to describe and understand the international literary space in terms of history and geography (Casanova, 1999) beyond nations' political and linguistic boundaries. The transnational approach to literature implies a shift of focus toward the dialectical relationship between identity and culture, towards a better understanding of what is perceived as marginal or different across borders. These theoretical new perspectives invite us to reconsider the way we look at literature in a globalized world, to reconcile the universal and the particular; in other words, to rethink the way we see the literary phenomena as a

system, as a whole, as a network without marginalizing the local, the particular, the *trans*- aspects of it.

The transnational immigrant life writing typology emerging in American and world literature during the last three decades is under-theorized. So, this research intends to provide a comprehensive, more complete framework addressing the transition of the immigrant self and artwork into innovative cross-genre forms and new modes of agency. At the same time, we propose a reconciliation of several antagonistic or contrasting perspectives in literary and cultural criticism, exploring the individuality of each author's work as well as its typological characteristics.

Both aesthetically and politically, the subject under analysis discusses aspects related to the revision of the world literary canon and the impact of the analyzed works in reshaping the notion of national literature, arguing the destabilization of canonization and periodization of literature in the context of globalization and the transnational paradigm in current cultural and literary studies. The proposed works straddle the border between ethnic, mainstream, and canonical literature, offering unprecedented visibility to the authors' communities - racial, sexual, and gender minorities historically underrepresented in the 20th-century American literary canon. The great achievement of these authors refers not so much to the representation of minorities in the literary production of today's United States as to the widening of the margins of American literature in their trajectory toward its center. What they ultimately destabilize is the center versus margin dichotomy proposing new ways of understanding historically and culturally marginalized forms of existence.

From a sociological perspective, the paper illuminates the socio-cultural and ethical implications of immigrant literature as well as its political role in counteracting forms of neoimperialism, racism, and inequality, subjecting to analysis the openness of today's America to ethnic, cultural, racial, and gender diversity and difference. Thus, we also wish to highlight the educational purpose of this thesis as knowing more and understanding better marginal segments in today's American culture and society can shape more inclusive policies for vulnerable social categories such as refugees and immigrants.

The research argues for a revision of the concepts of cultural marginality and linguistic otherness, as well as the relation between center and margins considering the context of global mobility, the international circulation of subjects and their literary production, as well as the cross-cultural reconfiguration of literary identities in fluid and heterogeneous transnational spaces. During the last three decades, geocritical inquiries into the literary field and social studies (Tally Jr., 2013, Westphal, 2007) have opened new directions in understanding the complex relationship between marginality and centrality in the context of a globalized world. The immigrant condition is central to such discussions, redimensioning the local vs. global debate. As many research papers have shown, space is one of the critical features of new poetics in contemporary immigrant literature (Weiner, 2018; Jay, 2022). One of the significant interventions of this paper is to underline that time is no less important than space, just as history is no less important than geography as guiding principles in the articulation of new aesthetics in present-day immigrant literature. Time and space are wedded concepts in our spatial and historiographic analysis of texts. To put it differently, historicity is as essential a concept as spatiality because this particular moment in time allowed these writers to represent their Otherness in more creative ways, reach a global audience, and hold a privileged status in American letters.

Thus, we will evaluate contemporary immigrant narratives from both spatial and historical perspectives. New immigrant writers envision a space where time travel and global mobility transform literary forms and their real and imagined selves. By recalling a traumatic past, they make sense of their present and create the prospects of a better, more inclusive future.

Consequently, we combine sociocultural, geocritical, and narratological methods to develop an analytical framework that addresses the complex connection between space (form), time (history), identity (self), and aesthetics (narration). This research claims to identify and describe patterns in contemporary American immigrant writing that would shape a new understanding of the politics and poetics of the Marginal. To do so, we shall move between reality and imagination, nonfiction and fiction, texts, paratexts, and epitexts, facts and their sociocultural representations. Therefore, our framework shall be inter- and transdisciplinary in applying

the methodologies of literary theory (close reading), literary history (distant reading), and sociocultural interpretation.

Our research is also positioned at the intersection of postcolonial theory, geocriticism, and digital media since space, identity, aesthetics, and mixed-media knowledge production are interconnected sections in the texts we analyze. Visual representations in and outside the proposed novels (photographs, maps, blank spaces, blog posts) will be examined from both a concrete and abstract understanding of the authors' spatial aesthetics. Aleksandar Hemon incorporates actual photographs and maps in his texts. Diaz's approach is more subtle as he discursively draws on the format of comic books and speculative genres without actually producing a graphic novel (Weiner, 2018). Adichie inserts first-person blog posts in her third-person narration in *Americanah* (2013) using a different font and text size. Ocean Vuong's fragmented writing style often "breaks" into poetry, creating blank spaces in his debut novel. By encompassing this variety of forms, mediums, languages, and voices, we intend to illustrate that just as cultural borders between nations become increasingly porous, so do the boundaries between genres in contemporary transnational *life writing*.

Immigrant narratives today indicate a literary renewal both in form and content. The immigrant's view of the world is central to this research as it speaks about the complex relation between space, history, identity, aesthetics, and politics in the world we live and work together, rethinking notions of marginality, alterity, and hybridity. Our contribution and multivalent approach are meant to reflect the social, historical, and political forces that shape the immigrant's identity and literature by exploring literal and figurative border crossings in contemporary immigrant writing. In our critical approach, we also intend to cross the boundaries of dominant trends in postmodern literary criticism that reduce immigrant narratives to autobiographical acts, evaluating fictional and nonfictional dimensions of their texts beyond issues of truth and authenticity from a reader-response perspective. As we will argue in the last chapter of this thesis, the blurring boundaries between fiction and reality, storytelling and truth-telling lie at the heart of contemporary migrant (auto)fiction.

Finally, we wish to emphasize the role of the Reader/ literary critic in measuring the impact of immigrant narratives at a global level, writing from

a different location and position from that of the four chosen authors. The originality of this research ultimately resides in the way we revisit and reframe concepts from a multitude of disciplines, bringing together different yet similar migrant voices addressing , rethinking, and remapping the Marginal in contemporary literature.

Remapping the Marginal in Contemporary American Immigrant Writing explores how immigrant authors reshape American literature through narratives of movement, displacement, and belonging. Examining works by Junot Díaz, Aleksandar Hemon, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Ocean Vuong, the book challenges traditional margin–center paradigms and shows how transnational experiences redefine cultural centrality. By foregrounding narrative experimentation and mobility, it reveals immigrant writing as a site where the assumptions and boundaries of the contemporary American canon are actively rethought.



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