

Migration, Melancholy, and Identity in the Context of Isolation

Migração, melancolia e identidade no contexto do isolamento

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Abstract: In this autobiographical text I address migration through the lens of my own trajectory as individual, composer, and researcher. This work examines collected memories beginning with childhood, moving through adulthood, and up to the present. I describe migration processes and their emotional impact, psychoanalytic interpretations, and the influence they've had on my musical compositions. I discuss the ambivalent potential of migration and the freedom of the migrant, proposed by Flusser. As an addendum to my original text from 2015, this follow-up reflects on serial migration (Ossman), the poetics of attachment and space (Bachelard), and concludes with a brief response to the pandemic of COVID-19 vis-a-vis the relationship between isolation and the intimate immensity of being.

Keywords: migration, melancholy, attachment, isolation, COVID-19

Resumo: Neste texto de caráter autobiográfico abordo o tema da migração, que acompanha minha trajetória como indivíduo, compositor e pesquisador. O relato resgata memórias desde a minha infância, juventude, idade adulta até o momento atual. Descrevo processos de migração, sentimentos por estes causados, interpretações psicanalíticas, e o impacto da migração na minha composição musical. Discuto o potencial ambivalente da migração e a questão da liberdade do migrante, formulada por Flusser. O texto original, foi escrito em 2015. O adendo de 2020 reflete sobre migração serial (Ossman) e as poéticas de apego e de espaço (Bachelard). O texto conclui com uma breve reflexão, suscitada pela pandemia do COVID-19, sobre a relação entre isolamento e a imensidão íntima do ser.

Palavras-chave: migração, melancolia, apego, isolamento, COVID-19

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Then shall I turn my face, and hear one bird
sing terribly afar in the lost lands.

E. E. Cummings

Never has there been a period of time in which I have not steadily moved between places, countries, and cultures. Born and raised as a nomad in Brazil, I have spent the majority of my life outside of my home country. I have experienced migration both as loss and suffering, and as opportunity and bliss. To feel at home everywhere and nowhere is a strange sensation. The experience of migration has brought forth an awareness within me that one must allow grief to emerge in order to embrace what is given. The following is an examination of my path of serial migration and a reflection on the notions of melancholy and identity that have emerged from it.

At the time of my birth, my father was working as an agricultural engineer for the Commission of the São Francisco Valley, an agency of the Brazilian federal government. The São Francisco River runs 1,811 miles — the longest river entirely contained in Brazilian territory and connecting the Southeast and Northeast regions of the country. My father's job was to develop agricultural colonies along the river in the states of Bahia and Minas Gerais. This required moving our family from one village to another, from Irecê to Santa Maria da Vitória, and on to Paracatu. These were places in which the shaping of raw material seemed to influence thinking with a similar rawness — framing everything with the brutality of social conflicts manipulated by corrupt politicians. Life was synchronized with the mythical rhythm of the jungle, oscillating between tolerance and invasiveness. One had to learn how to hit the head of the *jararaca*, an aggressive poisonous snake that once snuck into our house and hid behind the couch, poised ready to strike. On another occasion, villagers climbed a ladder to observe the monstrous anaconda (*sucuri*), the largest snake in the world, after it had been captured eating a whole calf. It was put in a bathroom to become an object of both desire and disgust. We kept unusual pets such as ostrich and deer. I would spend long periods of time playing alone and listening to children's stories and music on colorful vinyl records. My mother never understood how I could recognize the different albums, since they all *looked* the same; what she didn't know was that I was internalizing the notes and stories in search of some kind of order and finding it in the language of music.

Before turning five years of age, my father was transferred to Rio de Janeiro to work in the administrative office of the Commission of the São Francisco Valley. The dramatic transition from the solitude of the countryside to the heart of the city demanded a new rhythm of life — synchronized not with nature, but with tools and machines. There I attended a preschool where I learned English; not a common language and not one my parents spoke. Despite not understanding their impulse at the time to have me learn English, the early immersion in a foreign language turned out to be a great benefit to me.

My mother would take me to school via an open tram that had people hanging out of it on all sides, and which were removed from the streets of Rio de Janeiro shortly thereafter to make way for the new cars being turned out by a flourishing Brazilian auto industry. Two years later, my father was transferred from Rio to Salvador, Bahia, my birth city, where he worked on state government agricultural projects. Being back in the same city as my grandparents, uncles, and cousins, allowed me to develop a bond with my extended family — especially my grandfather, a man of severe manners and conservative values. Since my father's job required frequent travels, I sometimes accompanied him on trips through the large state of Bahia where we journeyed by Jeep on unpaved roads and visited impoverished remote locations where the colonial past and legacy of slavery were still painfully present. I witnessed people living in miserable conditions who somehow managed to keep the flame of human dignity shining through the darkness of suffering. I was privileged to get to know a reality beyond the comfortable middle-class world in which I was raised.

Then everything changed on March 31, 1964. The armed forces led a successful coup d'état and installed a military dictatorship that would rule Brazil until 1985. This was just days before we moved back to Rio de Janeiro near the beach of Copacabana. Most of the other residents in our apartment building were military officers and their families. During high school in Rio de Janeiro, I developed an intense political activism — participating in protests, demonstrations, and actions organized by Marxist movements advocating ideas of socialist revolution and supporting the armed struggle against the dictatorial regime. My generation lived with strong feelings of revolt and excitement propelled by the cultural change of the 1960s and demands for greater individual freedom. The revolt provided unique perspectives for exploring new horizons in the society and a passion for visual arts, cinema, and literature. It sparked creative potential that seemed inexhaustible.

The growing opposition caused an increase of repressive measures and a radicalization of the dictatorship. By this time, I had left my parents' home and went underground with a fake identity. After making the decision to leave Brazil in 1970, I went to live with my uncle, a literature professor who had fled the country six years earlier and had been living in exile with his family in Paris. When I arrived in France, I became one of many Brazilians living in a ghetto, and this began to sow the seeds of an identity crisis. As a 16-year-old, I was eager to discover new possibilities, but I was also driven by strong feelings of loss of attachment that blurred the light of freedom. I travelled to Algeria, where my uncle had lived before moving to Paris, seeking to reestablish connections with the revolutionary project. In conversations with exiled politicians living in Alger, I was struck by how living in exile had affected their being-in-the-world and their relation to time. Miguel Arraes, a former governor who spent fourteen years in asylum in Algeria explained it this way:

Being in exile is like seeing time pass outside you. Things happen without your participating in them, without your being inside them. So you have to make a tremendous effort to keep yourself on a par with reality through conversation, visiting, reading the newspaper, listening to the radio, et cetera. You need to make an effort to live because, on the contrary, when you're outside of time you don't live (Rollemberg 2007, 84).

Through a series of events, I got to know a group of 40 political activists who had been granted asylum in Algeria. I met them at the airport when they arrived from Brazil, newly released from prison in exchange for the German ambassador who had been kidnapped by urban guerrillas. These men and women of different ages and social origins had suffered tremendously during their incarceration. Some had been brutally tortured, and many would never recover from their trauma. What is most vivid even now, is the relief I saw in their eyes combined with the anxiety of loss. It was June 1970 and the World Cup was being televised live for the very first time. We watched the final game together, considered one of the greatest moments in the history of soccer when Brazil beat Italy 4 to 1. This experience exemplified the deep conflict between being a revolutionary while feeling an allegiance to your countrymen. The exiles knew all too well that the team was being used as a tool of propaganda by the military regime — but in the end, our national identity prevailed, and we were overcome by pride as we watched and rooted for our compatriots on the field and on the world stage.

I had the opportunity to complete high school in France (after dropping out in the 10th grade in Brazil) but decided to return home in January 1971 instead. It was a period when repression and torture had reached their heights and a growing number of activists were being arrested. Hundreds were killed or disappeared by the military apparatus. I watched people I knew being arrested and feared it might only be a matter of time until I was caught. On the other hand, my revolutionary activities had ceased, and I did not believe I would face consequences. Then one morning, they came and pulled me out of bed and took me to the military police headquarters. I was put inside the "refrigerator," a small cubicle, acoustically isolated, and completely dark and cold. Piercing sounds such as hauling oscillators, rumbling generators, distorted radio signals, motorcycles, and electric saws were piped through loudspeakers. Incessantly, dissonant sounds filled the dark space and overwhelmed my body for three long days. I lost consciousness at one point. Torture had become such a common practice and after political prisoners began dying, international pressure led to the regime introducing "clean" torture methods that would leave no marks, such as the "refrigerator." This frightening and terrifying experience I endured as a 17-year-old in 1971, plunged me into a new sphere of existence. It didn't destroy my *self*, but it did rob me of the nostalgia for innocence from the adolescent feelings of revolt.¹

¹ My experience of torture was the subject of the digital oratorio *The Refrigerator [A Geladeira]* (2014) for two singers (mezzo-soprano and baritone), instrumental ensemble (violin, viola, cello, piano and percussion), electronic sounds, live-electronics and interactive visual projection. The piece encompasses a

The period in which I was absurdly tortured coincided with the beginning of my interest in music. In 1972, I moved with my family from Rio de Janeiro to Londrina after my father found a new job in the industry of pesticides and fertilizers. I began learning basic music skills and worked diligently through dozens of beginning piano books. Despite being 19-years-old, I attended lessons at the local conservatory alongside young children who were only starting to move their fingers. The following year I moved again to study Music Composition at the University of São Paulo. Music became a kind of Promised Land, an existential space for new migratory experiences and a means of rediscovering the lost object of revolt. This evolution led to a progressive distancing from my origins toward new nomadic movements. After graduating at the University of São Paulo, I left Brazil and moved to Liège, Belgium, in January 1980 and to Cologne, Germany, in September 1982. After nearly 24 years living in Europe, I moved to California in November 2004.

Trauma and Freedom

I first began considering the move to Germany during my music studies in São Paulo, but went to Belgium first for the opportunity to study with Henri Pousseur, an iconic composer of the post-war European avant-garde, whose theoretical work also fascinated me. I became very close to Pousseur, who was then director of the conservatory and professor at the University of Liège, and had the privilege to learn from his exceptional humanism both as an artist, researcher, and individual.² However, I regarded the time in Belgium as a transitional step to settle down permanently in Germany, where the German musical tradition and the avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s resonated with my artistic ambitions. I felt a great existential affinity with the language, culture, and the ambivalent manifestations of tragedy in post-war Germany. When I arrived in Cologne, in 1982, I moved into a shared flat (*Wohngemeinschaft*) with Germans who were looking

multilayered narrative offering multiple perspectives for observing my personal experience of torture and the reality of torture in general. It was commissioned by the Centro Cultural São Paulo and premiered on April 8, 2014 in an event on the 50th anniversary of the Brazilian military coup of 1964. The video documentation of the performance is available on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/KH_EnKIItHM> (accessed June 30, 2020). For the genesis of the piece see (Chagas 2014b). For an analytical account of *The Refrigerator* and the relation between music and torture see (Chagas 2016 and 2017).

² I had the unique opportunity to compose in collaboration with Pousseur the piece *La Passion selon Guignol* [*The Passion according to Punch*] (1982) for amplified vocal quartet (SATB) and orchestra, which unfolds a pluralistic network of musical styles and references. It combines original material from Pousseur's avant-garde opera *Votre Faust*, including a large number of musical quotations reaching from Monteverdi to Webern. In addition to orchestrating the original material by Pousseur, I inserted an important number of new materials that go beyond the universe of *Votre Faust* and introduced elements of pop music, rock and jazz. The musical diversity of the piece contributed to its popularity and the several performers it had in Belgium, France, the United States and the UK. The recording of the first performance is available on SoundCloud: <<https://soundcloud.com/paulocchagas/henri-pousseur-paulo-c-chagas-la-passion-selon-guignol-1982>> (accessed June 30, 2020).

for a new architecture for communal life. I spared no effort learning the language, assimilating habits and cultural values, and integrating myself into the society. The Cold War and threat of nuclear annihilation greatly impact everyday life in the 1980s. One could also feel the ongoing tension emerging from the need to understand the fascist past, while pursuing a new identity that could integrate the rich cultural legacy usurped by the Nazi project into a society oriented by democratic values. The trauma of World War II was a shadow that obscured the enormous destruction and suffering of the Nazi catastrophe; the violent shock left an unutterable sense of failure, damage, and loss.

That existential feeling of loss resonated deeply with my own traumatic experience of torture and migration, the departure and separation from my homeland, and the struggle to reconstruct my identity in a foreign country whose own identity was in the process of being rebuilt.³ A sense of alienation tainted the exhilarating wish to fit in with German society. I felt helpless and caught in a struggle for self-preservation. I looked to my roots in an attempt to hold on to elements of my native environment, turning my attention to the music of Candomblé, the religion of the Afro-Brazilian descendants of slaves. As a child in Salvador, I remember listening to the rhythms of drums and the melodies of voices celebrating African deities in the surrounding temples of Candomblé. The sounds came from far away in the night as a subtle vibration of a mysterious place. They remained in my memory as a mythological symbol of the traumatic experience of the loss of my birthplace and the protective mother figure. I was especially interested in the ritualistic, transcendental function of Afro-Brazilian cult music and set out to create works in which these elements converged in electronic sounds, audiovisual components, and live performance. This was the birth of intermedia, which became the defining aesthetic of my oeuvre.⁴

The awareness of the migrant condition, in which I saw myself fluctuating between the trauma of loss and the longing for home, remained concealed in my unconscious mind for nearly 15 years. As Leon and Rebeca Grinberg (1989) detail in their psychoanalytic study of migration and exile, the traumatic experience of migration is not an isolated thing, but a constellation of combined factors that produce anxiety and sorrow. The feeling of loss increases the vulnerability of the self that can lead to depression and melancholy. Grinberg introduced the notion that one's sense of identity emerges as a continuous interaction among spatial, temporal, and social integration. *Spatial integration* refers to the interrelations among parts of the self that provide the feeling of "individuation." *Temporal integration* connects the different representations of self over

³ The German policy toward foreigners was an obstacle for the integration of migrants. The German notion of citizenship goes back to a romantic and almost mystical conception of the German people, or "Volk", which designates a community mainly of common blood sharing ethnical and biological roots (Green 2004, 25-49).

⁴ For an overview on intermediate aesthetics and the analysis of audiovisual and multimedia works, see the chapter "Audiovisual and Multimedia Composition: The Relationship between Medium and Form" in my book *Unsayable Music* (Chagas 2014a, 203-49).

time and establishes continuity from one period to the next; it lays the groundwork for the feeling of "sameness." *Social integration* has to do with relations between aspects of the self and aspects of objects that provide identifications; it helps to create the feeling of "belonging" (1989, 132). As Grinberg suggests, these three components function and interact simultaneously.

The pivotal experience for reversing melancholy affecting the relation with space, time, and society emerged from an analytical Jungian psychology therapy (1993-95). The analysis awakened my awareness of what was formerly unconscious — the reality of migration — and helped me to recognize and accept it as something that could enrich and enliven my life. The piece *Migration* for MIDI-piano, ensemble and live-electronics, composed between 1995-97, can be considered an artistic response to the therapeutic approach.⁵ The work reflects on the idea of migration as a positive process of reconstruction and re-organization, while simultaneously encompassing the diversity of genetic, social, and cultural heritage. The composition was inspired by *The Library of Babel* (1941) by Borges, which describes a universe consisting entirely of a vast library holding the complete informational content of the past, present, and future (Butler, 2010). I recorded the text in four languages (German, Spanish, English and French) with both a female and male speaker and developed a multi-layered composition of sound migrations by digitally processing their speech.⁶

It is the digitally networked and globalized society that invites us to reframe the understanding of migration. Digital machines of dialogue promote an exchange of information capable of bringing people together on a level that forces us to reexamine notions of proximity and distance, presence, and absence. The Czech/Brazilian philosopher Vilém Flusser analyzed the ambivalent potential of migration — the simultaneity of suffering and bliss of a migrant, refugee, or exile as a function of a specific technology that defines what we consider a homeland. Flusser (2003) posits that we are leaving 10,000 years of Neolithic settledness behind us and currently experiencing a troubled transition from the agricultural and industrial society into the unmapped regions of post-industrial and post-historical society. The countless millions of migrants, whether they be guest workers, exiles, refugees, intellectuals, or professors — should not be considered "as outsiders but as vanguards of the future" (2003, 3). They represent a

⁵ *Migration* was composed in two versions: *Migration: 12-channel electronic music* (1995) and *Migration* (1997) for MIDI-piano, ensemble and live-electronics. Both works are available on SoundCloud: <<https://soundcloud.com/paulocchagas/migration-12-channel-electronic-music-1997>> and <[https://soundcloud.com/paulocchagas/migration-1997-for-midi-piano-ensemble-and-live electronics](https://soundcloud.com/paulocchagas/migration-1997-for-midi-piano-ensemble-and-live-electronics)> (accessed June 30, 2020).

⁶ For the compositional conception and aesthetics of *Migration* and particularly the design of the 12-channel circular sound space, see (Chagas 2008).

new kind of freedom emerging from the collapse of settledness: the freedom of the migrant.⁷

The notion of home and homeland can be grasped through the dialectic opposing familiar to unfamiliar; home is what looks familiar in opposition to the world, which seems like an unfamiliar mystery. We should open ourselves to the unfamiliar, to the noise of the world, by allowing the unfamiliar to be perceived positively as previously unknown information. Living without a homeland is a challenging experience but does not need to be a disturbing one. The loss of the original home, the mysterious place to which we were attached, opens us up to a different kind of mystery — one of living together with others and taking responsibility for the people for whom we choose to be responsible.

Addendum 2020: Poetics of Attachment, Poetics of Space

Susan Ossman (2013) uses the term serial migration to describe the experience of migrants who, like me, have lived in several different countries and “generally feel settling in a third country as a liberation from the double bind of immigration” (2013, 4). By overcoming the duality of immigration in successive displacements — not only traveling around the world, but also settling in successive “homelands,” serial migrants establish *poetics of attachment* to different places (2013, 125-45). Ossman evokes the logic of the *poetics of space* by Bachelard (1994 [1951]), which accounts for the different houses in which we have lived over a lifetime. These houses are never lost; they live on within us populated by affections and memories. These are spaces we build through our imaginations⁸— invisible houses made of breaths, voices, and sounds that inhabit spaces. They are, therefore, spaces of dreams, daydreams of our imaginations that emerge from affections, from the possibilities of living with others, clinging to people, objects and places. The poetics of attachment are not restricted to the fixed spaces that accompany us from birth, but are also produced by movement, mobility, and displacement. In my trajectory as a serial migrant, I identify the attachment to a constant movement toward the future, toward a dream house “we shall live in later, always later, so much later, in

⁷ Vilém Flusser (1920-1991) was born in Prague in the Jewish German speaking community and arrived in Brazil in 1940 escaping from the Nazi terror. In 1972 he returned to live in Europe. The *Vilém Flusser Archiv* project provides information on Flusser and the international research on his vast work: <<https://www.flusser-archive.org>> s June 30, 2020).

⁸ Bachelard uses here the French word “*revêrie*” which indicates a kind of “daydream,” a form of detachment from the immediate real environment that provides a dynamic point of reference for mediating between imagining consciousness and the world. The word “imagination” seems to me more appropriate than “daydream,” which is used in the English translation to capture Bachelard’s philosophical attitude.

fact, that we shall not have time to achieve it" (Bachelard 1994, 61). This movement toward the future creates the feeling of living in a temporary space, in a continuous transition to another patch of migration. The provisional space is a nest and refuge that offers shelter and comfort, while also functioning as a space of solitude and restlessness.

At the conclusion of her study on serial migration, Ossman pointed to the need for developing a more comprehensive understanding of the "evolving politics of movement" (2013, 145). In June 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic restrained physical displacement and imposed social confinement on a global level, loneliness emerged as a shared reality. For millions of people, isolation was a new experience, accompanied by the acceleration of the digitalization of information and communication both public and private. The internet emerged as the primary political, economic, and social hub of reality as well as the center of daily life in our spaces of existence. While confinement is not a new reality for me personally, it reinforces the isolation that has been with me for many years here at my home in Riverside, California. The current isolation places us in a privileged position to observe global anxiety in the face of the transformation of the world and the need to restructure all areas of life. At the same time, the reality of confinement intensifies paranoid tendencies in society, insofar as it imposes a much more generalized type of fear — the fear of ourselves and of recognizing our patterns of thinking and behavior.

I would like to conclude this addendum to the original 2015 text by highlighting the metaphysical link between confinement, the design of the human immune system, and the idea of inner space. Confinement reinforces the metaphor of the immune sphere, the virtual membrane that separates us from the environment and protects us from the outside (the invasion of the virus), while it immerses us in the immensity of our own interior. Confinement enforces a state of immobility as migration ceases, in order to connect us with the intimate immensity of being. Bachelard observed this relationship between immobility and intimate immensity in the following terms: "Immensity is within ourselves. It is attached to a sort of expansion of being that life curbs and caution arrests, but starts again when we are alone. As soon as we become motionless, we are elsewhere; we are dreaming in a world that is immense. Indeed, immensity is the movement of motionless man (1994, 184)."

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