

Home-making and identity in the context of migration in the play *Ni que nos vayamos nos podemos ir*

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Amidst hyperinflation, increasing shortages of food and medicine, and one of the highest levels of crime in the world, millions of Venezuelans have had to leave the country in the last decade (IOM, 2020). Consequently, the question of whether to stay or to leave has become a defining feature of contemporary Venezuelan narrative. As Luz Marina Rivas (2011:3) points out, characters tend to discuss these options in the dialogue of much Venezuelan writing today, reflecting real-life conversations. In the words of Leonardo Padrón (2016: 205): ‘Our homes are the setting for more and more nervous conversations. It’s decision time. Do we leave? Resist? Fight? Do we say goodbye to our country or our life?’ However, Lupe Gehrenbeck’s 2014 play *Ni que nos vayamos nos podemos ir* questions this dichotomy, suggesting that leaving and staying are not binary states. The title can be translated as both ‘Even if we left, we couldn’t leave’ and ‘Even if we don’t leave, we could leave’. This sets out the idea at the heart of the play that you cannot ‘stay’ because home is no longer what it had been, and you cannot ‘leave’ because so much of your identity is tied up with what is left behind.

The play explores multiple components of identity, including family roles, languages, memories, and places, and asks what happens to them in the context of migration. It follows a 65-year-old woman, Elvira, as she discusses with her friend and housemaid Alberta whether to stay with one daughter, Candelaria, in Caracas or to move to Miami to be with her other daughter, Carolina, and her grandchildren. Given that the family often functions as a symbol of the nation, it is notable that the siblings are divided not only geographically but politically: a capitalist and a *chavista*. Throughout the play, through interjections from neighbours and discussions between the protagonists, we learn about food shortages, rising crime and the erosion of the local community. In the final moments, it is revealed that Alberta’s son Tony had kidnapped and robbed Elvira before the opening of the play and Alberta had died from the shock. As well as confirming the hints throughout the play that Alberta is a ghost – thereby setting up a parallel between Elvira’s situation and haunting beyond the scope of today’s paper – this ending reinforces the message that home no longer offers the safety and security that it should.

This paper will focus on how, as Elvira's sense of safety and belonging in her home becomes increasingly threatened, she responds by reasserting the meaning invested in the physical space of the home. She demonstrates Greg Noble's (2004) theory of 'accumulated being', using objects as anchors to people and the memories associated with them. According to her official website, Gehrenbeck 'delves into the everyday, into all that is seemingly unimportant, to reveal what lies behind, the depths that constitute us'.¹ This is in stark contrast to the trend of commercial 'light' theatre in Venezuela, which focuses on humorous escapism (Rosas, 2013). Domestic objects have a starring role in the play, which follows Elvira as she prepares to sell or pack her belongings. The play takes place with a background of cardboard boxes, visually asserting that home for Elvira has become a liminal state. The boxes form walls around her, containing her belongings in the same way that these belongings contain her memories, her stories, and her sense of self; but in the boxes, these objects are unused, removed from their homely setting, awaiting an uncertain new life elsewhere, just like Elvira.



Images from the 2017 New York production of *Ni que nos vayamos...*

While Elvira examines and tells the story of each object, she also tells her own story. In his theory of 'accumulated being' Noble (2004: 234) underlines 'the cumulative nature of our domestic material environments and the ways in which this accumulation of objects objectifies the experiential, temporal and intersubjective dimensions of family life'. For Elvira, objects are proof of her affective links and reminders of shared experiences over many years.

¹ 'Hurga en lo cotidiano, en todo eso que aparentemente carece de importancia, por revelar lo que hay detrás, lo profundo que nos constituye'

A further reason why certain objects have value for Elvira is the inversion of labour that they represent. For example, Elvira points out a terrible painting she has kept in her kitchen for years because it was painted by a relative. It is a proof, she says, of the 'solidarity required by a family link'.² Elvira insists, 'They're not things, it's my life, Carolina, that's up for sale!'³ As she has already said goodbye to many people, and is facing the prospect of living somewhere where nobody knows her history, the objects reinforce her threatened sense of self.

The play illustrates how Elvira's identity as a wife and mother was constructed through the process of home-making. Emma Power (2016: 91) argues:

For couples in cohabiting households the process of combining possessions and sharing decisions about the design and decoration of the house is an important way that houses are made into shared homes and that couple identities are established.

This is demonstrated in the play as Elvira ends reminiscences about her wedding day with 'We filled all of these cabinets and cupboards, and the walls from the foundations up, with so much effort and love that... How can you ask me to go now [...]?'⁴ Decorating the house and collecting objects has been a shared activity throughout their marriage, symbolising their bond. Noble (2004: 240) maintains that 'the significance of the cabinet lies in its plenitude, not simply in the existence of discrete objects'. While Elvira could keep certain objects to take with her to Miami, she cannot take everything and will therefore lose the proof that her and her husband have spent so many years together sharing experiences. She worries about what will happen to her relationship with her husband if they leave behind the home they built together.

For Elvira, home symbolises permanence in a very unstable context. It is clear that she fears being forgotten. She worries:

And if we go, who's going to tell the story? When you belong, even if things change, you belong, it's history, there's no way round it. But in another landscape with strange people, who's going to remind us who we are?⁵

² 'Solidaridad obligada por vínculo familiar' (13)

³ '¡No son corotos, es mi vida, Carolina, la que se está poniendo en venta!' (6)

⁴ '[...] llenamos todas estas vitrinas y los escaparates, y las paredes sobre la tierra de esta casa, con tanto esfuerzo y amor que ¿cómo me pides que ahora me vaya [...]?' (16)

⁵ 'Y si nos vamos, ¿quién va a echar el cuento? Cuando perteneces, aunque que cambie, perteneces, es historia, no tiene remedio. En cambio en otro paisaje con gente rara, ¿quién nos puede recordar quienes somos?' (19)

For this reason, she views objects as a link between her ancestors, herself and her children. The phrase handing down 'suggests a lived relation, an actual physical moment of giving something to someone, which refuses the finality of death' (Noble, 2004: 247). It is therefore painful to her that her daughter Carolina seems uninterested in preserving meaningful objects. For example, Carolina tells her mother that she should not bring her grandfather's wicker chair to Miami, as you can buy something similar in IKEA for \$25. Elvira responds, 'But that \$25 IKEA chair isn't where your grandfather sat every afternoon, doing crosswords and eating seeds'.⁶ The exchange demonstrates both a cultural and a generational divide between mother and daughter. For Elvira, leaving the chair behind would mean both accepting her father's absence and breaking a link between her parents and her children. Whereas IKEA, with its connotations of placing practicality and affordability over longevity, shows that Carolina is not considering passing down her furniture. Candelaria accuses Carolina of having embraced the consumerist culture of the United States, portrayed as a threat to memory and family connections, a preoccupation that Elvira shares. However, we could also consider how Carolina had to migrate at a relatively young age to give her children a better life, and has had to adapt to the practicalities of moving country – she cannot afford to invest so much emotion into objects, and instead sees stories as the link between generations.

Elvira talks about 'the jigsaw puzzle of your life where every object is a piece. With each piece that you leave behind, a part of you remains'.⁷ The domestic setting of *Ni que nos vayamos...* and its attention to household objects highlights a more intimate aspect of the migrant experience than is usually discussed. Elvira's clinging to her objects allows her to reassert her identity as a wife, a mother, a friend, a middle-class woman, a Caraqueña, and a Venezuelan, as she simultaneously deals with the loss of the familiar within her own neighbourhood and prepares for a move to a new country where those markers of identity will lose their meaning. Her reluctance to leave behind the accumulation of objects symbolises her fear of being cut off from her loved ones, losing her memories, and not being

⁶ 'Pero en esa silla de IKEA de \$25 no era que se sentaba tu abuelo todas las tardes a llenar crucigramas y comer semillas' (12)

⁷ 'El rompecabezas de tu vida donde cada objeto es una pieza. Con cada pieza que dejas, te quedas tú un poco.' (25)

understood in her new home. The fact that most of these objects will remain in Caracas reflects how Elvira's identity will remain rooted in Venezuela even if she leaves the country.

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