

Freedom in Motion: Roberts and Ortega on Flight and Home

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English Abstract

Two recent texts, Neil Roberts' *Freedom as Marronage* and Mariana Ortega's *In-Between: Latina Feminist Phenomenology, Multiplicity, and the Self*, both offer contrasting and novel contributions to the theorization of oppression and liberation, focusing on different places and moments in the Americas. While Roberts emphasizes liberation as an ongoing manifestation of *flight* and focuses on the Haitian revolution, Ortega draws upon Latina feminist texts generated largely in the U.S., and wrestles with the tension between narratives of authenticity and essentialist theories of identity on the one hand, and the real and compelling desire for belonging and a sense of 'home,' on the other. Roberts is focused on flight and movement *away*, a concern Ortega shares, but she is additionally interested in the where *to* which we are fleeing. I will take up the question of this tension between flight and belonging in our responses to oppression, and argue that the apparent tension can be overcome when we foreground a shared feature of these texts: their understanding of freedom as movement.

Resumen en español

Dos textos recientes, *Freedom as Marronage* de Neil Roberts y *In-Between: Latina Feminist Phenomenology, Multiplicity, and the Self*, de Mariana Ortega, ofrecen contribuciones contrastantes y novedosas a la teorización de la opresión y la liberación, enfocadas en diferentes lugares y momentos en las Américas. Mientras Roberts enfatiza la liberación como una manifestación en curso de la huida y se enfoca en la revolución haitiana, Ortega recurre a textos feministas latinos generados en gran parte en los EE. UU., y lucha con la tensión entre las narrativas de autenticidad y las teorías esencialistas de la identidad, por un lado, y Deseo real y convincente de pertenencia y un sentido de "hogar", en el otro. Roberts está concentrada en la huida y el alejamiento, una preocupación que comparte Ortega, pero también está interesada en saber hacia dónde huimos. Abordaré la cuestión de esta tensión entre el vuelo y la pertenencia en nuestras respuestas a la opresión, y argumentaré que la tensión aparente se puede superar cuando presentamos una característica compartida de estos textos: su comprensión de la libertad como movimiento.

Resumo em português

Dois textos recentes, *Freedom as Marronage*, de Neil Roberts, e *In-Between: Latina Feminist Phenomenology, Multiplicity, and the Self*, oferecem contribuições contrastantes e inovadoras à teorização da opressão e da libertação, focalizando diferentes lugares e momentos nas Américas. Embora Roberts enfatize a libertação

como uma manifestação contínua de fuga e se concentre na revolução haitiana, Ortega baseia-se em textos feministas latinos gerados em grande parte nos Estados Unidos e lida com a tensão entre narrativas de autenticidade e teorias essencialistas da identidade, por um lado, e desejo real e irresistível de pertencer e um senso de "lar", do outro. Roberts está concentrado em fugir e fugir, uma preocupação que Ortega compartilha, mas ela também está interessada no local para onde estamos fugindo. Vou levantar a questão dessa tensão entre fuga e pertencer em nossas respostas à opressão, e argumentar que a tensão aparente pode ser superada quando colocamos em primeiro plano uma característica compartilhada desses textos: sua compreensão da liberdade como movimento.

The struggles of oppressed peoples for liberation are intimately connected to questions of place and belonging. Freedom often requires removal of oneself from the place or condition of one's oppression and the arrival at or engendering of a place of freedom. One can think, for example, of the ancient Hebrew flight from Egypt to the 'promised land,' or the generations long struggle of indigenous peoples against the predations of colonizers. Liberation is often couched in terms of creating or arriving at a place where we can truly belong. Yet, oppressors, too, make appeals to place and belonging as they justify their oppression. The nationalistic *Volksreich* projects of 19th and 20th century Europe, and of course the 'manifest destiny' and 'nativist' movements in the United States all exemplify this tendency. They announce a project of 'homeland' predicated upon exclusionary, and historically genocidal, politics. This raises a critical question. How should projects of liberation articulate a relation to place and belonging? That is, how do they at once hold forth the promise of extrication from the conditions of one's oppression and the constitution of a place of freedom (and often, of course, security), without falling prey to exactly the sort of jingoistic essentialism that is the hallmark of so many appeals to "homeland" throughout history?

Two recent texts, Neil Roberts' *Freedom as Marronage* and Mariana Ortega's *In-Between: Latina Feminist Phenomenology, Multiplicity, and the Self*, both offer contrasting and novel contributions to this problematic, focusing on different places and moments in the Americas. While Roberts emphasizes liberation as an ongoing manifestation of *flight* and focuses on the Haitian revolution, Ortega draws upon Latina feminist texts generated largely in the U.S., and wrestles with the tension between narratives of authenticity and essentialist theories of identity on the one hand, and the real and compelling desire for belonging and a sense of 'home,' on the other. Roberts is focused on flight and movement *away*, a concern Ortega shares, but she is additionally interested in the where *to* which we are fleeing.

After some crucial exegesis of these two texts, I will take up the question of this tension between flight and belonging in our responses to oppression. Is it possible to appeal to a sense of home or belonging without falling prey to essentialist appeals to identity and a reified attachment to place? Must one's response to oppressive or unjust conditions always manifest as flight? I will argue that the apparent tension can be overcome when we foreground a shared feature of these texts: their understanding of freedom as movement. Though Roberts articulates a theory of freedom quite explicitly (it is hard to get more explicit than putting the word in the title), Ortega's text largely eschews any explicit discussion of freedom. Nevertheless, I will argue that there is an implicit theory of freedom informed by her avowedly existentialist commitments, and which speaks directly to the question motivating this essay. With this in mind, I will begin with a discussion of *Freedom as Marronage* before turning to *In-Between*.

Slavery, Flight, and Freedom

Roberts' text opens by arguing that slavery should be understood as conceptually or logically prior to freedom. That is, despite the common enlightenment conception of freedom as a primordial ideal or natural condition, and slavery as its negation, Roberts argues that freedom emerges rather as a negation of slavery, which is in this way the logically (though not necessarily chronologically) prior condition or concept. Thus, while diverse European Modern thinkers such as Hobbes (1985, 109), Locke (1960, 269), and Rousseau (1987, 142) all espouse a view in which human beings are, in their primordial condition, naturally free, Roberts argues that freedom has arisen as a historical development through the negation of slavery. We the free, in other words, understand ourselves as such first and foremost by way of contrast with (negation of) those who are unfree. As Roberts puts the point, "Slavery serves as the foundational notion that gives rise to freedom." (28) From this opening insight, he further holds that freedom, in this sense as a negation of slavery, can be understood as a practice of marronage. Freedom is made manifest, in other words, through such acts of flight as were characteristic not only of the great maroon communities such as those in Jamaica and Saint-Domingue (and including of course the *Quilombos* and *Palenques* of Latin America), but equally in the individual acts of flight or unauthorized travel (*petit marronage*) that were common throughout the plantation landscape of the Americas. In understanding and theorizing marronage, Roberts suggests, we re-frame the modern ideal of freedom in a way that better captures the reality of the concept of freedom as a response to enslavement and dehumanization - we understand freedom as marronage.

"Marronage," Roberts states, "is a multidimensional, constant act of flight that involves what I ascertain to be four interrelated pillars: distance, movement, property, and purpose." (9) Distance, as a "pillar," is at once literal and metaphorical, having to do with both space and with conditions. It is thus the aspect of marronage having to do with getting from here to there, both in the sense of escaping from a plantation, for instance, to the mountains, and in the sense of escaping conditions of suffering and precarity to conditions of relative security. Roberts characterizes the pillar of movement in terms of

control over both one's motion and one's intentions. Property, the third pillar, is crucial insofar as there are always efforts to designate material or even legal objects as in some significant sense *belonging* to the individual or community. Marronage, in the historical context that interests Roberts, is in this sense a transition from *being property* to *bearing property*, but significantly for Roberts, this appeal to property is not necessarily in the liberal sense of private property. "Property," Roberts writes, "can be private, collective, or common, but spanning a range of property relations from atomistic conceptions to the communitarian." (9-10) Purpose, the final pillar, refers to the goals and aims that initiated the act of marronage. The maroon, to draw together these four pillars, puts *distance* between herself and the site and condition of her bondage through an act of *movement* that reclaims herself as her *own* (and can, in many cases, lead to the forging or joining of new communities that become her own), for *purposes* that may range from basic survival of oneself or loved ones to larger revolutionary ideals of liberty and justice.

Roberts holds further that the pillar of movement is "the central principle of marronage to which the other three are inextricably connected." (10) It is movement that makes this process possible, and that characterizes essentially what marronage is and how it is carried out as a project. This is a significant point for Roberts, because he understands this emphasis on movement as leading to an understanding of agency (on the part of the maroon) as fluid and dynamic, in contrast with traditional western conceptions of the agent as stable and substantive. As Roberts puts the point:

During marronage, agents struggle psychologically, socially, metaphysically, and politically to exit slavery, maintain freedom, and assert a lived social space while existing in a liminal position. Agency here is temporally fluid in contrast to prevailing modern Western theories, particularly Aristotelian and Hegelian systems, which obscure the degrees of agency and their pertinence to freedom due to their inattentiveness to flight and mistaken rigid division between potentiality and actuality. (10)

If freedom, in other words, is manifest through the flight from or negation of slavery, then it points toward a view where freedom is realized in movement, not in the arrival at some fully actualized (and therefore final/static) end state. This means that, contra a long tradition in Western political thought, freedom is not the transition from the merely potential to the fully actual, but rather "there is agency within potentiality" (10) and in fact the cessation of movement implied by the idea of a fully realized freedom is antithetical to, or at least inconsistent with, the notion of freedom Roberts advances.

For Roberts, therefore, the tradition of positing freedom as either our "natural" state or as a static teleological condition realized in the political and economic institutions of European Modernity, must be challenged. His argument for the priority of slavery over freedom is the first move in this critique. Roberts' argument holds that the "traditional" view's claim to see slavery as the negation of freedom was only ever pretense – "we the free...we the sovereign" were always in fact constituted as "we who are not slaves...like them," where some 'them' must be present in order to ground the

contrast. The critical insight here is to see freedom as the negation of, or flight from, slavery, and it is only ever a move toward a kind of static essentialism (typically, in the modern era and after, wedded to a variety of modes of systematic oppression, racism being one obvious instance) to posit that freedom is a natural condition, which positing is in fact, if not in word, only appropriate for a particular “us.”[1] The figure of the maroon thus exerts or expresses her agency or freedom in the moment of flight, whether through an individual act of *petit marronage* or a collective act of *grand marronage* (including, for Roberts, acts of rebellion), by and through each of Roberts’ four pillars. She creates distance between herself and the physical and spiritual sites and conditions of her enslavement, carving out spaces and moments of time as her own, deployed toward her own ends, and all of this through the very act of movement expressed in the first instance as flight.

Roberts’ emphasis on flight and his critique of static accounts of freedom as a state or property to be possessed runs throughout his text, but becomes most explicitly theorized in his brief concluding chapter on Rastafari. Let me offer three quotes from that chapter to illustrate his view.

We are able to decipher freedom’s meaning when we acknowledge a basic precept of the theory of freedom as marronage: freedom materializes in the liminal and interstitial social space between our imaginings of absolute unfreedom and the zone of its opposite. (173)

Marronage philosophy runs counter to the idea of fixed, determinate endings. (174)

The promise and shortcomings of Rastafari during its present epoch attest to an underlying maxim of marronage: freedom is perpetual, unfinished, and rooted in acts of flight that are at moments evanescent, durable, overlapping. (181)

In a way, Roberts continues to link freedom conceptually to slavery, but rather than seeing freedom as the *negation* of slavery *in toto* and as a (static) status, he links freedom to the ongoing and active movement of flight from slavery. That is, the maroon does not simply negate slavery by running away and then, presto, they are free. Marronage, rather, stands as a manifestation (not realization) of freedom understood as a kind of upsurge in resistance to the negation of freedom, itself understood not as a property, nor as an inherent or fixed status, but rather as the expression or movement of agency or freedom. Crucially, these last two terms are themselves understood by Roberts as activities and processes – agency and freedom are for him manifestations of *becoming*, not *being* (a distinction that will play a key role in Ortega’s work, as well).

Freedom in this way is not a status to be achieved or a destination at which we can arrive as a *fait accompli*, in the way that, self-possessing whites (men) simply *are* free within the modern colonial/racist framework. Rather, freedom emerges in and through flight from conditions that negate our agency, which conditions surely include, but are not reducible to, enslavement. In this way, genuine freedom is *not* the negation

of slavery as a single moment or state of being, but rather is the ongoing movement of flight from conditions of enslavement. Furthermore, enslavement for Roberts, stands essentially, following in the footsteps of Fanon, Douglass, and L'Ouverture, as a kind of dehumanization. In thus resisting enslavement, maroons and rebels assert their humanity, and in so doing make *freedom* manifest - which is very different from saying that they *achieve* freedom.

It is for this reason, as I read him, that Roberts offers the characterization of freedom as *flight*. This characterization of freedom as flight includes, significantly, moments of revolution, which “are *themselves* moments of flight that usher in new orders and refashion society’s foundations.” (116) This of course makes perfect sense not only from within the account of marronage in all of its different varieties that Roberts provides, but also, and importantly, given his insistence on a concept of freedom that is dynamic and open-ended, as opposed to static and closed. From within oppressive conditions, liberation must entail flight and struggle, and Roberts’ text articulates this quite admirably.

While I share many of the aims and commitments of Roberts’ text, especially and crucially with regards to his characterization of freedom as dynamic, I am concerned about the limitations of the model of marronage, and in particular with its robust emphasis on flight. Why must the rejection of a static and closed concept of freedom require not merely an emphasis on movement and change, but specifically a constant practice of flight? Escaping conditions of dehumanization is clearly a critical component of the practice of freedom, especially in a world so fraught with dehumanizing conditions. Yet at the same time, every instance of running away is also a running toward, and even if the emphasis is, especially in the context of oppression, more on the former than the latter, the question of where we are going, and who we even are, must be taken up. Indeed, Roberts’ own discussion of naming in his exploration of the Haitian revolution is indicative of this. By choosing the name *Haiti* at the dawn of independence, Roberts argues there is an articulation on the part of the revolutionaries of a new people considering both the place where they belong (an aspect of the pillar of ‘property’ discussed in Roberts’ account of marronage) and their history and the history of that place (indicated in the use of the original Arawak name, as opposed to a French or, for example, a Yoruba one). This notion of belonging brings up questions of home, and these are questions that, I suggest, are important to consider in relation to Roberts’ characterization of freedom as flight. To be sure, ideas of “home” that posit fixed and rigid identities or essentialist notions of sovereignty, must be avoided; but in so doing are we left with nothing to call home and only a constant flight? In the next section, I will look to Mariana Ortega’s work, which I suggest is particularly fruitful in addressing these concerns.

On ‘Hometactics,’ Coloniality, and Agency

Ortega opens *In-Between* by raising precisely this issue, though in a very different arena. Within the first two sentences, she evokes her sense of discomfort and

alienation within the world of philosophy, and states that her book is “my *hometactic*, my attempt at finding a sense of belonging and ease within a discipline that forgets the contributions of those regarded as ‘others.’” (Ortega 2016, 10). The discipline of philosophy in the abstract, and all too often the concrete spaces in which that discipline is brought to life (departments, conferences, etc.), are sites in which she, at best, cannot find herself and feels adrift, or at worst, encounters herself as the denigrated antithesis to philosophy’s own self-image as purified and universal reason. I’m sure that this is an experience with which many readers of this essay, in different ways and to different degrees, can relate, and that we are attempting to challenge – to shift that colonial space into a space where we can find ourselves, however imperfectly or incompletely, at home. This opening discussion of philosophy sets the stage for Ortega’s main project of the text, which is to articulate an account of identity that eschews essentialism, accounts for the lived experience of ‘multiplicitous’ selves, and ultimately enables a positive account of belonging or being ‘at home.’

Drawing upon resources and inspiration both from European figures such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Martin Heidegger, as well as Latina feminist thinkers like Gloria Anzaldúa and María Lugones, Ortega dedicates herself to articulating what she calls a “*mestiza* theory...” that “is a theory of *multiplicitous selfhood*, of selves characterized by *being-between-worlds, being in worlds, and becoming-with.*” (2016, 2) The Latina feminists from whom she draws in the text emphasize a *plurality* of selves in their work, though in slightly different ways, with Lugones in particular offering a robust account of plural selves who occupy different worlds with varying degrees of discomfort or being-at-ease. However, Ortega’s sympathies with existential phenomenological accounts of the subject lead her to distance herself from such references to a plural self in favor of a “multiplicitous self.” Unlike plurality, she argues, “the term ‘multiplicity’ suggests a complexity associated with one self.” (Ortega 2016, 64) Ortega is thus concerned to preserve some notion of unity within difference/plurality, such that there remains one self that travels across worlds, transgresses boundaries, or inhabits *la frontera*.

That being said, Ortega is clear that this unity is not guaranteed by some fixed and simple underlying substance. Rather, Ortega offers the new *mestiza* as “an existential pluralism in that [she] take[s] into consideration the existential sense of being an ‘I,’ as well as the multiplicity of the self in terms of her various social locations and the ways in which she fares in different worlds.” (2016, 114) What is most important about preserving some notion of a *subject* of experience, for Ortega, is that such a subject is necessary in order to serve as a locus of resistance. As she puts the point: “By having access to multiple worlds and being-between worlds, the multiplicitous self can encounter or develop possibilities of resistance.” (Ortega 2016, 115) Indeed, it is the unity of the self across these different worlds and borders that makes these resistances possible. The key, for Ortega, is not to abandon the idea of the subject altogether, but rather to “dethrone the unified, allegedly neutral epistemic modern subject,” (Ortega 2016, 115) a project that she understands to be integral to phenomenology.

However, despite this preference for an underlying unity or coherence of the subject, Ortega remains suspicious of Heideggerian appeals to authenticity, especially with respect to history and the ‘resolute’ attitude of *Dasein*. She argues: “Heidegger wishes the resolute, authentic being to find that one history that she shares with others and to repeat it, enhance it, or modify it, all while being part of the one destiny and fate of her people.” (Ortega 2016, 130) But what, Ortega asks, is the shared history of the new *mestiza*? Is it the history of the colonized and conquered? The history of the revolutionaries and trouble-makers? Or perhaps the history of the assimilated and “good” *mestizos* who have taken up the cosmopolitan project of *nuestra América* (Ortega 2016, 130)? It is all of these histories, but not reducible to any of them, nor even the sum of its parts. Drawing from Lugones’ accounts of ‘world-traveling,’ Ortega argues that the multiplicitous self that characterizes the new *mestiza* has a similarly multiplicitous history. A history (note the singular) constituted by overlapping instantiations of world-traveling and *frontera* existence. The *mestiza* subject thus mediates unity and multiplicity as a both/and, not an either/or. This new *mestiza* “is the one that keeps the multiple histories alive and does not try to reconcile them so as to assimilate. She needs to examine her experience of world-traveling, dissect it, and never let it lose its force; she needs to practice *critical* world-traveling.” (Ortega 2016, 131) The new *mestiza*, therefore, is engaged in a constant process of breathing life into her multiple histories, which process itself constitutes her underlying unity, all while maintaining a deeply critical attitude with respect to any tendencies or impulses toward final reconciliation or assimilation, thus maintaining multiplicity and unity in relational process. There is, Ortega argues, neither some underlying unitary “true” self awaiting discovery/expression, nor is there only a set of externally related yet discrete “selves.” For the multiplicitous self, this is a false dichotomy.

Ortega’s vision of a multiplicitous self engaged in a practice of critical world-traveling further means that identity politics must be replaced with “coalitional politics.” She states: “Coalitional politics relies on the understanding that we are both being and becoming, that we occupy certain social and material locations, and that we are relational.” (Ortega 2016, 155) Ortega’s reading of existential phenomenology and Latina feminisms is thus walking a fine, but crucial, line. On the one hand, it eschews the narratives of authenticity and linear teleologies of development characteristic of European Modernity. There are no fixed and stable substantive identities for individuals or peoples, nor is there some final unity or reconciliation waiting over the horizon (or lost in the distant past). On the other hand, Ortega’s account rejects reduction to a kind of absolute particularity. We are not discrete atoms, nor does the uniqueness of our experiences render us utterly unintelligible to each other or turn all groups memberships or affiliations into totalizing and tyrannical collectives. That is, identity and subjectivity are understood by Ortega according neither to an all-consuming universality nor to a completely fragmented particularity, precisely because she stresses an underlying *dynamism* (“both being and becoming”) and relationality in her account of the subject and coalitional politics. This dynamism and relationality mean that we stand as open and ongoing loci of interaction, not as closed and discrete selves. As Ortega stresses:

“Ultimately, coalitional politics can lead to a *becoming-with* that involves not just understanding others but being transformed by them and with them.” (2016, 155)

An integral part of this becoming-with is the cultivation and expression of a sense of belonging or being-at-home, and Ortega refers to the activity of generating this home as “hometactics.” The question of home and the idea of hometactics emerge as a result of this emphasis on dynamism and open-ended relationality. If we are both being and becoming, then that process of becoming has a kind of *orientation* – it emerges from some *here*, and is heading to some *there*.^[2] Importantly, for the new *mestiza*, the *here* is always a multiplicitous site with different sets of intertwining histories, and the *there* toward which it aims should not be understood as itself either unitary or fixed. This means that Ortega must navigate between an outright rejection of any sense of home or belonging on the one hand, and the ideal of an authentic and all-encompassing home on the other. Affirming Paula Moya’s insight that, for a multiplicitous self, not all identities will have equal political or epistemological salience in different contexts, yet rejecting Moya’s appeal to a final or ultimately *true* identity, Ortega warns us that we must avoid any notion of home that relies on *authentic* or *primary* identity characteristics. (2016, 195) When we understand home to be linked to fixed and stable identities, it can become homogenizing and exclusive of those who are not *like* us in the relevant ways – it can become, in effect, *colonial*.

However, despite Ortega’s well-founded suspicion of certain understandings of home and belonging as pernicious mythologies of exclusion, at the same time she avers that “there is no denying the power that the notion of home has in producing sentiments of safety, comfort, and belonging.” (2016, 201) The notion of hometactics is her effort to negotiate this tension between reified notions of home so common to forms of nationalism, racism, ethnocentrism, and patriarchy on the one hand, and our need to carve out spaces of comfort and belonging on the other.^[3] As she puts the point, “the aim of hometactics can be understood as the production of a sense of familiarity in the midst of an environment or world in which one cannot fully belong due to one’s multiple positions and instances of thin and thick not being-at-ease.” (Ortega 2016, 203) Further, the ways and means of hometactics must be improvisational. As a kind of open-ended negotiation and relational jockeying for position, there can be no one-size-fits all program. This is especially significant when we recognize that, given Ortega’s dynamic and relational account of the subject, we will ourselves to be changed in and through our engagement with hometactics, where we feel comfortable, with whom we most belong and feel familiar, and even who we are, will be both a cause and consequence of the successes and failures of our hometactics.

For Ortega, it is critical to unsettle the mythologies of *pure* belonging. In her words, “Full membership and belonging – the safe, comfortable home – is indeed an imaginary space in need of demystification.” (Ortega 2016, 200) Yet it does not follow from this that all notions of home and belonging are coercive, oppressive, or colonial, nor does it follow that we should all simply be cosmopolite “citizens of the world” or take up an unrooted “nomad” existence.^[4] Some, even many, notions of home are

oppressive and colonial, to be sure, but some sense of place or belonging, especially among the oppressed, is critical to one's health, well-being, and even, I will argue, liberation. The appeal to rootlessness or cosmopolitanism seems to enact what Shannon Sullivan refers to as "ontological expansiveness" – the sense among the privileged that they are entitled to occupy whatever space (both literal and conceptual) they wish. (2006, 10) One might wonder whether the sense that the whole world is your home is a sign of deep insight and commitment to justice, or rather an indicator that you have a pathological sense of entitlement. The practice of hometactics, therefore, is the ongoing effort to articulate and negotiate, through critical world-traveling and coalitional politics, the places and communities in and through which different and differently related multiplicitous selves can generate thick and thin senses of being at ease. It avoids the sense of finality and closure found in the myth of the pure homeland, and instead offers only dynamic and ever-changing relational configurations that nevertheless provide what Ortega sees as this deeply human need for familiarity and belonging.

As I pointed out earlier, Ortega does not explicitly take up questions of freedom or liberation, but I read her as putting questions of freedom and liberation at the heart of her account, even if only implicitly. To be sure, this is a sense of freedom that is more in keeping with her existential phenomenological allegiances than with more liberal traditions. I read her as being focused on and deeply concerned with processes of oppression, dehumanization, and marginalization. Her call for critical world-traveling, coalitional politics, and hometactics are, at root, all different kinds of *praxis* directed toward resisting those processes of oppression, and to this extent her project is one of liberation. This is why I find her work so productive in relation to Roberts' work.

Implications

At this point, I want to take a step back and consider the relation between these two important and provocative texts in concert. Both texts speak to a notion of liberation as essentially dynamic and relational – it is not something we have or a state we occupy in some final or static way, but rather something we do, or better yet, a particular way of enacting our selves (this is why Ortega's preoccupation with identity is at the same time a manifestation of a concern for liberation). Crucially, however, the "self" is not a pre-given entity awaiting such enactment or expression, but rather is constituted in and through enactment. Both texts are also beginning not from an idealized vision of what a perfect condition or manifestation of freedom might be, but from the very non-ideal conditions of dehumanization and oppression that more accurately reflect the world we presently confront. Roberts, as I read him, articulates a vision of freedom as the *flight* from oppressive and enslaving conditions. It is the constant movement away from processes and spaces of dehumanization. To the extent that he takes up questions of home and belonging, however, they remain implicit and under-theorized. Ortega, likewise, sees freedom as a kind of movement, and clearly recognizes the need for flight in precisely Roberts' sense as distancing oneself from one's dehumanization. She

recognizes, however, that this movement away is also always a movement toward and attends, in a very productive way, to the question of home as the aim or telos of our movement. In this way home relates to the property pillar found in Roberts' formulation of marronage – when I am home, there is a way in which home belongs to me, and I belong to home.[5] As such, how should we best understand these insights and their implications?

First, both writers rightly focus upon the experiences and theorizations of the dehumanized and marginalized as the driving engines for their emphasis on flight and movement, and both accounts argue that the ideal of a fixed and final sense of belonging and place is only ever a pernicious myth. Thus, in a sense, the real root of the problem is in the perpetuation and insistence on the mythos of *the* home, correlated as it is with a mythic pure identity. It is “pure” in the sense that it posits a norm of clear and distinct boundaries between that which is “internal” and “external” to “the self,” and prescribes a politics dedicated to maintaining a home (including the institutions of that home) that is purified of external influences and elements.[6]

One can see this way of thinking of the home at the heart of the ‘Make America Great Again’ ideology. It tells us (for some “us”) that this is *our* home, and its integrity has been ruined by the introduction of foreign elements and the degradation of its purity (both material/biological and cultural). In this way, the articulation of a home that is properly *ours* is at the same time an articulation of who *we* even are, and vice-versa. Identity and belonging, tied essentially to exclusion and closure, are thus related. Historically, the roots of the contemporary anti-immigrant moment in the nineteenth century “nativist” movements make this link quite clear. That nineteenth century Anglos could think of themselves as “native” Americans over and against not only Latin American and Asian immigrants, but also at various times Irish, Mediterranean, and Eastern European immigrants makes this point abundantly clear. Anglo “nativity” is predicated upon a mythological account of the United States as a sui-generis product of settler-colonial genocide and displacement of *actual* indigenous peoples.[7] The natal moment is thus the moment of genocidal exclusion, and the purity of “our” identity is maintained only through ongoing practices of strategic exclusion and assimilation. Again, this exclusion/assimilation has material manifestations having to do with wealth/resource extraction and geographical apartheid, as well as non-material manifestations having to do with, for example, symbolic culture, education, and historical narratives. This is precisely the way in which such a mythical account of the home is colonial, and ultimately pathological.

However, there remains a tendency to understand the lack of this sense of home as a kind of harm. To be “homeless,” “stateless,” “refugee,” or otherwise “cast adrift,” are often understood to be harms in themselves. To be sure, they certainly are instantiations of harm and injustice, and as the analyses of Roberts and Ortega make clear the harm is not simply a matter of lacking any appeal to the more mythological notion of home. Rather, the root of the problem is that some folks *are* capable of buying into this “nativist” mythology with the legitimating support of dominant institutions and symbolic

regimes, and that those lacking such support suffer materially and spiritually as a result. What we need, therefore, is not to include more people into the *homeland*, but rather to disrupt this sort of notion of the homeland altogether – the ‘Make America Great Again’ crowd need to have their settler-colonial sense of belonging profoundly *unsettled*. Put differently, who is or is not admitted into the country and the category of “American” (the imperial roots of which can be readily seen when we take into account that this term places a single country as the hemispheric norm) is not the real problem, but rather what we understand “American” to be and how that understanding is legitimated and reinforced. It isn’t simply about who does or does not belong, in other words, but additionally how we understand the nature of that belonging in the first place.[8]

As Ortega stresses, however, the response to this important insight is not necessarily to disavow or reject any appeal to home and belonging. Different contexts and different ways of understanding what is meant by the home are of critical importance here. Take, for example, the frequently invoked claim that *todos somos inmigrantes* (we are all immigrants). It is a political and historical claim about the U.S. polity, but it can also be read as a more abstract or even ontological claim, the upshot of which is that ideas of a stable and settled *home* corresponding to a fixed identity is a myth that can only serve oppressive functions. It also states what can be an important fundamental truth – if we go back far enough, nobody really comes from this land originally. However, the kind and salience of truth that this claim picks out is going to vary dramatically depending upon how it is deployed. For instance, if I, descended as I am from European immigrants, the most recent of which is three generations removed, use it as a way to delegitimize calls for justice on behalf of migrant workers or DACA recipients by equivocating between my own “immigrant” status and theirs, then the ways in which the claim is *also* false become abundantly and painfully clear. I am most certainly not an immigrant in the way that both documented and undocumented recent immigrants are. Nor, significantly, are the millions of Puerto Riqueños in diaspora across the 50 states, who are decidedly *not* immigrants in a way that is very different from my own way of not being an immigrant. Then there are those, like Gloria Anzaldúa, who have lived for generations in a place (the Rio Grande Valley) that has, in effect, had the border cross them, and even after that have been brought across that shifted border as a cheap labor source for wealthy *Estadounidenses*. They exemplify yet another significant way in which we are certainly not all immigrants.[9] The Rio Grande Valley of Texas is surely their *home* even though they may be legally deported to Mexico should they run afoul of the wrong ICE or border patrol agent. What I take these examples to show is that sometimes the appeal to a certain place or community as *mine*, as “my home” can indeed capture something important. Appeals to home thus do not need to serve the function of reifying identities tied to mythologized homelands. For those excluded from or marginalized by such an exclusionary and static account of home, or for those forced from their homes, the idea of home or the claim to a home can serve as a critical resource for what Ortega calls *resistant* agency, for community formation, and for coalition building.[10]

What follows from this is that the problem is not solely that some people lack a home – a place of familiarity and belonging, but also that others have constituted their own sense of belonging precisely through the positing of the mythologized homeland, and organized their agency and identity around projects of purification. A crucial piece, therefore, of any liberatory praxis will have to be the unsettling of such static and mythological accounts of home. This does not, however, mean abandoning concepts of home altogether. A crucial task going forward will be to think through the ways and means of making these sorts of liberatory appeals to home that nevertheless maintain a critical vigilance against natal mythology and reification.

Toward this end, the second implication I want to draw out has to do with ways to think about the practice of hometactics itself, and its relation to flight or “fugitivity.” [11] Namely, what is the aim or goal of hometactics? Does it have a *telos*? I want to draw attention to the ironic relation between the familiar and the strange that bears directly on a central problem we must face in our theorization of hometactics. A place or a community feels like “home” in part because of a familiarity with it that one has developed. This means that there is a crucial epistemic dimension to home, and thus to hometactics that I wish to build upon here.

To illustrate this epistemic point, consider the experience of travel. In entering a foreign country, one encounters the strange, and is oneself encountered as a stranger. Further, one can often, especially after an extended time away, return home to find it nearly as strange as the “foreign” place from which one has just returned. We find in this moment of homecoming to a newly “strange” place that that our prior sense of “fit” and “homeliness” was a result not of our having achieved some ideal harmony with our home environment, but was rather a result of our lack of penetrating observation and perspective. It had become so comfortable, in a sense, that we failed to attend to it, and consequently our knowledge of or familiarity with it degenerated. It became, in effect, a kind of ignorance with which we had grown accustomed and comfortable, and in fact our re-encounter with our home as strange is indicative of an enhanced knowledge and familiarity, not a loss of thereof.

What this example shows is that we come to better know a place, or a person (including ourselves), not through eradicating or overcoming all strangeness, but in finding new and ever more sophisticated ways of (re)discovering or revealing their strangeness. When something ceases being strange, in other words, that is a sure sign that we have begun to lose any real contact or intimacy with it – when we no longer experience it as strange, then we can be sure that our knowledge of it is decaying. This epistemic advantage of returning to rediscover the familiar as strange, and thus come to know it better, is precisely one of the benefits of being “in-between” for Ortega, is touched on in the discussion of “world-traveling” by Lugones (2003, 97-98), and is characteristic of Anzaldúa’s *Atravezados*. (1999, 104) Thus, the problem with idealized and mythologized characterizations of home as a place of *absolute* belonging is not simply that they are not feasible. Rather, what I am arguing here is that feeling completely at ease and absolutely one with one’s home is actually a sign of a lack of

familiarity and connection - it is a sign of failure, not of success. The *telos* of hometactics, therefore, cannot be the final arrival at a fixed and eternal unity with place and the overcoming of all strangeness, but rather must involve the seeking-out of the strange within the familiar. This too, is of course a kind of movement in much the same way of Roberts' and Ortega's notions of freedom.

My argument is that the reified and mythologized sense of a fixed and stable homeland is ultimately a manifestation of profound epistemic failure. It is a failure to truly know one's home as a place, insofar as one no longer encounters the strange within it (and indeed typically must undertake sustained projects of self-deception to maintain the fiction of absolute familiarity), and it is a failure to know one's home as a community, insofar as one fails to encounter (often through actively avoiding) those who are both within it and yet strange. Successful hometactics, therefore, requires a fundamental openness to having our sense of "being-at-ease" disturbed precisely in order to further develop and deepen our familiarity with our home. This manifestation of "epistemic openness" (Gordon 2000, 88) is linked to the account of agency as *becoming* common to both Roberts and Ortega, though Roberts does not pursue the implications of this with respect to notions of home and belonging. Because who we are is a matter of ongoing activity in relation, we shape who we are in and through this practice of unsettling our sense of a fixed and determined (i.e., closed) identity (and its corresponding home). Home may be where we can "be ourselves," but when that self is an instantiation of becoming in relation to those places and communities that constitute our home, then both home and the self in question remain in process, and like any activity, we know it better only through engaging in ever deeper practice, which requires a constant effort to unsettle ourselves and our feeling of belonging. It is in our openness to the strange, in other words, that we enhance our familiarity with ourselves and our world(s).

That being said, it does not follow that all uses of "home" serve these deleterious functions, or that it is never acceptable to relax and be at-ease in a comfortable setting among a beloved community. Ortega's point that some sense of belonging and home is helpful and even necessary for living a fully human life (that is, to deprive people of any meaningful sense of home is a kind of dehumanization) is critical for understanding, undertaking, and maintaining meaningful resistance to forces and agents of oppression. As Angela Davis argued, it is in the slave quarters, in the *hearth* maintained by enslaved women, that the seeds of resistance were nurtured. She writes: "Stripped of the palliative feminine veneer which might have encouraged a passive performance of domestic tasks, [the black woman] was now uniquely capable of weaving into the warp and woof of domestic life a profound consciousness of resistance." (8) Flight from oppression is surely a necessary component of liberation, as Roberts points out, yet at the same time, the formation of communities and places of belonging are critical sites for nurturing and sustaining resistance, an aspect which is at best understated in Roberts' work, if not neglected altogether.[12] The key to warding off the reification of the home and maintaining the liberatory potential of one's hometactics, I am arguing, is a constant critical orientation toward an unsettled and ambiguous relation to one's

home(s). It is an orientation toward *nepantla*, in Anzaldúa's terms. As an orientation, however, it need not be something that we pursue constantly and completely, especially in the context of resistance to oppression. First, there remains room for seeking sustenance and support at home (both in the sense of place and of community). There we can seek solace and nurturing, marshaling our resources for a time before returning to the proverbial (and all too often literal) fray. Secondly, central to the understanding I am attempting to advance here is the idea that the depth of our connection to and familiarity with our home(s) is in fact very often furthered, not thwarted, by this critical orientation.

This is particularly clear when we think about our relations to others, and not just to places. Consider bell hooks' point in her discussion of the relation between love and freedom that love in the sense as important to her, is always a kind of critical and importantly self-critical encounter with the other. (1994, 295-96) It is, further, like freedom, and like our agency/identity, not a state to be achieved or a *fait accompli*. To grasp this crucial point, just think about your closest, deepest, and most intimate relations with others - those whom you most deeply and sincerely love. The building of such relationships, even in cases of unchosen relations, requires effort and exactly the sort of openness discussed above - it is a kind of activity or even labor (of love). There does not come some point at which you realize that you have "achieved" love, and thus all effort to better know the person becomes superfluous, and the labor has ended. "*We did it, my dear! We achieved love! What now?*" Indeed, imagining arrival at such a state is a sure sign that the connection and intimacy has in some way been lost, has not been fully actualized. This is surely an example of taking the other for granted, not love. What is required is an effort to better know our beloved, and ourselves, through deepening that connection on large part by seeking out growth, development, and change - by making the familiar and comfortable strange and unsettled. This holds for our relation to home both in the sense of place and of community. Truly loving our home demands that we problematize both our relationship to it, and our understanding of what it is and what it can become (and what we can become in, through, and with it). The ultimate point of all this is that the ideal of a settled and fully-given home is in fact incoherent - we need moments of discomfort and strangeness in order to both enrich our knowledge of (familiarity with) as well as our attachment to or love of our home(s).

The suggestion I want to make in closing (I will not go so far as to suggestion that it is a *conclusion*) is that Roberts' and Ortega's texts point the way toward some very productive terrain for theorizing freedom and liberation. Their emphasis on movement, and on the critical and open-ended struggle to create a *home* and a coalitional politics offer alternatives to essentializing and *purified* accounts of freedom and the subject. The question of the home and our relationship to it is particularly provocative. Ortega is clearly right in claiming that there is a strong desire of belonging and home as well as claiming that those concepts can be and have been deployed in colonizing and dehumanizing ways. What both of these texts offer is a clear call to take a critical stance toward facile appeals to belonging and identity and the philosophical resources to offer

critical responses to the very real crises we currently face as human beings looking for genuinely liberatory ways to find ourselves *at home*.

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Notes

[1] This is in effect the central claim of Charles Mills' *The Racial Contract* (1994).

[2] My appeal to orientation is indebted to the development of the concept in the work of Sara Ahmed (2006).

[3] It should be noted that more nefarious uses of hometactics are possible. Those in positions of domination can deploy hometactics in ways that legitimize precisely those mythological accounts of home that are part of Ortega's original motivation. In other words, hometactics can be liberatory, or colonial.

[4] See McQueen (2015, 93-95) for a critical discussion of the nomadic subject.

[5] Again, this "property" need not be understood narrowly as reducible to private bourgeois property. The commonly drawn distinction between "a house" and "a home" helps to illustrate this. The way Ortega discusses hometactics, and the sense of home that I take to be significant here, is one that is, at least, indifferent to relations of private property. I may be "at home" in places or settings I do not "own."

[6] I have discussed this account in more detail in my prior work (Monahan 2011, 183-186)

[7] For a discussion of this phenomenon as it relates to contemporary debates in the philosophy of race and gender Meissner and Whyte (2018)

[8] Certainly I do not mean to suggest that who does or doesn't 'belong' is irrelevant or unimportant - only that it is one part of a larger (and philosophically deeper) complex.

[9] In this way, the idea that "we are all immigrants" is akin to the claim that "we are all African." It captures a certain kind of truth, and can be used to challenge certain facile accounts of race (though probably only those predicated upon polygenesis, which are surely quite rare anymore), and the idea that we are all immigrants is in some sense true, and can be used productively to unsettle "naturalized" ways of understanding relations to place. Yet the ways in which these claims are true is a way that rarely matters, and often obfuscates other more important truths, as I tried to show in my examples. There is, in short, a way in which I, Denzel Washington, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie are all African, but there is also a way in which I am not, and yet another way in which only Adichie is. It is not simply about truth, but about the truths that matter, and the truth that more often matters is that we are most decidedly not all African.

[10] We could read Fanon's account of "national consciousness" as a manifestation of this appeal to home as "resistant agency." (Fanon 2004, 143-144; see also Gordon (2014, 129-161)

[11] c.f. Moten 2008

[12] There is an obvious gender dynamic at work here, when we find so clearly the emphasis on home and belonging in the intellectual work of women of color. However, from the legendary Jamaican maroon leader "Nanny," to the countless women across the Americas who engaged in both *petit* and *grand marronage*, there is clear evidence of the ubiquity of maroon women (cf. Fick 1990, 50-57). One thus has good reason to be suspicious of the retrospective tendency to read flight and resistance as somehow quintessentially masculine. At the same time, as Davis' work so clearly shows, the work of resistance can often be done in the "domestic" space of the hearth and home, even under conditions of extreme brutality and dehumanization.