

## IN BETWEEN PLACES AND NON-PLACES: THE WANDERING SUBJECT IN *ATLANTIC HOTEL*, BY JOÃO GILBERTO NOLL

POR ENTRE LUGARES E NÃO LUGARES:  
O SUJEITO ERRANTE EM HOTEL ATLÂNTICO, DE JOÃO GILBERTO NOLL

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**Abstract:** The aim of this work is to analyse the wandering subject in the work *AtlanticHotel* by João Gilberto Noll starting from the story of a narrator-character which represents the postmodern subject in constant transition. This work will take a bibliographic approach where the story is read and analysed in the light of the ideas set forth by Stuart Hall (2005), Augé (1994), Santos (2004) among others. These authors discuss the issues of place, non-place and its implications for the construction of identity in post-modernity as well as the subjectivity of being. In *AtlanticHotel* (1995), João Gilberto Noll presents the narrative of a wandering man who rambles through places and non-places. The author emerges in contemporary times with a markedly dry and photographic language to focus on characters representing restlessness, disintegration, loneliness, fitting a man in conflict with his time. His writing is marked by the emptiness of relationships and the fragmentation of the subject that comprises a non-place of the lived and the imagined. In *Atlantic Hotel*, the anonymous narrator-protagonist lives an uprooted condition that makes him a walking subject is both in geographical and psychological space.

**Keywords:** Place and not place; Wandering subject; Identity; Postmodernity.

**Resumo:** Este trabalho tem por objetivo analisar o sujeito errante na obra *Hotel Atlântico* de João Gilberto Noll, a partir da história de um narrador-personagem que representa o sujeito pós-moderno em constante transição. O referido trabalho realizar-se-á a partir de uma abordagem bibliográfica; a narrativa é lida e analisada à luz das ideias de Stuart Hall (2005), Augé (1994), Santos (2004) dentre outros, que discutem as questões sobre lugar, não lugar e suas implicações para a construção da identidade na pós-modernidade como também da subjetivação do ser. João Gilberto Noll traz na narrativa de *Hotel Atlântico* (1995) um sujeito errante que vagueia por entre lugares e não lugares. O referido autor surge na contemporaneidade com uma linguagem marcadamente seca e fotográfica a focalizar personagens que representam o desassossego, o esfacelamento, a solidão, próprios do homem em conflito com o seu tempo. Sua escrita é marcada pelo esvaziamento das relações e pela fragmentação do sujeito que compõem um não-lugar do vivido e do imaginado. Em *Hotel Atlântico*, o protagonista-narrador anônimo vive a condição de desenraizamento que o torna um sujeito andante seja no espaço geográfico e psicológico.

**Palavras-chave:** Lugares e não lugares; Sujeito errante; Identidade; Pós modernidade.

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## INTRODUCTION

The scene of fragmenting the subject invades the contemporary narratives of João Gilberto Noll, especially the *Atlantic Hotel* (1991). This is a work that presents an intriguing and challenging facet of contemporary literature as it discusses urban and everyday issues that confirm the discourse of the margins, as well as the deconstruction of the subject, contrary to the universe of insecurities of their time. This work sets a subject who is errant and adrift from itself. Initially, we will highlight the writing of the author under study.

## JOÃO GILBERTO NOLL'S WRITING

João Gilberto Noll's writing presents subjects marked by the loss of identities as well as an impermanent condition and loneliness. In this context, his writing encompasses models of a contemporary narrative, recounting the story of a narrator-character who represents the characteristic subject of post-modernity, being in constant change.

In 1970, João Gilberto Noll stood out in the history of Brazilian literature as having a heightened poetic prose, originating from a "brazened I," as he himself calls it, presenting a symbolic characteristic: to shock the reader. His discourse lies between cinema and literature, between fiction and world, which comes to reveal a lively and present-day prose, as it intends to show a man in his present, in his being-in-the-world, which through its form, is revealed in any way to himself or by non-assertion or by self-deformation. However, there is a story to tell; there is an experience to narrate: the emptying of self, the body.

The author emerges on the literary scene with a diminished language, dry and with characters who represent the unrest, fragmentation, strangeness and loneliness well, fitting of the post-modern man and their respective conflicting relationship with their time. His writing is punctuated by a lack of boundaries, the emptying of relationships and the fragmentation of the subject which constitutes a non-place of experience and of fantasy. In this sense, we may say that:

The origin of the novel is the isolated individual, who can no longer speak exemplarily about their most important concerns and who does not receive advice or know give it. Writing a novel means, in describing a human life, bringing the immeasurable to its ultimate limits. In the

wealth of this life and in the description of that wealth, the novel announces the profound perplexity of those who live it (BENJAMIN, 1994, p. 201).

As we can see, Noll's writing identifies the dispersion of the subject, the one who is alone, lost, disembodied, living in a fluid and stifling environment, as the following excerpt asserts:

I closed the curtain [of the window]. A countdown was underway, I needed to go. But I decided to go back to bed. I took off my shoes with my own feet. I knew that on the inside I represented despair because in a little while I needed to go. (NOLL, 1989, p. 9).

We note that their narratives reference images that crumble in seconds in the writer's direct and wise style whereby he says a great deal with few words. A stifling narrative which, at the same time is light, asphyxiates and is moving. In it we find experience, experimentation and a continuous attempt to affect readers able to challenge the real world through representation, by searching for understanding of the other, the interpretation of the human condition.

Noll's writing incorporates the elusive, that is, that which paralyzes or disturbs; his pen outlines the poetics of discontent, enhanced by a crushing feeling of having a conscious voice when the world is already full and alienated and deaf. Thus:

In populating the settings of his narratives with the dregs of society, abandoned children, drug addicts, beggars, prostitutes, the homeless and landless, Noll inserts the individual and anonymous experience of exile, of wandering, of abandonment, of begging and disqualification into our collective experience of modernity (TREECE, 1997, p. 10).

Thus, there is a latent voice that refuses any familiarity or imprisonment of social order; it only roams among the fields of contemporary life, recreating simulations of reality.

Bauman in *Identity* (2005), points out that in the "liquid modern" era, the identity issue is ambivalent. In this new era, we are totally or partially "displaced" or we are not anywhere. According to this theorist, we may even feel at home, but we are not fully anywhere at all.

In this sense, João Gilberto Noll's fictional universe suggests a chain of meanings pointing towards doubt. Creatures that bear fruit on the edges of marginalization and are grouped into a possible social reality, activate the disparity that exists between contravention and what is legitimately accepted. Subjects in transit

who, in the dynamics of coming and going generate the reflection of a society that is only distinguished in movement; standing still means belonging to the past and thus becoming obsolete.

## IN BETWEEN PLACES AND NON-PLACES: THE WANDERING SUBJECT IN QUESTION

We have observed that changes occurring in the daily life of the subject resulting from the process of globalization, stem from our relationship with space, time and others. The two notions of places studied by Marc Augé (1994), “as an anthropological place/non-place,” enables us to be aware of these changes, which arise from a seemingly “natural” way and are replacing the old city by the emergence of a “new city.” For this theoretician, if a place can define the subject as identity, relational and historical, a space that cannot be defined neither as identity nor as relational, nor as historical, is defined as a non-place. Noll’s subject lives on the corner seeking identity. We can say that what happens in *Atlantic Hotel* (1995) is a consequence of post-modernity.

In this work, the subject in question is a kind of walker, anonymous, unemployed, uprooted, a kind of man without qualities and that roams the passages of scenarios or transits characterized by Augé (1994) as non-places, as they are not defined as identity, as relational nor as historical. The idea that we put forth is that postmodernity manufactures non-places, considered spaces that are not in and of themselves anthropological and are not part of the old places classified and promoted to places of memory.

Augé, in analysing the relationship between anthropological place and non-place in contemporary society carries into space the question of otherness: “If the anthropological tradition connected the issue of otherness (or of identity) to that of space, it is because the processes of symbolization placed in practice by social groups should understand and control space to understand and organize themselves” (AUGÉ, 1994, p. 158).

According to Santos (2004), the subjectivity of the wandering subject in *Atlantic Hotel* (1995) is presented as fractured, the result of a degraded and provisional setting, as the following asserts: there was no longer the blue wooden house. “. . . “the same

old bar owner.” But the bar round the corner is no more, “the landlord had sold the land to make that building” (NOLL, 1995, p.99).

We note images of mobility, an imaginary place of a possible encounter with that one who was left waiting. With the phenomenon of globalization, the issue of cultural identity based on the Cartesian model, gives way to a subject that is constantly building and reassessing their way of being and acting in society. Zygmunt Bauman, in *Malaise in Postmodernity* (1998, p. 114), sees the “axis of the strategy in postmodern life is not to make identity refrain itself, but to keep it from affixing itself,” bringing to light the fragility and temporary condition of the subject who must evaluate their identifying features.

About identity, we take the concept of identity proposed by Hall.

Hall identifies the Enlightenment subject, “a centred, unified individual, equipped with the right skills, awareness and action. The essential centre of the self was the identity of a person.” (10-11). He then identifies a sociological subject, the one who runs contrary to the idea of autonomy and that is formed in their relationship with others. The core of the subject – “the essential centre of the self” – still exists, but there are changes that occur as a result of the dialogue established between this identity and others belonging to their culture and the “outer cultural worlds” (11). The third model, the postmodern subject, brings the signs of fragmentation and plurality of identities. (HALL, 2001, p.10-11)

As a consequence of this plurality of identities, a new notion of subject with temporary and indefinite identity comes about. This model has been represented in contemporary literature through fragmented narratives of hermetic, discontinuous and undetermined areas. The contemporary novel brings in its fabric a dialogue in which the “marks” of man’s social experiences are no more than the representation of a precarious and unstable present.

*Hotel Atlantic* brings within its architecture a dialogue in which the “marks” of man’s social experiences are no more than the representation of a precarious and unstable present.

The novel’s narrator-protagonist is a refugee, in an apparent search for identity and roots and a place, but there are no horizons to go to, because everything is empty. The narrator of *Atlantic Hotel* is an actor imprisoned in acting masks because he is always representing other characters, such that the actor’s mask becomes glued to the narrator’s face (SANTOS, 2004, p.86-87). Let us recall that masks constitute strategies and possible solutions to refusing to be fixed to some place. At a time where

one is not presented, one is imprisoned to the masks, theatrically incorporating elements of the acting profession from which one can no longer free oneself.

Throughout the narrative we see the actor, unnamed, wearing clothes which belong to others to play an occasional role: Susan Fleming's ex-husband's wool jacket, a Japanese prostitute's father's pyjamas, a deceased priest's cassock. All of these garments feature disposable identities, incoherent subjectivity. These features in the narrative suggest marks of "de-temporalization of the socially unstructured space, without a solid design, durable, moves along an axis whose object is not to detain identity, but rather to keep it from becoming fixed" (BAUMAN, 1998.p.114).

In the sexual relationship, the narrator-protagonist acts also in his function as actor, wearing the mask of someone mechanical and disposable as if representing an automated body with no sensitivity (NOLL, 1995 *apud* SANTOS, 2004). Another scene that marks the plot is the passage with the receptionist of the hotel (Rio de Janeiro) called Marisa. All of the scenes point towards the theatrical aspect, the non-affective for erotic consumption of the body as a mass product. According to Santos, fiction intervenes there to mock the cultural scene, the subjectivity imposed by the media, the novelist's mimesis object.

The protagonist-narrator incorporates the experience of abandonment and the symbolic scene of postmodern culture with fiction. In the novel, the traveling actor is incessantly going away, leaving the people he has met (women like Marisa) or being left alone (Diana abandons him when he becomes an outcast, helpless and mutilated) (SANTOS, 2004). There is at no time passages of the narrative that show an anchoring of the subject with the places he frequents. On this point, we turn to Augé who tells us that:

The place and non-place are fleeting polarities: the first is never completely erased and the second never fully takes place – palimpsests in which re-enrols, without ceasing, the jumbled game of identity and relationship. The non-places, however, are the measure of the epoch: a quantifiable measure that could be taken by adding through some conversions between surface, volume and distance. (AUGÉ, 1994, p.74)

When it is not possible for the individual to experience of the relationship with another or with the environment he frequents, he is facing a non-place. It is what occurs with Noll's narrator-protagonist: "Who knows if I will marry the touchy doorwoman?"

Who knows if I'll be content in the company of a woman? . . . Turning to someone would be the same as staying and I needed to go" (NOLL, 1995, p.19).

According to Santos (2004) the wanderer is lost in space, in faraway places. This theoretician adds that he is always leaving others, ending up drifting. The former actor, in the city of Viçoso (p.63), dressed as a priest, "the cassock was too short for me" (NOLL, 1995, p.64) considers he who never leaves, becoming fixed in the same place, in an eternal wait: "he was sitting in his chair in the same position I had met him, cross-legged, staring at the front door" (NOLL, 1995, p. 69).

The subject of *Atlantic Hotel* is a temporary man; never sure of his will, he is always ready to go to try to live new lives in different locations:

"I saw Marisa among the hanging sheets, I felt a twinge of burning. But I still wanted to have lunch along my way, it would be very late" . . . "So he just gave her a gentle kiss on the mouth. I said I would be going" (NOLL 1995, p. 69). At certain times, the traveller is alone with a dog. He does not cling to anything or anyone. He is about to abandon everything, if possible, even the dog:

When I closed the door, I saw the reddish dog looking at me across the street. I opened the window. I started to put my head out, to say something, to give some sign. But nothing that could save that friendship came to me" (NOLL, 1995, p.95).

The experience of abandonment is inscribed into one's conscience, and acquires visibility in the configuration of intrigue, in dreams the subject of *Atlantic Hotel* may appear as an abandoned and mutilated woman: "it was a woman without a leg":

I fell asleep. I had a strange dream, where once again I was a woman. Only now so as to follow my life, I was a woman without a leg. I, that woman, at a remote train station, surrounded only by wilderness, I waited for someone I was not sure would come. Then, the train arrives; it fills my surroundings with smoke, you cannot see anything...and I woke up. (NOLL, 1995, p. 98)

The actor in *Atlantic Hotel* is slippery, skilled, unsteady. Therefore, it is impossible to grasp his aloof and unstable identity. The desire to leave, to leave without destination, is proven when in waking up in the hotel room at dawn, the character was impetuous, apprehensive:

I closed the curtain [of the window]. A countdown was underway, I needed to go. But I decided to go back to bed. I took off my shoes with

my own feet. I knew that on the inside I represented despair because in a little while I needed to go. (NOLL, 1989, p. 9).

The subject refuses a single identity. Every day, he cultivates sensations in which his body wears the identities required to conceal its origin, but also to fit into the space it occupies temporarily.

For the wanderer there is no constitution that can help the reader to define him. His existence is marked by the horizon of uncertainty. Wherever he goes, he dissolves any object that can bring any memories of places he has visited. The character extinguish his history, disposing of baggage, postcards and maps. When asked by the woman who had kept him company at night in a hotel, about the fact that he carries only the clothes he is wearing, he says, “[I] do not keep anything with me” (NOLL, 1995, p. 41). The character’s speech exemplifies the subject uprooted from his origins and who does not know where he is going, making his life seem like a mere fiction.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The relationship between language in first person, and the look of the character conceives a narrative driven by unexpected movements in the constant search for new landscapes and images. Given this perspective, reading *Atlantic Hotel* (1995) starting from the dilemma of places and non-places and of the fragmentation of identity is relevant in a time in history where local aspects give importance to a global culture. The Nollian narrative investigates a process of reading and searching for an identity on the part of an awkward narrator to define himself as a culturally and socially constructed subject.

We note that in *Atlantic Hotel* (1995) there is not a relationship of unity between the characters. The feelings we perceive in the narrative reverberate the longing for a lost search. The Nollian narrative points out that dimension of sociality mapped onto an ailing social body. The wanderer represents the dislodgment of the subject far from himself and the other within a cultural universe that cause estrangement and incompleteness. There is no hint of belonging to suggest an anchoring and support for the encounters of otherness. In *Identity* (2005, p. 17), Bauman expresses both belonging and identity “do not have the strength of a rock, are not safe for life, and are



quite adjustable and revocable and depend on the decisions that the individual himself takes, the paths one travels along, the way one acts.”

The thought of the sociologist guides towards understanding of the character’s unconsummated identity in the Nollian novel. In the narrative, the relationship of unconsummated identity has an intrinsic relationship with the notion of belonging to the geographic issue. The question that always seems to be underlying Augé’s thought is to know how the “non-places” can cause a loss of ourselves as a group and society, prevailing the “solitary” individual.

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