Paloma Vidal

Stops: Argentina, Brasil, Estados Unidos

(1975 -)



Paloma Vidal was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1975. At the age of two, she moved with her parents to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where she spent her childhood and adolescence. In 1999, she graduated with a degree in literature from the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ). She later pursued doctoral studies at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro, completing her Ph.D. with research partly conducted in Los Angeles – an experience that provided the seed for her 2009 novel *Algum lugar*. In addition to her career as a writer and translator, Vidal teaches literary theory at the Universidade Federal de São Paulo, where she lives today.

Vidal debuted on the Brazilian literary stage in 2003 with her first collection of stories, *A duas mãos*. That same year she joined the editorial team of *Grumo*, a yearly journal dedicated to exploring intersections between contemporary Brazilian and Argentine literatures. Her fiction often stages the unease of inhabiting more than one linguistic world at once, probing how belonging is negotiated less through fixed territory than through the fragile terrain of language. In *A duas mãos*, for instance, one character thinks in “portunhol,” a hybrid idiom born at the borders between languages. Her second book of short stories, *Mais ao sul* (2008), develops these themes further. Set in cities such as Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro, its

stories trace the lives of characters whose subjectivities are shaped by the instability of inhabiting spaces and languages that are never entirely their own. Vidal's second novel, *Mar azul* (2012), examines these themes against the backdrop of dictatorship – Vidal's own family immigrated to Brazil during Argentina's Dirty War. The protagonist travels to Brazil in search of the father who abandoned her decades earlier, and though their reunion is fraught, she remains there. Structured in three parts, the novel opens and closes with dialogues with the narrator's childhood friend Vicky, while the central section traces the discovery of her father's notebooks, revealing intersections in both father and daughter's experiences of displacement and foreign language. As such, *Mar azul* affirms Vidal's sustained engagement with the complexities of linguistic and cultural belonging.

Among the semifinalists for the 2010 São Paulo Literature Prize, Vidal's first novel *Algum lugar* is a semi-autobiographical narrative set largely in California, following an unnamed narrator through her year as a visiting graduate student at UCLA and her eventual return to Rio de Janeiro. The story, however, does not settle neatly into the conventions of autobiographical fiction. Its distinctive narrative form – shifting between first, second, and third person – produces a fragmented subjectivity, dramatizing the instability of identity in diasporic experience. At times the protagonist narrates her own story; at other moments she is addressed directly, as if by an inner voice; and elsewhere she is described from a distance, as though an external observer were recounting her actions. This polyphonic construction enacts the splintering of the self across borders, producing a kind of metonymic multilingualism: multiple voices, like multiple languages, coexisting on the same page and reflecting the fractured condition of diasporic life.

Although written in Portuguese, the novel situates itself within a multilingual world. In Los Angeles, the narrator's primary language is not English but Spanish. She teaches it at the university, uses it with her colleagues, and hears it constantly on buses and trains. Spanish becomes her everyday idiom, yet it remains unstable: she is not a native speaker, but a heritage speaker, having been born in Argentina and raised in Brazil. Her Spanish is agile but imprecise, leaving her feeling like a charlatan. English, meanwhile, hovers as an inaccessible

necessity. The narrator recognizes that she ought to learn it, but insists that the city itself resists her fluency, erecting invisible barriers to integration. Unlike transcontinental movement which appears relatively easy – the narrator's arrival at LAX, for example, is described without mention of immigration checks or visas – the linguistic border within Los Angeles proves insurmountable.

Vidal dramatizes this condition by rarely reproducing foreign languages directly. English and Spanish are narrated or described rather than transcribed. One exception, however, is striking: the language of war. Set in the early 2000s, the novel is punctured by untranslated English phrases like "cluster munitions" and "collateral damage," imported from news reports on the Iraq War. These terms enter the text as alien intrusions, unmoored from subjectivity and belonging, highlighting the asymmetry between the narrator's intimate struggles with language and the impersonal discourse of empire.

If English is experienced as exclusion, Spanish becomes a space of uncertain negotiation, particularly in the narrator's friendship with Luci, a Korean colleague also studying Spanish-language literature. Luci's pronunciation is flawless, but her syntax renders her speech strange and confusing, reminding the narrator of machine translation. Their exchanges unfold in a shared but unstable Spanish, a second language for both, constantly marked by miscommunication. When Luci's voicemail greets callers in English, the narrator is paralyzed: in what language should she leave a message? Such moments dramatize the failures and lacunas of linguistic exchange, foregrounding fluency not as a neutral skill but as a contested measure of authenticity and belonging.

Language is not merely communicative but constitutive of subjectivity. The narrator reflects on her own positionality as a heritage speaker, neither fully inside nor outside Spanish, always navigating its gaps. She envies the ease with which Luci and her Korean friends converse in English, while for her English feels exhausting, a constant reminder of exclusion. In an argument with Luci, she feels abandoned by language itself, as if all her insecurities about Spanish condensed into a single moment of failure. For Vidal, these breakdowns of

communication are not peripheral but central: they stage the precariousness of diasporic subjectivity, always at risk of collapsing under the weight of linguistic insufficiency.

Los Angeles itself mirrors this precarity. The novel's opening scene at the airport sets the tone: the narrator cannot understand the public address system that plays over the loudspeakers, cannot locate her boyfriend, and feels simultaneously disoriented and uncannily familiar with the city, having absorbed its images through North American cinema. Everyday life in Los Angeles is described as exclusionary. Without a car, her mobility is limited to buses and narrow pedestrian routes, which she experiences as both alienating and oddly intimate. The city is mapped through freeways and Spanish-named streets, yet walking feels prohibited, distances insurmountable. When her mother suggests visiting the Getty Center, she perceives the route as a battle of will against the geography of the metropolis. These struggles to traverse the city highlight the ways in which urban space can enforce forms of belonging or non-belonging as powerfully as language.

Mobility in the novel extends beyond geography to relationships. The narrator's boyfriend, M., jogs daily, constructing routes that avoid obstacles and minimize contact with the city. His running parallels her commuting to and from campus: both forms of circulation are repetitive, limited, and detached. By refusing to buy a car, the couple underscore their outsider status. They live in Los Angeles without fully inhabiting it, remaining solitary passers-by rather than residents. Through this refusal, Vidal explores how non-belonging may generate alternative, precarious modes of adaptation – ways of being in a place without ever assimilating to it.

The novel also constructs a geography of superimposition. Its table of contents places Rio de Janeiro between two Los Angeleses – one in California, one a cinema in Buenos Aires – suggesting that Rio, too, is not a stable origin but a site of passage. In Buenos Aires, the narrator and her mother rename streets and monuments with Brazilian equivalents, inscribing their own references onto the landscape, though some spaces, such as the mother's childhood neighborhood, remain resistant to translation. The narrator's dreams further blur these geographies. In these dreams she is transported to a city that is neither Rio

nor Los Angeles, a deserted, ghost town Los Angeles, an unrecognizable Rio, a room with a man she doesn't know, a well, an airplane. When she is in Los Angeles, she dreams of Rio. When she is in Rio, she dreams of Los Angeles. These overlapping cartographies illustrate how diasporic experience produces spaces that are at once spatial and psychological, constantly elsewhere.

Corporeality also becomes a site of displacement. Pregnancy transforms Vidal's narrator's body into a vessel for another life and an object of familial scrutiny, making clear that it is no longer entirely her own. After giving birth, she experiences despair at her inability to meet her baby's needs, repeating "I can do it" until the words lose meaning and become a question: can I do it? Here, the body and language collapse into one another – the tongue as both organ and speech – making visible the intersections of linguistic and bodily displacement. In early motherhood, displacement becomes domestic: she avoids leaving the apartment, relying on the internet for contact with the outside world. Reterritorialization occurs not in Brazil but in Argentina, where walking the streets of Buenos Aires with her mother and son allows her to inscribe Brazilian references onto the cityscape, bridging generational voices and reasserting subjectivity.

Ultimately, Vidal privileges language over territory as the measure of belonging. *Algum lugar* locates self-actualization in the navigation of multiple languages at home and abroad. The novel closes with the image of the narrator's son, who naturally inhabits bilingualism. At the Los Angeles movie theatre in Buenos Aires, he understands Spanish addressed to him without translation. This conclusion imagines a future where linguistic coexistence is possible, even if the narrator herself never achieves fluency.

By foregrounding the insecurities, failures, and improvisations of linguistic displacement, Vidal opens space for reimagining diasporic subjectivity as fluid and generational. *Algum lugar* resists the idea of belonging as rooted in fixed geography; instead, it situates identity in the ongoing negotiation of languages, selves, and relationships. The novel's title – "algum lugar" – captures this indeterminacy: belonging is not tied to a single place, but to the

precarious, shifting terrain of language.

Quotations

Se depender de Los Angeles, nosso inglês permanecerá eternamente como é: uma língua básica, latinizada, de passagem (*Algum lugar*: 21)

O Rio de Janeiro é uma sombra que de vez em quando vejo passar, como uma nave sobrevoando a cidade... me sinto tentada a sobrepor uma geografia sobre outra como para medir o grau do meu deslocamento ou forçar uma adaptação necessária. (*Algum lugar:* 29)

Penso que serei sempre uma passante solitária nesta cidade. (i*dem*: 113)

Desde criança ouvia minha mãe contar que houve um momento, entre meus dois e três anos, que eu tinha ficado de tal forma dividida entre o espanhol e o português que parava de falar. (i*dem*: 162)

A sensação de que o corpo está contra mim, de que é um impedimento e não minha subsistência; a sensação de que é um forasteiro. Essa dualidade me foi ensinada desde muito cedo. (*Mar azul*: 52)

Ele me conhece desde o primeiro dia em que cheguei aqui e com minha língua de manual perguntei: por gentileza, o senhor poderia me informar onde fica o correio? Acho que não queria ir ao correio. Queria perguntar algo e achei que seria natural numa estrangeira o desejo de enviar uma carta, porque era isso que meu pai havia feito durante décadas. (i*dem*: 68)

Depois fiquei aqui por algo que havia adquirido, quem sabe esta cidade em que me sinto até hoje tão anônima; mas por isso mesmo, um cidadão qualquer, mesmo que no documento continue constando que não sou daqui, fiquei sem pensar, o que para mim era igual a uma ausência de dúvida. (*idem*: 147)

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