Wolfgang Berg · Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh (Eds.)

Exploring Transculturalism

VS RESEARCH

CrossCulture

Edited by

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CrossCulture is committed to a new understanding of culture: individuals or communities do have in common a particular set of cultural items, but other sets of rules and tools differ. There are no cultures which have borders like territories or states. Cultural change can thus be explained as cultural exchange.

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A Biographical Approach

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Editors' Introduction: Exploring Transculturalism

Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh and Wolfgang Berg

The nation state has been at the heart of political discourse since its invention in the nineteenth century. Before this, crossing state borders did not have the same cultural implications as it does today: there was no sense that one was transnational simply because one moved from one political state to another. The idea that states/countries and their cultures are congruent emerged from the widespread perception of the state as the legal and political expression of a sovereign, unified and culturally unique nation. This connection between national boundaries and culture persists in the popular imagination even today: when we travel to Germany, for example, it is German culture that we expect to find people practising. This relationship between the state and its culture is also at the heart of debates about national identity. In Benedict Anderson's influential text on the function of nationalism in contemporary societies, the nation is defined as a kind of cultural metanarrative or ideological framework within which a group of people experiences a sense of unity:

> It is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nations will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion (B. Anderson 2003:6).

A country's culture is, according to this formulation, the glue that binds its inhabitants together and marks them as a distinct ethnic group. Moreover, members of this group work together to create a social identity, which they use to perform their distinct national character into being (H. Tajfel 1981; R. Jenkins 2004). The function of this social identity is to promote certain values, norms and behaviours considered central to the well-being of the state, and reward those who adhere to these values. By extension, those who cannot or will not subscribe to the socially-sanctioned values are marginalized and othered. This includes, most visibly, ethnic, racial or religious minorities within the state; but also, more invisibly, gender, sexual and other groups perceived to deviate from the "norm". It is little wonder that many debates about the role of cultural nationalism in contemporary state-building have focused on its limiting,

homogenizing narratives predicated on categorization and differentiation (E. Hobsbawm 1990).

1.1 Culture and Identity

In his book *Keywords*, Raymond Williams claims that: "Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language" (R. Williams 1985: 87). The word "culture" has historically been used in a variety of ways. However, it always implies a contrast with nature. In other words, the things that human beings produce or do are culture, whereas things that occur naturally in the world are nature. Williams was one of the first theorists of cultural studies to insist that definitions of culture be extended to include the entire "way of life" common to a certain nationality, race or other social group:

> Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact. Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning. The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land (R. Williams 1997: 6).

For the purposes of this book, we follow Williams' definition of culture as a multilayered system of rules (meanings, values, views, habits) and things (symbols, products, tools) that people apply or use in daily life. Moreover, we acknowledge that these elements of culture are learned behaviours that mark an individual as belonging to a particular social or national group. Identity after all is based, at least in part, on how we define ourselves in relation to other people in our environment: there are those with whom we identify and those with whom we do not. Such binary categories enable us to define ourselves as members of a particular national, ethnic, racial, gender, etc., group. Nor is such identification a static process: on the contrary, every time we experience something new (job, travel to a foreign country, relationship, cultural text, etc.), we come into contact with new ideas, learn new skills and maybe even adopt different mannerisms or styles of clothing in order to express these new elements of our identities. Because of the increasingly globalized nature of our world, cultural differences are no longer as clearly delineated as they were in the past. Worldwide travel and even television programmes have arguably decreased many of the differences that existed in the past between cultures and make crossing borders an easier experience for the contemporary traveller who is bound to recognize at least some of the cultural rules and values he encounters.

1.2 Culture and Identity in a Postmodern World

Michel Foucault's statement that: "The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity; we are in the epoch of juxtaposition" (M. Foucault 1986: 22) heralded a new approach to identity in the contemporary world by suggesting that one's identity is formed not as a result of the cultural and national values and history one has inherited, but rather as a result of the different spaces through which one travels. In other words, one's identity is no longer perceived as an inherited construct but rather as something flexible that changes as one moves through the more fluid spaces of the contemporary, globalized world and internalizes a mixture of the different cultures and ideas that one encounters. The idealized contemporary traveller will thus effortlessly cross national and cultural borders and negotiate a constantly changing and flexible identity for himself. Andy Bennett argues that it is no longer even possible to conceive of identity as a static entity, forged from a communal history and value system, because all of the traditional certainties on which identity formation were based in the past have been fatally undermined by a postmodernist flux and fluidity: "Once clearly demarcated by relatively static and ethnically homogenous communities, the 'spaces' and 'places' of everyday life are now highly pluralistic and contested, and are constantly being defined and redefined through processes of relocation and cultural hybridisation" (A. Bennett 2005: 4). Contemporary migrants are thus liberated from the binary oppositions that functioned in the past to define and inscribe them within clear-cut narratives of belonging, and are now free to assume multiple and hybrid identities.

This focus on liberation and hybridity has given rise to a range of terms designed to express the adaptability of the contemporary traveller. Words such as "sojourners" and "commuters" imply an effortless crossing of borders and integration into new cultures, while the rise of family holidays "abroad" and an increase in academic exchange programmes suggest that people today are crossing borders and interacting with other cultures without experiencing any difficulties at all. However, it is important to acknowledge that moving to another country can be a difficult and challenging transition, even if one is somewhat familiar already with the culture and language of that country. The scale of research into the difficulties experienced by migrants as they try to adapt to life in a new country indicates that optimistic accounts of the effortless globalized traveller may be exaggerated and that cultural differences continue to isolate and marginalize those who are not native to a particular society. The problem, as Williams conveys in his use of the phrase "way of life" to define culture, is that many of a society's rules and expectations are assumed rather than

expressed. One can learn all about a society's history, values and language before traveling to it and still find communicating impossible because of one's ignorance of these taken-for-granted rules and expectations. This phenomenon is at the heart of research into "culture shock", the anxiety and confusion experienced by people who find themselves having to operate in an unfamiliar social environment without the requisite skills or cultural knowledge (C. Ward et al 2001). The prevalence of culture shock in the literature on adaptation suggests that contemporary migrants continue to experience the same barriers to inclusion as their historical forebears in spite of globalizing forces. It is in an attempt to explore this contradiction between the supposed flexibility of postmodern identities and the rigidity of inherited cultural divisions that this book focuses on the biographies of a number of people we term transcultural.

1.3 Exploring Transculturalism

In a bid to transcend the limitations of traditional static and binary conceptions of identity and nationality, contemporary theories of culture tend to focus instead on the modern state as a multicultural rather than monolithic society, which accommodates a range of different cultural groups within its own borders, while reaching out to its diaspora. This sense of multiple cultures living together in a single state suggests that a straightforward opposition of belonging/not belonging, us/them is no longer valid. However, the term "multicultural" is in itself problematic, suggesting the presence in society of a number of different – but not necessarily interacting – cultures. As Wolfgang Welsch points out, theories of multiculturalism do nothing to challenge traditional conceptions of culture as a monolithic, homogenous construct and that, in fact, such a "culturalist" approach highlights the presence in a society of cohabiting but crucially *distinct* cultural groups, thus perpetuating the divisions that exist between them (W. Welsch 1999: 194-213). Instead, Welsch advocates the use of the term "transculturality" to convey the complex interconnections that bind different cultures together today. He suggests that this contemporary condition of interconnectivity is a consequence of three distinct developments: the internal complexity of contemporary societies, the external networking in which they engage to build and develop links with other societies, and the tendency in all cultures today to be hybrid, as a result of increased mobility and communications technologies. As a consequence of this condition, he concludes, nothing today is "absolutely foreign" any longer.

Welsch's concept of transculturality offers a useful starting point for the discussion contained in this book. Our focus is on identity and the modern quest

for belonging without conforming. The contributors explore the lives and works of a range of curious, open-minded protagonists who managed, through perseverance and affinity, to adapt to new, alien cultures. The basic premise of this book is that some individuals find ways to transcend their native cultures, in order to explore, examine and infiltrate new, seemingly alien cultures. These people we define as "transculturalists" and their experiences show that in the future it will become increasingly difficult to identify and separate people according to previously accepted delineations. In essence, we are saying that transculturalism defies race, religion, sexuality, class and every sort of classification known to sociologists and marketers. Transculturalists lead unusual lives. They date and marry outside of their race or religion; they date and marry inside of their gender; they travel on a whim and venture into faraway lands; they dress unconventionally, and customize new dress codes regularly; they live in areas from which their parents were once barred, and take jobs previously considered outside of their leagues; they listen to, create and criticize music they are not supposed to listen to; they display high levels of creativity in the arts and other progressive disciplines.

Crossing borders – transnational mobility – is an interesting and exciting phenomenon. It has a big impact not only on the lives of the individuals who travel to another culture and go through the process of learning how to adapt and survive there, but also on the host culture itself whose hegemonic rules and values may be challenged by the influx of different ideas and behaviours. Identifying transnationally mobile persons and engaging with their experiences and careers is one of the best ways to learn about the conditions under which cultural change takes place. The focus underlying all of the essays contained in this book is on the strategies used by the transcultural protagonists to cope with the challenges they experience when confronted with situations in which they are forced to follow different rules. In order to gain an insight into the process they underwent, firstly to learn the rules of the new culture and, secondly, to adapt these rules so that they could engage with the surrounding culture without losing their own individuality and cultural heritage, it is mainly on biographical resources that we concentrate. Many of our protagonists are writers and academics who faithfully recorded and analysed their transcultural journeys even as it was unfolding. From these autobiographical texts we gain a fascinating, first-hand insight into the challenges confronting even the most well-educated and urbane contemporary traveller. Some of our protagonists also wrote fictional texts, in which they explore the process of border-crossing and its emotional toll on the individual and family involved. What makes all of our protagonists interesting is the level of self-conscious scrutiny and analysis they bring to their acts of transcultural mobility. Because all of the protagonists demonstrably

undergo a process of learning new cultural behaviours, we can call them transcultural personalities. We do so in spite of some reservations we have with the term. As many of our protagonists demonstrate, Welsch's optimism about the transcultural state of the contemporary world and his belief that advocating transculturalism can help the migrant to overcome feelings of isolation, dislocation and foreignness are perhaps overly optimistic: heterogenous cultures do still dominate and people who cross borders continue to struggle with unfamiliar social norms and behaviours. When we use the term "transcultural" in this book, therefore, we do so in full acknowledgement of the challenge that migrants continue to face as they strive to adapt their own inherited value systems to that of the new culture in which they now find themselves living.

1.4 Outline of Chapters

In Chapter Two, Serine Haghverdian presents the results of qualitative interviews she conducted with six young women of Middle Eastern backgrounds now living in Sweden. The interviews were focused around the participants' lived experiences as members of an othered ethnic and cultural group. Haghverdian rejects models of identity that posit immigrants as living *in-between* two different (conflicting) cultures and thus positioned on the margins of both cultures. Instead, she suggests that immigrant groups frequently construct a third, hybrid identity for themselves which goes beyond the simple combination of two competing identities (that of the ethnic group and the new host society). The participants describe their ongoing negotiation of identities that straddle the borders between traditional Muslim and more permissive Swedish norms, and more crucially between socially conscribed and personally constructed norms of behaviour. By negotiating their identity claims like this, the participants' stories exemplify the construction of social identity as a process – a fluid, constantly changing and negotiable process which runs through all aspects of their life-stories.

In Chapter Three, Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh explores the writings of Eamonn Wall. A member of a group of migrants called the "New Irish", distinguished by their frequent and seemingly facile transitions between the homeland and the new host society, Wall strives to identify a new narrative voice that accommodates the hybrid identity he wishes to adopt. After a number of years in America, he makes the crucial discovery that transculturalism involves not only the *ability* to live between different cultures, but crucially the *willingness* to actively engage with and question the values and assumptions on which these cultures are based. Wall thus begins the process of exploring what it means to be

a transcultural being, interrogating and exploring a dual identity and heritage. The construction of a transcultural identity will require not the postmodern ambivalence of a commuter, but an active engagement with the process of multiculturalism. For a transcultural writer like Wall, this involves opening himself up to the language and rhythms of the culture in which he now finds himself living in order to develop a dynamic and inclusive poetic voice.

In Chapter Four, Magda Danciu presents the work of Petru Popescu who has, perhaps uniquely, acquired the status of a Romanian-American author, popular and critically acclaimed in both countries. Popescu defected from Romania to the United States in 1973 and was immediately struck by the challenges and opportunities of living in a country which championed individual freedom above all other values. His most famous novel, *The Return*, was written after his first visit back to Romania in 1994, and reflects on the twenty-five years he lived "in exile" in the United States. The book juxtaposes his reflections on his past with a contemporary narrative voice, thus transcending the gaps that exist between past and present, America and Romania. Popescu confesses that for a transplanted writer, as for any immigrant, adaptation is baffling and never complete. Indeed, his own sense of identity has taken a number of interesting turns. Popescu became an American citizen and assumed the status of an American writer, making a huge effort to adopt the signifiers of American writing, its heroes, themes and genres. However, after writing in English for most of his career, Popescu has recently completed a book in Romanian as part of a contract with a Romanian publisher. The role of language as the transmitter of one's identity, values and culture is thus a central concern of his. Danciu suggests that Popescu is best summed up as a Romanian-American (writer), in a liberal multicultural environment, thus exemplifying the condition of postmodern in-betweenness and multiplicity of identity.

In Chapter Five, Márta Fülöp examines the transcultural experiences of noted Japanese intellectual, Natsume Soseki, who journeyed to London at the turn of the twentieth century, becoming an early cultural mediator between East and West. Soseki was what nowadays would be called a "sojourner". He was sent to England to study English language and literature. For a sojourner, who stays in a place only temporarily, it is important to adapt to the new culture rapidly in order to operate effectively. However, Soseki, the product of an isolated and inward-looking culture, was unable to cope with the fundamental and widespread differences between Japanese and English societies and as a consequence suffered a massive "culture shock" which led to severe mental trauma. In spite of this, however, he made full use of his time in England and returned to Japan with a new theory of literature which combined traditional Japanese forms with a western emphasis on psychology. He also began to

promote ideas about autonomy and individualism, which clashed with the Japanese privileging of group-oriented behaviour. Soseki was among the first Japanese writers to be influenced by Western culture. His experiences of alienation and fear resonated with many of his readers, and created a bridge between East and West.

In Chapter Six, Cristina Chevereşan explores the journey undertaken by Julia Alvarez, the successful Dominican-American writer, to assert her right to a hyphenated identity. Born in the United States, spending some of her childhood in her native homeland, before returning to the United States at the age of ten, Alvarez' experiences of transculturalism have had a profound impact on her sense of identity and belonging. The inherent traumas of dislocation and the often troublesome negotiation of identities in the ambiguous regions of the hyphen, are the constitutive elements of Alvarez's identity and are dramatized in the experiences of the characters of her debut novel *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. Like Alvarez, the García girls of the novel's title find themselves living between the dual cultures of their by now distant and romanticized homeland and contemporary New York. What makes them interesting as examples of transcultural personalities is their active engagement with the surrounding environment and awareness that identity is neither static nor preordained but is rather in constant flux. The García girls thus live decisively in the world of the hyphen, drawing on both aspects of their cultural backgrounds and forging new, dynamic narratives of identity and belonging. Alvarez does not claim that this embrace of a hyphenated identity is easy. On the contrary, she demonstrates that attempting a transcultural existence, trying to come to terms with the traumas of dislocation and go back and forth between literal and symbolic homes, families and settings is undeniably problematic. In her writing, Alvarez manages to document the inherent challenge and uniqueness of a life lived between and across national boundaries, describing it to the world and exploring the potential of transcultural living as a personal option.

In Chapter Seven, Catherine Leen examines the work of director Luis Buñuel, whose career took him from his native Spain to France, Hollywood and Mexico. Her chapter focuses on his work in Mexico, and particularly on his initial experiences as a director there. In spite of the high regard in which Buñuel is now held, his initial foray into Mexican filmmaking was less than successful, with his third Mexican film *Los olvidados* (1950) particularly badly received. The reason for this was Buñuel's refusal to adhere to the tenets of romantic-nationalistic *mexicanidad*, which portrayed rural family life in Mexico in positive, idealistic terms, preferring instead to parody its conventions in order to draw attention to the underlying violence and poverty of contemporary Mexican society. In spite of the hostility that greeted his films, Buñuel's uncompromising

look at Mexico paved the way for a complete reimagining of Mexican culture and identity. Leen suggests that it was precisely Buñuel's outsider status that enabled him to transcend the narrow, nationalistic representations of Mexico and critically engage with its contemporary problems.

In Chapter Eight, Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh explores the writings of Hugo Hamilton, who was born in Ireland in 1953 to a German mother and an Irish father. Because of his father's extreme Irish nationalism and his mother's outsider status, Hamilton grew up in a household significantly at odds with the surrounding society. Teased for speaking Irish and bullied for being German, he found himself constantly struggling to find a personal identity neither his family nor society would allow him to express. What is interesting about his situation is that he manifests many of the feelings of dislocation, confusion and isolation characteristic of transcultural migrants – without ever actually leaving the country of his birth. Language becomes for Hamilton the most obvious manifestation of his isolation. Forbidden by his father from speaking English – for a nationalist the language of the "coloniser" – he becomes overwhelmed by the weight of the narratives of history and identity with which the Irish and German languages are loaded. His bilingualism, instead of facilitating an easy embrace of multiculturalism, thus renders him effectively voiceless. Hamilton's ongoing challenge is to try to find a way to transcend the strict binary oppositions imposed on his sense of identity by his father and embrace the contradictions and multiplicities he has inherited.

In Chapter Nine, Gerald David Naughton traces the engagement of Irish writer Colm Tóibín with James Baldwin, the prominent African-American author. In a number of essays and reviews of Baldwin's work, Tóibín has repeatedly resisted the prevalent tendency to categorize Baldwin as a black, homosexual, even American writer, insisting instead that the multiplicity of influences on his writing renders him the exemplary transcultural figure. In so doing, Naughton suggests, Tóibín is also rejecting attempts to subject Irish literature and identity to a similarly reductive act of categorization. What is interesting is that this refusal by Tóibín to impose a metanarrative on Irish culture and identity is in contrast with Baldwin's faith in an American (Emersonian) privileging of individualism. Naughton's essay focuses on the connections between Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956) and Tóibín's *The Story of the Night* (1996), both of which ignore the limiting narratives of nationalism and race in order to focus on homosexuality as a type of exile, both geographic and symbolic. However, the outcome of the acts of exile in the novels reveals a crucial difference between the cultural contexts of their respective authors: while Tóibín's post-nationalist context enables him to depict the exile of his protagonist as a voluntary state, Baldwin's act of exile ends in tragedy as his

protagonist is unable to resist the limits of American heteronormativity. Naughton suggests that whereas Tóibín's transcultural protagonist could ultimately transcend the limitations of national and political narratives of identity, Baldwin's protagonist (and arguably perhaps the author himself) could not.

Chapter Ten presents a snap-shot of the research carried out by lecturing staff and students on the Masters programme in Applied Culture and Media Sciences, in the University of Applied Sciences, Merseberg, Germany into the historical development of transcultural mobility. In the first section, Wolfgang Berg focuses on transcultural movement in the 17-19th centuries, investigating whether any awareness of cultural differences could exist in pre-nation state Europe. In the second section, Franziska Scholze, Janina Lehr and Christin Buchheim examine the lives of three twentieth century figures, whose travels through different cultures were complicated and compounded by a variety of significant social, political and racial upheavals. The biographies of the selected protagonists illustrate a wide range of strategies and responses adapted by those whose lives and careers bring them to engage with a variety of different cultures.

Exploring Transculturalism presents a series of essays reflecting the contributors' own interests in the crossing of borders. A wide variety of different political, geographical and cultural borders are discussed. However, the different borders and acts of crossing reflected upon in this book share a common theme, namely a concern with issues of identity. Our protagonists can all be defined as transcultural personalities because of their willingness to rise to the challenge of living in unfamiliar, sometimes even hostile, societies, and forge new, hybrid narratives of identity for themselves, without compromising their own individuality and cultural heritage.

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"It's my own stuff": The Negotiations and Multiplicity of Ethnic Identities among Young Women of Middle Eastern Backgrounds in Sweden

Serine Haghverdian

> I have never heard anybody in the media talk about a good immigrant girl. She's always subjected to something, like for instance, her dad, or brother, has threatened her or something (….) So, it's always a problem when it comes to immigrant girls (Yasmin).

This quote, expressed by one of the participants in this study, points to a dominant stereotype of young immigrant[1] women in Sweden today. This category of young women is primarily identified as originating from the Middle East. Their voices have not been considered enough in the official debate, for instance in the news media. Previous research has shown that the news media have since the 1970s been involved in objectifying immigrant women as isolated and passive *victims* of their own (patriarchal) culture (Y. Brune 2004; G. Hultén 2001). This stereotype conceptualizes the immigrant woman as "oriental" (E. Said 2000). In this light, it is assumed that as females they are particularly subject to oppressive cultural and religious regulations concerning the freedom of movement and sexuality of the unmarried woman.

Taking these components of the stereotype into consideration, Swedish emancipative gender equality values are not applicable to immigrant women (A. Towns 2002: 157-179). Much of recent research into Swedish identity draws on gender related determinants of ethnic identification. Ann Towns argues that "(a)t the same time as Sweden emerges as a gender-equal state in the mid-1990s (….) gender equality became a salient terrain of differentiation between people residing in Sweden, between 'immigrants' and 'Swedes'" (A. Towns 2002: 158). The immigrant girl thus personifies the *Other* from a Swedish gender equality point of view. Drawing on this social context, this chapter explores lived experiences among young women of Middle Eastern backgrounds living in Sweden. The goal of the research is to seek a deeper understanding of the subjective meanings of the lived experiences of the participants using the general

[1] In this chapter, the word "immigrant" refers to individuals who have actually immigrated to Sweden or are born in Sweden to immigrant parents.