

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Transcultural Writers and Transcultural Literature in the Age of Global Modernity Arianna Dagnino

We are living in an age of increasing interconnectedness, where political borders and cultural edges tend to blur and growing numbers of people throughout all layers of society are 'on the move' across the planet, experiencing the effects of dislocation, deterritorialisation and cross-cultural acculturation. Even though their numbers are still relatively limited,¹ their mobility patterns and strategies are impacting on societies at large and call for new social, political and lifestyle configurations and conceptualizations. Hence the growing influence of views and approaches related to transnationalism,² neocosmopolitanism in its rooted/situated/vernacular variants,³ flexible citizenship,⁴ neonomadism,⁵ transculturalism⁶ that are trying to grasp and theorise the dynamic nature of our global modernity:

Modernity may no longer be approached as a dialogue internal to Europe or EuroAmerica, but is a global discourse in which many participate, producing different formulations of the modern as lived and envisaged within their local social environments.⁷

Within a more specific literary context, I am theorising that this socio-cultural scenario is also giving birth to a new generation of culturally mobile writers, whom I call 'transcultural writers'. That is, imaginative writers who, by choice or by life circumstances, experience cultural dislocation, live transnational experiences, cultivate bilingual/pluri-lingual proficiency, physically immerse themselves in multiple cultures/geographies/territories, expose themselves to diversity and nurture plural, flexible identities. While moving physically across the globe and across different

¹ According to the GCIM Report (2005), international migrants account for not more than 3% of the entire global population. 'Report of the Global Commission on International Migration', *Population and Development Review*, 31.4 (2005) 787-798.

² Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996).

³ Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006); Ulrich Beck, *The Cosmopolitan Vision* (Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 2006); Homi K. Bhabha, 'Unsatisfied: Notes on Vernacular Cosmopolitanism,' *Postcolonial Discourses: An Anthology*, ed. Gregory Castle (Oxford and Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2001) 38-52; Pnina Werbner, *Anthropology and the New Cosmopolitanism: Rooted, Feminist and Vernacular Perspectives* (Oxford; New York: Berg Publishers, 2008).

⁴ Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham: Duke UP, 1999).

⁵ Anthony D'Andrea, 'Neo-Nomadism: A Theory of Post-Identitarian Mobility in the Global Age,' *Mobilities* 1.1 (2006) 95-119.

⁶ Mikhail N. Epstein, 'Transculture: A Broad Way between Globalism and Multiculturalism', *American Journal of Economics & Sociology* 68.1 (2009) 327-351; Wolfgang Welsch, 'Transculturality: The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today', *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World* ed. Mike Featherstone and Scott Lash (London: Sage, 1999).

⁷ Arif Dirlik, 'Modernity as History: Post-Revolutionary China, Globalization and the Question of Modernity,' *Social History* 27.1 (2002) 17.

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cultures, they find themselves less and less trapped in the traditional migrant/exile syndrome and become more apt instead to embrace the opportunities and the freedom that diversity and mobility bestow upon them. It is thanks to this specific status, I argue, that these mobile writers have found themselves at the forefront in capturing and expressing an emerging transcultural sensitivity – ‘the freedom of every person to live on the border of one’s “inborn” culture or beyond it’⁸ – that appears better suited to the needs of a rapidly globalising society. In this way, not only do they contribute to the development of a transcultural literature able to ‘transcend the borders of a single culture in its choice of topic,’ vision and scope, but they also promote a wider global literary perspective.⁹

In this article, I explore how the identity and cultural metamorphosis inherent in the ‘dispatiation’ process (the transcultural process that may be triggered by moving – physically, virtually and imaginatively – outside one’s cultural and homeland borders) allows these writers to adopt new creative modes through a transcultural lens, ‘a perspective in which all cultures look decentered in relation to all other cultures, including one’s own.’¹⁰ It is through this process, I argue, that internationally renowned writers such as Pico Iyer, Alberto Manguel, Amin Maalouf, Michael Ondaatje, Ilija Trojanow, Brian Castro have acquired their transcultural mindset, developed their orientation towards the world at large and showed us the path towards a transcultural attitude/mode of being. To develop my case, I also draw on interviews with some of the quoted authors.¹¹

I would like to open a parenthesis here to explain why, within a comparative literary discourse, I prefer to call these writers transcultural rather than transnational, cosmopolitan or inter-cultural. Transnationalism is generally related to the study of the processes and the effects of transnational migrations¹² on subjectivity, social identity formation and the creation of new ‘transnational social spaces’¹³ rather than expressing a cultural attitude and a philosophical approach towards what Peter Burke calls the ‘new global cultural order’.¹⁴ The term cosmopolitan, on the other hand, is highly charged and over time it has acquired a strong political connotation, to the extent that Pheng Chea and Bruce Robbins prefer to use the term ‘cosmopolitics’¹⁵. What’s more, cosmopolitanism is a political ideology highly contested: the seemingly covert ‘neo-

⁸ Epstein, *Transculture* 334.

⁹ Cf. Anders Pettersson, ‘Introduction. Concepts of Literature and Transcultural Literary History,’ *Literary History: Towards a Global Perspective* ed. Anders Pettersson (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2006) 1-35 (1).

¹⁰ Ellen Berry and Mikhail N. Epstein, ‘In Place of a Conclusion: Transcultural Dialogue,’ *Transcultural Experiments: Russian and American Models of Creative Communication* ed. Ellen Berry and Mikhail N. Epstein (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999) 312.

¹¹ In this particular case, I quote from interviews with authors Ilija Trojanow and Inez Baranay conducted in 2011 as part of the research for my current PhD thesis at the University of South Australia, which includes also in-depth interviews with writers Brian Castro, Alberto Manguel and Tim Parks.

¹² Appadurai. Schiller, Nina Glick, Linda Basch, and Cristina Szanton Blanc, ‘From Immigrant to Transmigrant: Theorizing Transnational Migration,’ *Anthropological Quarterly* 68. 1 (1995) 48-63.

¹³ Ludger Pries, *New Transnational Social Spaces: International Migration and Transnational Companies in the Early Twenty-First Century* (London and New York: Psychology Press, 2001).

¹⁴ Peter Burke, *Cultural Hybridity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009).

¹⁵ *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation* ed. Pheng Cheah & Bruce Robbins (University of Minneapolis and London: Minnesota Press, 1998).

imperialist' ideology of capitalist globalisation¹⁶ and a 'utopian over-idealization of the cosmopolitan virtues of Northern states'¹⁷ for some, the despicable resurgence of Western universalist attitudes for others¹⁸ or the expression of an elitist, postmodern existence for some others.¹⁹ I also deliberately avoid the terms 'cross-cultural' and 'inter-cultural', that still stem from the epistemological framework of national cultures, where cultures are seen as separate, well-defined entities instead of metamorphic, confluent and intermingling processes.²⁰

Transcultural thought as an alternative cultural discourse

This study expressly focuses on a specific and extremely narrow segment of the mobile global population, that is those middle-class progressive creative intellectuals among the so-called 'knowledge workers'²¹ or, in Ulf Hannerz's lexicon, people with 'decontextualized cultural capital'²² who are privileged enough – by census, educational background, life opportunities/circumstances, creative/expressive abilities – to benefit from and get the most out of their transnational life-patterns and imaginations. These are individuals who, moreover, have been particularly affected by their multiple displacements and have developed an acute sensibility towards a cosmopolitan consciousness.

We are all aware that, as Doreen Massey argues, not everyone is able to equally benefit from the mobility and intensified communication flows generated by late capitalism.²³ Why should we thus concentrate on the study of such a tiny portion of the intellectual elite? Because it is this self-reflexive and highly knowledgeable (sensitized) upper-crust, I argue, that can more radically express the alternative discourse to the still dominant common views that gravitate around the two main master narratives of our contemporary, which posit the centrality of culture – and of cultural values and meanings – at their ideological core. On one side we are witnessing all over the world, in a pure assimilationist or realist logic, a renewed virulence of nationalist stances and ethnic/religious revanchisms (where one culture, often celebrating the values of integrity and purity, aspires to or strives to remain dominant over the others or to impose its own particularism); on the other, we have the paladins of multiculturalism, and the risks inherent in cultural ghettoisation and extreme conflictuality. As Beck points out:

¹⁶ Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

¹⁷ Pheng Cheah, 'Cosmopolitanism', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 23.2-3 (2006) 486-496.

¹⁸ Craig J. Calhoun, 'The Class Consciousness of Frequent Travelers: Toward a Critique of Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism', *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101. 4 (2003) 869-897.

¹⁹ Pnina Werbner, 'Global Pathways. Working Class Cosmopolitans and the Creation of Transnational Ethnic Worlds', *Social Anthropology* 7.1 (1999) 17-35.

²⁰ Ilija Trojanow and R. Ranjit Hoskote, *Kampfabsage. Kulturen bekämpfen sich nicht – sie fließen zusammen* (München: Karl Blessing, 2007). The still unpublished English translation, 'No confluence no culture', was kindly provided by the authors.

²¹ The term was initially coined by Peter Drucker in his book, *Landmarks of Tomorrow* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959).

²² Ulf Hannerz, 'Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture,' *Theory Culture Society* 7 (1990) 246.

²³ Doreen Massey, 'Power-Geometry and a Progressive Sense of Place,' *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change* ed. Jon Bird et al. (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) 59-69.

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Among the ... paradoxes of multiculturalism is that it emphatically rejects the essentialism of national homogeneity when defending minority rights, yet it itself easily falls into the trap of essentialism. ... Multiculturalist moralism shuts its eyes to the potential for violence which has long since been shown to result from giving free rein to ethnic identities.²⁴

Transcultural writers seem to be tuned into a different wavelength and thus are able to capture the first still embryonic, still incoherent, still mostly unexpressed or intercepted symptoms (signals) of a different emerging cultural mood/mode. In other words, these writers are developing an alternative discourse that in any case is perceived by both mainstream parts (let us call them the assimilationist and the multiculturalist stances) as destabilising the perceived *status quo*.

This disruption is being felt even within a pure literary context, where we have well established, and to a certain extent opposing, categorisations: on one side, mainstream national/autochthonous writers and on the other side migrant (alternatively called postcolonial, multicultural or diasporic) writers. *Tertium non datur*, no third (possibility) is given. In both cases, cultural specificity and stressed essentialised difference (in ethnic/national/racial/religious/territorial/linguistic terms) seem to be the epicentre of social and political organisation (and control), at the level both of the nation-state and of the state of literature. Paraphrasing Aihwa Ong when explaining why she chose the term transnationality instead of globalisation to capture 'the *horizontal* and *relational* nature of the contemporary economic, social, and cultural processes that stream across spaces,' we might as well say that 'transcultural' (more than the term inter-cultural or cross-cultural) denotes the '*transversal*, the *transactional*, the *translational*, and the *transgressive* aspects of contemporary behaviour and imagination' triggered by the changed and changing dynamics of cultural production and identity building.²⁵

These writers have not necessarily set their mind to diffuse an internationalist ethos. Rather, they may feel more compelled than others to express/uphold the responsibility of the intellectuals' public role and the effects of their creative production on the wide spectrum of cultural discourses.

The resistance to closure, the insistence on permanent openness, partiality, and provisionality so evident in many contemporary cultural and political projects might be seen as part of this commitment to opening multiple paths to the future so as not to foreclose it in advance ... Such an investigation has even been called one of the most urgent ethical projects that cultural workers can undertake in our altered world.²⁶

As Henry Louis Gates Jr has underlined, in a world more interconnected than ever 'the responsibilities and obligations we share remain matters of volatile debate.'²⁷

²⁴ Ulrich Beck, *The Cosmopolitan Vision* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2006) 67.

²⁵ Ong 4.

²⁶ Ellen Berry, 'Nomadic Desires and Transcultural Becomings', *Transcultural Experiments* 123-124.

²⁷ Henry Louis Jr. Gates, Review of Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, *Publisher's Weekly* 2005, 12 July 2011 <http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-393-06155-0>.

Nonetheless, challenging both visions of ‘clashing civilizations’²⁸ with its apparently irreconcilable divides on one side and complete cultural relativism on the other, transcultural writers are disposed to reclaim, together with such transcultural theorists as Wolfgang Welsch²⁹ and Mikhail Epstein,³⁰ an inclusive vision of culture/s, which stresses the power of confluences, overlappings and interactions rather than that of polarities.

Transcultural theories have been deployed and engaged since 1940, when the Cuban scholar Fernando Ortiz³¹ coined the term ‘transculturation’ to describe the process of mutual – even if asymmetrical – cultural influences and fusions between so called ‘peripheral’ and colonising cultures. The concept of transculturation has been further developed, within a postcolonial framework, by Mary Louise Pratt in her seminal text, *Imperial Eyes*.³² In this article, I mainly refer to the conceptualisations of ‘transculturality’ and ‘transculture’ respectively devised by Welsch (1999, 2009) and Epstein (1995, 2009), which in my opinion overcome the binaries of dominant versus subordinate cultures inherent in the original concept of transculturation.³³

For this very reason, the transcultural thought and mode of analysis is gaining increasing currency especially among those scholars and writers who feel the need to supersede the perceived existing limits of – though without denying their innovatory inputs – postcolonial (and multicultural) approaches. These being now seen too attached either to an excessively essentialised vision of national/ethnic identities or to a polarising mode based on the classical dichotomies of colonised versus coloniser, dominant versus subordinate:³⁴

Lo sventramento della nozione tradizionale di cultura, non più da intendersi come entità omogenea, e l’idea di fitta interconnessione e continua trasformazione generata dai concetti di transculturalità e transculturalismo aprono nuovi orizzonti teorici e nuovi percorsi di ricerca, facilitando il nostro sforzo di superare i limiti delle letterature viste in termini nazionali o regionali e

²⁸ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

²⁹ Wolfgang Welsch, ‘On the Acquisition and Possession of Commonalities’, *Transcultural English Studies: Theories, Fictions, Realities* ed. Frank Schulze-Engler and Sissy Helff (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2009) 3-36.

³⁰ Mikhail N. Epstein, ‘Culture – Culturology – Transculture,’ *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture* ed. Mikhail N. Epstein (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995) 280-308. Mikhail N. Epstein, ‘The Unasked Question: What would Bakhtin Say?’ *Common Knowledge* 10.1 (2004) 42-60.

³¹ Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, trans. Harriet De Onis (Contrapunteo Cubano Del Tabaco y El Azúcar, 1940 (Durham, NC and London: Duke UP, 1995).

³² Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

³³ See in this regard also the article by Anne Holden Rønning, ‘Literary Transculturations and Modernity: Some Reflections’, *Transnational Literature*, 4.1, November 2011.

³⁴ See in this regard Frank Schulze-Engler, ‘Theoretical Perspectives: From Postcolonialism to Transcultural World Literature,’ *English Literatures Across the Globe: A Companion* ed. Lars Eckstein (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2007) 20-32.

allo stesso tempo offrendo un'alternativa al paradigma dicotomico del postcolonialismo.³⁵

In this light, the transcultural perspective may prove to be a viable alternative concept especially when dealing with works that might be inscribed within the wide family of the 'literature of mobility'. This literature includes those works of fiction particularly affected and shaped by migratory flows, exploratory/travelling drives, diasporic/exile conditions, expatriate statuses, postcolonial experiences, transnational movements, and, more recently, by the multiple trajectories of global nomads.³⁶ Alternatively called new nomads or neonomads, global nomads are postnational subjects whose mobility creates non-linear, seldom unpredictable flows of movement and who inhabit spaces (countries) through an alternative and alternating pattern of temporary deterritorialisations and reterritorialisations; this way, they tend to feel (better, 'are') at home in more than one country, in more than one place, expressing that kind of attitude that Henry James³⁷ first described when coining the term 'dispatiation', by that meaning 'a kind of detachment in viewpoint of, not severance of interest in, the birthland'.³⁸

The transcultural mode of being and the process of 'creative dispatiation'

In referring to the transcultural condition peculiar to certain writers, the terms transcultural and transculturalism (especially in comparison to multiculturalism and postcolonialism) are here used drawing mainly on Epstein's theorizations and views of 'transculture' as a mode of cultural individual development and transformation, namely 'a mode of being experienced at the crossroads of cultures'.³⁹ It is clear that the transcultural path tends to be highly personalised and inventive/original – there does not exist a common pattern, a common recipe, a common way of being transcultural – and that a transcultural constitution, that is the ability to negotiate between different cultural identities, depends on the specific individual capabilities/attitudes and experiential backgrounds. Nonetheless, the transcultural path allows a process of transformation – a metamorphosis – that even if played at an individual level can have a collective resonance. The concept of what can alternatively be described as a process of 'self-culturation' (the self-service of cultures for the formation of one's own cultural identity) echoes also Frank Schulze-Engler's understanding of Welsch's transculturality, with its open notion of cultural identity:

³⁵ 'The demolition of the traditional notion of culture, not meant anymore as an homogeneous entity, and the idea of thick interconnectedness and ongoing transformation generated by the concepts of transculturality and transculturalism open new theoretical horizons and new research paths, easing our effort to overcome the limits of literatures seen in national or regional terms and at the same time offering an alternative to the dichotomic paradigm of postcolonialism.' Sabrina Brancato, 'Transcultural Perspectives in Caribbean Poetry,' *Transcultural English Studies* ed. Schulze-Engler and Helff, author's translation.

³⁶ cf. Arianna Dagnino, *I nuovi nomadi: Pionieri della mutazione, culture evolutive nuove professioni* (Roma: Castelvecchi, 1996).

³⁷ Henry James, 'The Story-Teller at Large: Mr. Henry Harland,' *Fortnightly Review* April 1 (1898) 650-654, *Theory of Fiction: Henry James* ed. J.E. Miller (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1972) 56.

³⁸ Edna Kenton cited in *Henry James Against the Aesthetic Movement: Essays on the Middle and Late Fiction* ed. David Garrett Izzo and Daniel T. O'Hara (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2006) 33.

³⁹ Epstein, 'The Unasked Question,' 48.

Theories of ‘intercultural’ communication ... create the very problem they set out to solve: they posit ‘cultures’ as separate entities and people as ‘belonging’ to these separate entities, thereby failing to acknowledge the fact that in an increasingly interconnected world, cultures are increasingly intertwined and people often constitute their cultural identities by drawing on more than one culture.⁴⁰

Cultural transformations and interactions have always been part of human history but what we are facing now is an exponential growth in their dynamics and practices. As already stated, some writers have positioned themselves – by chance, by life circumstances, by intellectual curiosity or by sheer determination – at the forefront of contemporary transcultural encounters emerging from biographies and lifestyles that are no longer located in relatively stable/fixed cultural frameworks and where individuals find themselves to be negotiating, compromising (or in conflict with) several cultures on a daily basis, affecting their cultural dispositions and imaginations. These transcultural writers, highly sensitised towards the processes of cultural mediation, confluence and transformation, and whose readers are often marked by the same kind of cultural complexity and heterogeneity, seem to be living in a dimension without any fixed borders or whose geographic, cultural, national or homeland boundaries and allegiances are self-identified, self-chosen, and possibly impermanent, constantly recontextualised. In this regard, they might also be considered as *dispatriate*, *postnational* beings belonging to the community of ‘global souls’⁴¹ or *neonomadic* people on the move across the planet or through the frontier-less digital realm of micro- and macro-(symbolic) communications.

Even when declaring allegiance to one place, we seem to be always moving away from it ... Nationalities, ethnicities, tribal, and religious filiations imply geographical and political definitions of some kind, and yet, partly because of our nomad nature and partly due to the fluctuations of history, our geography is less grounded in a physical than in a phantom landscape. Home is always an imaginary place.⁴²

For the same reason, a writer in the Arabic and French language like Amin Maalouf, born in Lebanon, Christian rather than Muslim (and Malachite rather than Maronite), when asked about his identity and allegiance (that is, whether he feels “‘more” French or “‘more” Lebanese”), is compelled to answer: ‘Both! ... I am poised between two countries, two or three languages and several cultural traditions’.⁴³ It is not a subtraction (or denying) game, but an inclusive one: the notion that reduces identity to one single affiliation (...) encourages people to adopt an attitude that is

⁴⁰ Schulze-Engler, ‘Introduction,’ *Transcultural English Studies*, xii.

⁴¹ Pico Iyer, *The Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls and the Search for Home* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001).

⁴² Alberto Manguel, *The City of Words* (London: Continuum, 2008) 145.

⁴³ Amin Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity* (New York: Penguin, 2000) 1.

partial, sectarian, intolerant, domineering, sometimes suicidal, and frequently changes them into killers or supporters of killers.⁴⁴

In an interview with Bulgarian writer Ilija Trojanow, who grew up in Kenya and Germany, spent several years in India and South Africa before moving to Vienna, the author of *The Collector of Worlds* stressed the importance of the dispatiation process in attaining a transcultural mindframe:

For that to be true – and I understand what you mean – I think we should assume that the [transcultural] author you describe would need to have in himself a sense of where he comes from, a sense of origin, of order and of a new world. I'm sure there are many like that; when I look at them this definition usually describes a very clear-cut kind of persona, who has had an immigrational or transformational transnational experience (either the family came from somewhere else, or they reached another place) and a lot of the dynamics of his narrative are centred around these experiences.⁴⁵

For these writers dispatiation does not have any negative connotation except the dissociation from the nationalistic idea of *patria*, the fatherland. As Italian writer Enrico Palandri, who lived for many years in England, puts it:

ci sarà sempre più gente che trova naturale spostarsi e che non percepisce più il 'dispatrio' come una crisi d'identità nazionale ... Se si pensa al mondo antico, al Medioevo, al nostro Rinascimento o all'Illuminismo, si potrebbe pensare che è proprio nell'epoca racchiusa tra Leopardi e Meneghhello che si dà dispatrio; che in fondo prima dei romantici questa unità di lingua, cultura e geografia cui facciamo risalire l'idea di identità nazionale era incomprensibile e che forse domani non ci riguarderà più. Quale idea di spatrio o dispatrio c'è in Da Ponte, Casanova o Goldoni? In Shakespeare o persino in Milton? In Rabelais, Rousseau o Voltaire? In Ovidio o in Marziale? ... è piuttosto Foscolo, imbevuto di ideali nazionalisti, a chiamarlo esilio nel sonetto autobiografico A Zacinto.⁴⁶

Especially when associated with the adjective 'creative', dispatiation represents the assertion of the writer's freedom from the ties of cultural affiliations and national traditions as well from all those traumatic and distressing feelings (nostalgia,

⁴⁴ Maalouf 30.

⁴⁵ Trojanow, Interview.

⁴⁶ 'There will ever be more and more people who find natural to move and who do not perceive any longer "dispatiation" as a national identity crisis ... If we look at the ancient world, at the Middle Ages, at our Renaissance or at the Age of Enlightenment, we might think that it is exactly in the era between Leopardi and Meneghhello that we have dispatiation; that, after all, before the Romantics this unity of language, culture and geography from which we trace back the idea of national identity was incomprehensible and that perhaps tomorrow will not concern us any more. What idea of dispatiation is there in Da Ponte, Casanova or Goldoni? In Shakespeare or even in Milton? In Rabelais, Rousseau or Voltaire? In Ovid or in Martial? ... It is rather Foscolo, imbued with nationalist ideals, to call it exile in his autobiographical sonnet, A Zacinto.' Enrico Palandri, 'Seminario itinerante di Enrico Palandri,' Bordeaux, 20 marzo 2005. The abstract of the conference was published in *Bollettino '900* 1-2: 2007, <<http://www3.unibo.it/boll900/numeri/2007-i/>> (13th April 2010), author's translation.

estrangement, loss of memory, loss of one's sense of identity, loss of native language) generally associated with the migrating experience. In other words, in this case dispatiation rehabilitates, through its imaginative and creative power, that attitude of the polyglot writers *sans patrie* of the Enlightenment. By dispatiation I mean the process of distancing oneself more from one's own native or primary culture than from one's own national identity, even if, as we have seen, in many cases the two tend to coincide. In any case, as Franca Sinopoli and Silvia Tatti suggest:

Quel che se ne ricava è comunque una straordinaria esperienza di come le diverse forme del dispatio possano palesarci una significativa e nuova mondialità della letteratura contemporanea, quella che rende universalmente indispensabile riconoscersi ed arrivare a costruirsi una nuova identità attraverso altri territori, lingue e culture.⁴⁷

This generation of transcultural writers shares the fact that its creative dispatiation may have been acquired more or less consciously. Only now that this condition starts to be theorised and systematised, to the point of becoming a topic of academic research, we might perhaps expect that other (younger) writers might grow an interest in experimenting transculture by consciously dispatiating themselves, in order to use dispatiation as a creative tool. 'At what point is such a tool sought?' asked Australian author of Hungarian origins Inez Baranay during our interview:

It seems to me that dispatiation is the condition into which I was born, the condition I had to understand to make sense of my self in the world. Quite likely its gift has been a complexity of vision. And that has inevitably informed my writing. My dispatiation became a creative dispatiation when it began to inform the creative work: now one might understand it, in hindsight, as a tool.⁴⁸

What distinguishes these writers from their precursors and 'cousins' under the wider 'genus' of the literature of mobility is expressly their relaxed, neonomatic attitude when facing issues linked to displacement, rootlessness, nationality, cultural allegiance, and identity. Unlike in the past, these contemporary transcultural authors are not at odds with their destabilized, decentred selves. On the contrary, they aim at being culturally and/or geographically dislocated, or 'dispatiated', in order to gain a new perspective: on the world, on different cultures, on humanity and, ultimately, on themselves. They are not any more writers 'out of place' but 'in place', wherever they happen to be: 'Someone like me, I figured, could (for worse as much as better) fit in everywhere,' admits Pico Iyer.⁴⁹ They adapt, they change in accordance to the language and the customs of the place, they metamorphose till they blend in. 'I slide into the different

⁴⁷ 'What we get is however an extraordinary experience of how different forms of dispatiation might reveal us a new meaningful worldisation of contemporary literature, the one that makes universally essential to identify ourselves with and get to build a new identity through new territories, languages and cultures.' Franca Sinopoli and Silvia Tatti, *I Confini Della Scrittura: Il Dispatio Nei Testi Letterari* (Isernia: Cosmo Iannone Editore, 2005) 15, author's translation.

⁴⁸ Baranay, Interview.

⁴⁹ Iyer, 258.

languages that I know. I wear them depending on where I am,' remarks Trojanow.⁵⁰ And by adapting they spur their creativity along a path which is not yet set or clear-cut, but which tends to attract along its bends and straight stretches writers and readers who share certain life-patterns, experiences, views and sensibilities. In the opinion of Hong Kong-born Australian writer Brian Castro:

Hybridity, a mixture of forms, a mixture of character types and ethnicities, is what I bring to writing. It is what the 'I' is. A proliferation of selves. A juxtaposing of differences. *I am not only Portuguese, English, Chinese and French, but I am writing myself out of crippling essentialist categorisations, out of the control exerted over multiplicities* (emphasis in original).⁵¹

Transcultural sense of identity

If dispatriate transcultural writers show us what it means to live with a multiple sense of belonging, made of plural affiliations and a somewhat dispersed sense of allegiance (and of place/home), where the borders of a single nation are transcended in favour of a planetary view of humanity (and community),⁵² they also show us a new direction, a new solution to the eternal problem of identity. That is, the development and acquisition of a plural, flexible, metamorphical identity, with multiple states of belonging.

Mi chiedono delle mie radici. Ma io non sono un albero. Credo che il concetto di radici sia sopravvalutato. L'identità è piuttosto qualcosa di dinamico, è un concetto fluido, anche se molti ragionano soltanto in termini di appartenenza.⁵³

On the same wavelength, Alberto Manguel, born in Argentina and raised in Israel before wandering the globe, becoming a Canadian citizen and then moving to live in France, writes: Our identity, and the time and place in which we exist, are fluid and transient, like water.⁵⁴

To a certain extent, the cultural essence (or identity) is now represented by the paradoxical (or simply narrative) coherence of a transformational and constantly dynamic process of becoming, with its multiple entries and lines of flight. As Ellen Berry and Epstein point out, 'the goal becomes to "mutate" beyond any singular or

⁵⁰ Trojanow, Interview.

⁵¹ Brian Castro, 'Auto/biography', *Looking for Estrellita* (St Lucia, Qld.: University of Queensland Press, 1999) 115.

⁵² In this attitude transcultural writers are not dissimilar to the competent and 'genuine' cosmopolitans described by Hannerz (1990), for whom cosmopolitanism more than a charged political ideology or ideal is 'first of all an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other. It is an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness toward divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity. To become acquainted with more cultures is ... to view them as art works.' Ulf Hannerz, 'Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture,' *Theory Culture Society* 7 (1990) 239.

⁵³ 'They ask me about my roots, but I am not a tree. Identity is rather something dynamic, a fluid concept, even if many people tend to think only in terms of belonging.' Ilija Trojanow, 'Le identità in movimento. Incontro con Ilija Trojanow', *Infinite Storie*, 20 April (2007) 18 June 2011

<http://dh11.teligo.net/frames.speciali/speciali.asp?page=22&ID=568&searchString=author's translation>.

⁵⁴ Alberto Manguel, *A Reader on Reading* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010) 42.

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<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

bounded mode of cultural identity – even a hybridized identity – in order to “become transcultural”⁵⁵.

If expatriate/migrant writers were still concerned with the main question of ‘how to traverse, intellectually and emotionally, the distance between a familiar “here” and an alien “there”’,⁵⁶ transcultural writers have already traversed that space, they have already incorporated the stranger within themselves, they have already accepted or restored their inner Other. It is expressly upon these cultural crossings that their creative works are built; their novels are literary expressions of what it means to understand the nuances in cultural transactions and cultural transformations.

If I appear so keen on calling them transcultural, it is because in my view these mobile writers distance themselves and go beyond the politically and culturally constructed categories of the ‘migrant writer’, ‘ethnic writer’, ‘multicultural writer’, ‘Commonwealth writer’, ‘Writer of New literatures in English’ or ‘francophone writer’ that dominated the critical discourse of the late twentieth century. ‘So many of us at Binger were pressed to answer unanswerable questions about our identity and our work, did we feel more this or more that, where did we really belong, that kind of thing’, recounts Baranay recalling her last stay in Amsterdam as a participant in the Writers Program at Binger Film Lab, ‘Here I was among hyphenates and hybrids, and some of us now refused the available categories.’⁵⁷ It must be noted that transcultural writers hardly adhere to conventional forms of categorisation and, as Habel notes, even the hyphenated stratagem usually does not work with them:

Indeed, a focus on diaspora and globalisation rules out simplistic hyphenations suggested by terms like ‘Asian-American’ or ‘Asian-Canadian’, and this problem in itself is a point of discussion for many authors... acknowledging, analysing and even encouraging a diversity which disputes not only binaries such as East/West, but even the dominance of terms such as ‘diaspora’ and the easy hyphenations which pigeonhole authors, texts, and ultimately individuals.⁵⁸

Salman Rushdie, who could be inscribed within a transcultural discourse despite his having being alternatively and indiscriminately defined by critics and scholars as a migrant/exile/diasporic/postcolonial writer, commented as well on his annoyance about his invariably being ethnically labelled:

In my own case, I have constantly been asked whether I am British, or Indian. The formulation ‘Indian-born British writer’ has been invented to explain me. But ... my new book deals with Pakistan. So what now? ‘British resident Indo-Pakistani writer?’ You see the folly of trying to contain writers inside passports. One of the most absurd aspects of this quest for national authenticity is that ... it

⁵⁵ Berry, *Nomadic Desires* 130.

⁵⁶Richard F. Patteson, ‘Paul Bowles/Mohammed Mrabet: Translation, Transformation, and Transcultural Discourse,’ *Journal of Narrative Technique* 22.3 (1992) 180.

⁵⁷ Inez Baranay, ‘Chapter Six. Hyphenates and Hybrids: Amsterdam [city music],’ *Transition Zone: a Memoir of Cities, Friendships and the Writing Life*, 2011 (unpublished).

⁵⁸ Chad Habel, review of the book *China Fictions/English language: Literary Essays in Diaspora, Memory, Story* edited by A. Robert Lee (Rodopi, 2008), *Transnational Literature*, 2.2 (May 2010).

is completely fallacious to suppose that there is such a thing as a pure, unalloyed tradition from which to draw.⁵⁹

Rushdie's viewpoint is shared by Castro:

I was referred to as a Chinese author, an Asian-Australian, a foreigner who didn't subscribe to the Australian ethos, whatever that meant, and finally, ... misplacing the facts, as an Australian-born Chinese. It is interesting to see how the cross-cultural writer in other societies has also had to go through this frustrating assimilation. Salman Rushdie is sometimes an English writer but mostly an English-Indian writer or a writer from India who writes in English.⁶⁰

It must be noted that Rushdie had also explicitly refused to be categorised under the post imperial umbrella of the 'Commonwealth literature', a term that in his view 'is not used simply to describe ... but also *'to divide'*: 'At best,' he wrote, 'what is called "Commonwealth literature" is positioned below English literature "proper"—it places Engl. Lit. at the centre and the rest of the world at the periphery'.⁶¹ Pascale Casanova as well has deplored those British critics who, ignoring the ambiguity implicit in the notion of Commonwealth literature, did not take into consideration (or merely overlooked) Rushdie's refusal 'to be treated as a post imperial product, [he] was one of the first to repudiate the geopolitical assumptions of the new British taxonomy' and were instead ready to annex him under the British aegis in an act of literary misappropriation driven by the new postcolonial 'vogue for exoticism'.⁶²

Within the wider and more neutral realm of transculture writers can finally 'share a fundamental critique of narrow identitarian labeling'.⁶³ Any category is constructed but at least, despite the limitations inherent in any categorization, the one relating to transculture tries to overcome the ethnic, national, cultural, imperial or religious boundaries imposed by previous categorizations. Though this remark is most valid for those writers of mobility active in the realm of Anglophone literature (being the most widely diffused), it applies as well to any other transcultural writer writing in any other language whose work adheres to the contemporary canon of world literature. Moreover, this approach allows us to re-read through a new lens, as Claudia Esposito's study on Maghreb francophone writers shows us, those transnational authors who, despite having been alternatively labeled as migrant, exile, diasporic, ethnic or refugee, 'operate outside the confines of a nation and consequently address questions of multiple forms of cultural, political, sexual and existential belonging'.⁶⁴

If these transcultural writers tend to get rid of their ethnic and national categorizations, it is specifically because these categories are not dissimilar from those

⁵⁹ Salman Rushdie, 'Commonwealth Literature Does Not Exist', *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991) 67.

⁶⁰ Brian Castro, 'Writing Asia', *Looking for Estrellita* 158.

⁶¹ Rushdie 66.

⁶² Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004) 121.

⁶³ Claudia F. Esposito, 'Mediterranean Imaginaries: Writing Transcultural Subjectivities in Contemporary Francophone Literature,' diss., United States, Rhode Island: Brown University, 2007, 3.

⁶⁴ Esposito 5.

pre-existing, essentialised constructions of genre, race, class, sexuality, family relation or other such biographical classifications that have been defied and refused by the postmodern literary discourse and in an age where, as anthropologist Michael Herzfeld claims, ‘just about every other category has been deconstructed and reconstructed, or at least has self-destructed’.⁶⁵ This is how Baranay, who first published most of her works in Australia (while her last two novels were published first in India), addresses this issue:

What’s happened is that the multicultural in Ozlit has been given its own territory, its own separate colour in the mosaic. When *the mosaic not the melting pot* became the slogan it was the 1980s and multiculturalism was the intellectual, sociological and social-engineering fashion Then I declined the advice: ‘Write about your family, go find your roots, write about the old country with communism coming to an end and your life in the new country.’ ... Multiculturalism in Australian writing has become a useful term to identify migrant narratives and the explorations of identity related to that. It’s as if Australian writing is divided into the multicultural and the mainstream.⁶⁶

Though being themselves cosmopolitans and polyglots, explicitly disregarding political, national or linguistic affiliations in their search for literary autonomy, transcultural writers are not international writers in the way Casanova envisions and defines them in the worldwide reality of the literary space (her so-called World Republic of letters) – that is, writers who ‘draw upon ... [a] transnational repertoire of literary techniques in order to escape being imprisoned in national tradition’.⁶⁷ They are instead writers who work at an international or transnational level with a manifested, transcultural penchant – that is a specific lens, a peculiar way of adopting cultures, interfering with them, letting themselves be transformed by them and, ultimately, imaginatively writing about them. In this way they have started developing the modes and tropes of a concomitant emerging transcultural literature.

Conclusion

In our rapidly globalising world, cultures, as well as societies and identities, tend to be more fluid and intermingled, less irreducibly different and less ‘territorially fixed’ than in the past.⁶⁸ Especially now, when cosmopolitan issues and pluralistic sensibilities – driven by transnational and transcommunal experiences – tend to become more relevant⁶⁹. It is within this emerging social context that a new generation of mobile writers, on the move across cultural and national boundaries, has started expressing a

⁶⁵ Michael Herzfeld, ‘Practical Mediterraneanism: Excuses for Everything, from Epistemology to Eating,’ ed. William V. Harris, *Rethinking the Mediterranean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 46.

⁶⁶ Inez Baranay, ‘Multiculturalism, Globalisation and Worldliness: Origin and Destination of the Text,’ *JASAL* 3 (2004) 127-128.

⁶⁷ Casanova 327. Casanova also wrote that international writers are ‘cosmopolitans and polyglots who, owing to their knowledge of the revolutions that have taken place in the freest territories of the literary world, attempt to introduce new norms’ (110-111).

⁶⁸ Schulze-Engler, ‘Theoretical Perspectives’ 27.

⁶⁹ cf. John McLeod, ‘Sounding Silence: Transculturation and its Thresholds’, *Transnational Literature* 4.1 (November 2011).

‘transcultural’ sensibility and mode of being, fostered by ‘the process of self-distancing, self-estrangement, and self criticism of one’s own cultural identities and assumptions’.⁷⁰ In this article, I argue that the main element that distinguishes these early ‘transcultural writers’ from their precursors and/or ‘cousin species’ (migrant/exile/diasporic/postcolonial writers) – albeit all belonging to the wider ‘genus’ of ‘the literature of mobility’ – is their relaxed, neonomadic attitude when facing issues linked to identity, nationality, rootlessness and dislocation. It is an attitude that reflects itself also in their creative outputs, which can already be inscribed within the realm of ‘transcultural literature’, a literature able to ‘transcend the borders of a single culture in its choice of topic’, vision and scope, thus contributing to promote a wider global literary perspective.⁷¹

More than the stylistic solutions, which can belong to different literary genres and approaches, it is the intentions and the cultural dispositions of transcultural authors while writing their works of fiction that mostly count and should be taken into consideration when (at least initially) dealing with transcultural literature. It is by expressly analysing the lived experience of creative displacement, I argue, that we can also better understand the nature and the content of transcultural literary outputs – more attuned to current cosmopolitan and pluralistic sensibilities. It is not just a question of literary definitions and genres. It is instead a question of changing mindsets, different cultural approaches, heterogeneous identities, deterritorialising dynamics and, subsequently, of emerging new imaginaries that are being created in the process, through the active interaction between transcultural writers and transcultural readers. As Dominic Sachsenmaier points out, ‘In the near future, it will be a major intellectual, political and also economic challenge to harmonize claims to diversity with global commonalities and responsibilities’.⁷² Hence, the significance of a transcultural ‘transforming’ approach and experience, enhanced by (or simply conveyed through) its literary expressions, that instead of heightening conflicts and culture clashes promotes the value of ‘confluence’,⁷³ fruitful encounters and mutual respect; dismantling boundaries instead of erecting new barriers, encouraging a new sense of communality. As Welsch prompts us: We can transcend the narrowness of traditional, monocultural ideas and constraints, we can develop an increasingly transcultural understanding of ourselves.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Berry and Epstein, ‘In Place of a Conclusion’ 307.

⁷¹ Pettersson, Introduction 1.

⁷² Dominic Sachsenmaier, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt and Jens Riedel, ‘Multiple Modernities – the Concept and Its Potential’ ed. Sachsenmaier, Riedel and Eisenstadt, *Reflections on Multiple Modernities: European, Chinese and Other Interpretations* (Leiden; Boston, MA: Brill, 2002) 42.

⁷³ cf. Ilija Trojanow and Ranjit Hoskote, *Kampfabsages. Kulturen bekämpfen sich nicht – sie fließen zusammen* (Munich: Karl Blessing Verlag, 2007). ‘Confluences. Cultures don’t clash – they merge’; the unpublished translation in English was kindly made available by the authors.

⁷⁴ Welsch, Transculturality 201.