Inside/Out: Negotiating Multiple Identities in a Globalized Postcolonial World. Introduction

Madeleine Laurencin and Sneharika Roy

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ces/5158>
DOI: 10.4000/ces.5158
ISSN: 2534-6695

Publisher

SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 April 2014
Number of pages: 5-9
ISSN: 2270-0633

Electronic reference

Madeleine Laurencin and Sneharika Roy, "Inside/Out: Negotiating Multiple Identities in a Globalized Postcolonial World. Introduction", *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 36.2 | 2014, Online since 15 April 2021, connection on 19 July 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/5158> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.5158>

Commonwealth Essays and Studies is licensed under a Licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

Introduction

Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a *positioning*.

Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora"

Stuart Hall, one of the preeminent scholars of British cultural studies and postcolonial theory, passed away this February. So it is only fitting that we open this issue of *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* with a quote that is both an act of homage to Hall and a testimony to the continuing relevance of his ideas.¹ Hall's distinctive way of understanding "multiple identities" provides crucial definitions and a pertinent framework within which this volume's interrogations can be located:

I mean "multiple" in a very particular way. I don't hold with what I call the post-modern conception of the nomadic subject. I don't think that identity is what you get up in the morning and feel like being. I'm talking about something that is in between making it up and being just one thing unfolding, like the oak.

Instead of asking what are people's roots, we ought to think about what are their *routes*, the different points by which they have come to be now; they are, in a sense, the sum of those differences. That, I think, is a different way of speaking than talking about multiple personalities or multiple identities as if they don't have any relation to one another or that they are purely intentional. These routes hold us in places, but what they don't do is hold us in the same place. ("A Conversation with Stuart Hall," n.p.)

Hall's ideas echo other enlightening explorations of globalization such as James Clifford's roots/routes paradigm, Salman Rushdie's view of migrant identities in-the-making, and Edouard Glissant's theory of the Relation. However, it is Hall's cautionary note that is perhaps most pertinent, as it points to a source of tension that this volume of essays explores from different angles: not the mere fact of having multiple identities, but the strain arising from the shifting relationships between the multiple allegiances and identities one may bear. There is a difference between a "purely intentional" engagement with identity – following the long cosmopolitan tradition of "world history" reflected in the works of thinkers as diverse as Herodotus, St. Augustine, Condorcet, Herder, Hegel, and Marx (Kilminster 261-2) – and postcolonial identities that do "hold us in places" – identities born of inheritances of race, gender, colonialism, and diasporic experience. Rather than ironing out or subsuming different legacies, multiplicity becomes the often volatile "sum of those differences."

One of the ways of thinking about routes and relationships between identities is to focus on positionality, both spatial and ideological. How does one's identification with one set of racial, national, cultural or economic coordinates influence one's re-

1. Most of the essays presented here are revised versions of papers presented at an international seminar entitled "Inside/Out: Negotiating Multiple Identities in a Globalized World" held in November 2013 at University Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3.

relationships to the others? Multiple identifications create zones of overlap and friction that would seem to deny the subject any comfortable position of being an “insider” or an “outsider” in relation to a given social, cultural or political group, or an “imagined community,” to use Benedict Anderson’s term. As “inside” and “outside” become increasingly contingent terms (Whose outside? What set of values defines the inside?), identity itself becomes unstable, repeatedly subject to interrogation and relative positioning, constantly turned inside-out.

Two leading thinkers whose work reflects their ambivalent positions as insiders and outsiders are Edouard Glissant and Paul Gilroy. In “Black Postcolonial Communities in a Globalised World,” Sam Coombes points out that both Gilroy and Glissant are, to varying degrees, cultural outsiders and insiders in relation to mainstream British and French society respectively. Their critiques of Western modernity and the colonial project reflect a fundamentally ambivalent position: they are located inside specific local contexts (the black immigrants in Britain associated with the “black Atlantic,” the multicultural condition of Martinicans in the Caribbean, described as “creolisation”), but are also applied outside these communities as paradigms of the transnational and cross-cultural patterns of globalization.

Coombes’s theoretical exploration of two classic cases of black diasporic subjectivity is complemented by Elena Furlanetto’s essay which applies the postcolonial approach to a national context not usually considered within the purview of postcolonial studies, that of contemporary Turkey. In “Safe Spaces of the Like-Minded: The Search for a Hybrid Post-Ottoman Identity in Elif Shafak’s *The Bastard of Istanbul*,” Furlanetto draws attention to what she calls the “perceived colonization” experienced by the Turks due to the adoption and valorization of Western practices by the Ottomans and subsequently by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Furlanetto points out that both post-Kemalist Turkish nationalism and the minority discourse of Armenian nationalism depend on homogenizing constructs of the Other. They represent essentialist identities or “safe space[s] of the Self” that Shafak seeks to “otherize” and write back to by privileging “a multicultural notion of identity reminiscent of the [Ottoman] Empire’s societal model.”

The subsequent essays of Jennifer Randall, Ahmed Mulla, and Nabil Baazizi explore the diasporic condition of in-betweenness, drawing on the analyses of Homi Bhabha, Jacques Derrida, and Chinua Achebe. Jennifer Randall’s visually evocative title “Jostling with Borders” underscores the “complex interplay of polarity and in-betweenness” that marks the diasporic condition of the Indo-Canadian characters of Anita Rau Badami’s *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* Drawing from Mikhail Bakhtin’s notions of polyphony and Homi Bhabha’s reflections on liminality, Randall foregrounds the comic and tragic potential of the “power of distortion” unleashed when political and ideological boundaries of outside and inside are no longer clear-cut. She deploys Homi Bhabha’s distinction between diversity, predicated monolithic definitions of culture, and difference, which goes beyond a dualistic Self/Other paradigm to demonstrate that the violence of extremism and global terrorism “becomes a symptom of the impact *between* cultures as they shift from diversity to difference.”

Another approach is one which emphasizes the dynamics of hospitality and the power relationship between host and guest, as Ahmed Mulla demonstrates in his essay “Accommodating the Other or the Self?” Delicately interweaving Western and Indian perspectives on hospitality (Derridean theory and the *Laws of Manu*), Mulla unders-

cores the interaction between outside and inside by showing how notions of Self and Other, home and outside are at work in an act of hospitality. By focusing on moments of incomprehension, jealousy and “selfish hospitality” in Jhumpa Lahiri’s “Hema and Kaushik,” Mulla argues that one can be an outsider even within one’s own immigrant community. He thus concludes that “Lahiri deconstructs long established stereotypes regarding traditional societies’ tendency to offer disinterested hospitality.”

A final diasporic perspective is offered by Nabil Baazizi who focuses on the in-betweenness of V. S. Naipaul’s textual allegiances in “The (Hi)Story of a Pro-Western Very Eastern Story-teller.” *A Bend in the River*, Baazizi contends, can be seen as a rewriting of the Conradian archetype of Africa that appears in *Heart of Darkness* as well as a writing back to the West through strategies of misquotation and through a critique of contemporary European “junk” culture. Refusing easy categories of inside and outside, Baazizi underscores the fundamental ambivalence of Naipaul’s inside-out position observing that “Naipaul is neither simply ‘one of us’ (nationalist Third World writers) nor ‘one of them’ (his metropolitan Anglo-American readers), to use Jane Kramer’s terms.”

While the first four essays explore the intersections between race, nation, and the colonial inheritance, those by Myriam Moïse and Jennifer Rideout foreground the significance of gender in postcolonial configurations of multiple identities. In “(Un)Disciplining Bodies and Tongues, Performing Cultural Schizophrenia,” Moïse proposes a dialogue between the work of African Caribbean Canadian writers M. NourbeSe Philip and Olive Senior, structured around the trope of schizophrenia. Building on the theories of schizophrenia articulated by Frantz Fanon, Gilles Deleuze, and Derek Walcott, Moïse sets up a series of dialectic pairs that stage inside/outside dynamics: subjectivity/corporeality, discursive/physical, imagined/“real,” but above all, discourse as defined by patriarchal and colonial legacies and the female liberation beyond this discourse. Moïse’s emphasis on the corporeal is complemented by Rideout’s focus on the allegorical. In “Toward a New Nigerian Womanhood,” Rideout undertakes a close reading of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* in order to interrogate the Nigerian nationalist construction of the female postcolonial subject. Drawing on Joyce M. Chadya’s observations on “mother politics” during liberation struggles, Rideout shows how the female protagonist Olanna both reaffirms the patriarchal discourse of women as maternal figures and goes beyond it by assuming leadership roles during the Nigerian Civil War. Rather than a rejection of the traditional in favor of the modern, the postcolonial female condition involves a redefinition of womanhood itself.

The closing triad of essays by Mélanie Heydari-Malayeri, Christine Lorre-Johnston, and Jan Cronin broadens the discussion on inside/out subjectivities by reminding us that these dynamics are not limited to the diasporic or postcolonial condition, but extend to literature and its use of language. In “‘Almost the same, but not quite’: Masks and Mimicry in Vikram Seth’s *An Equal Music*,” Heydari-Malayeri deploys Bhabha’s theory of transgressive cultural imitation that is “almost the same, but not quite,” in order to read *An Equal Music* as a creative “reprise” of Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations*. Going against the grain of conventional readings of the novel, she argues that underneath its “smooth, apolitical” surface, it is, in fact, fissured with postcolonial anxieties related to accents, linguistic norms, and metatextual reflections on the creation of an “original” text through the imaginative rewriting the Victorian tradition.

Lorre-Johnston focuses on similar tensions between European intertexts and their postcolonial reception in the Canadian context. In “Alice Munro’s *Who Do You Think You Are?* as Cultural Moment: Colonial Culture Turned Inside Out” she focuses on the changing reactions of the short story cycle’s characters to cultural artefacts created in the successive contexts of the Victorian era, modernism, and postmodernism. The dialectics of inside/out allow Lorre-Johnston to bring to the surface the interplay between “material” and symbolic” culture as theorized Raymond Williams in Monroe’s short stories. Thus, vases, paintings, buildings, even Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” and foul language become culturally significant sites, because they reveal the transformations in Canadian society in relation to attitudes towards high- and low-class status, home and imperial markets, colonial culture and North American counter-cultures of modernism and postmodern camp.

Lorre-Johnston’s concluding reflections on language pave the way for Jan Cronin’s rhetorical study of tropes in “‘What is’t that ails young Harry Gill?’ Containers, Contents, and Composition in Janet Frame’s *In The Memorial Room*.” Drawing on contemporary interpretations of Roman Jakobson’s theory of metaphor and metonymy, Cronin argues that the eponymous protagonist’s ailments are “vehicles” that are contiguous with, and thematize, metalinguistic concerns with expression. His maladies can be seen as “containers (sight/blindness, sound/deafness)” [that] are contiguously linked with the contents they enact (perception and expression).” The metonymic tensions between external reality, internal perception, and figurative expression are seen by Cronin as the novel’s major contribution to Frame’s “predominantly metaphoric” oeuvre.

This collection of essays casts the dynamics of inside-out in various lights, spanning a range of geographical contexts and engaging with an array of issues, from rewriting and mimicry to ailments and hospitality. What the authors subtly highlight here is the fecundity of analysis generated by an approach stressing politics of location in terms of inside/outside. Its potency, paradoxically, lies in its heuristic capacity to invite us to see inside and outside as co-defining forces that hold within them the possibility of their own dissolution and transcendence. In other words, multiple identities in a globalized world “hold us in places” but “not in the same place,” to use Hall’s turn of phrase. Coombes concludes, for example, that when locations are simultaneously local and global, “what is inside is simultaneously outside and what is outside simultaneously inside.” Heydari-Malayeri asserts that “Vikram Seth is too complex to be summed up in simple, adamant dichotomies like home/abroad, inside/outside, and same/other.” Furlanetto affirms that Shafak not only “subscribe[s] to Bhabha’s conviction that it is “the *in-between*, the space of the *entre* that carries the burden of the meaning of culture,” [...] she also considers in-betweenness an identity as such.” Similarly, Baazizi observes that “Naipaul himself represents the best example of what Bhabha calls “*a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*.” Randall demonstrates that Badami’s “characters’ tragic in-betweenness is enhanced by the inter-connectedness of world events.” Such are the complexities of a globalized world, that Mulla philosophically concludes: “because one’s identity is determined by the Other’s intentions, it is finally impossible to know oneself inside-out.”

Rideout offers a more affirmative, political reading in the context of the Nigerian postcolonial female subject: “Only by ‘coming in’ from ‘the outside’ could Olanna, and by extension, Nigerian women, redefine womanhood in those changing times.” Moise,

focusing on the politics of the body, sees feminist postcolonial literature as a Deleuzian “mixture of bodies, and inside the body, interlocking and penetration.” Lorre-Johnston, for her part, relocates the inside/out paradigm in the context of aesthetic and cultural history. She reminds us that modernism turned realism inside-out and that our postmodern hyperspace is marked what Fredric Jameson calls “the strange feeling of an absence of inside and outside.” On a more metaphysical level, Cronin draws our attention to the ways in which mental images and language enact the “serial removal from ‘truth,’” which remains, as the eponymous character puts it, “like a star, outside the human mind.”

Thus, nestled with inside/outside dynamics is the non-essentialist stance of the in-between—but also the liberating potential of the “beyond.” Each of these essays makes the case in favor of moving beyond identity constructs towards a more inclusive, but also at times unstable and unsettling, definition of selfhood. In this sense, they corroborate Bhabha’s intuition that “the beyond” is the “trope of our times,” a realm in which we tend to locate the question of culture. The essays capture the “exploratory, restless movement” of “post” in “postcolonialism,” the tension in “the French words *au-delà*—here and there, on all sides, *fort/da*, hither and thither, back and forth” (2). Perceived as a handicap of history, the in-between inside-outside position of the postcolonial and diasporic subject opens up alternative horizons of the beyond, a piercing analogy of which can be found in the hearing disability of Julia, a musician who gradually succumbs to deafness in *An Equal Music*. “There is something tender and indefinably strange and searching about her playing, as if she is attending to something beyond my hearing.”

Madeleine LAURENCIN

University Sorbonne Nouvelle—Paris 3

Sneharika ROY

Institute of Political Science, Lille

Works Cited

- ANDERSON, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. 1983. London: Verso, 1991.
- BHABHA, Homi. “Introduction: Locations of Culture.” *The Location of Culture*. 1994. London: Routledge, 2008. 1–27.
- CLIFFORD, James. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard UP, 1997.
- GLISSANT, Edouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Trans. Betsy Wing. 1997. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2003. Trans. of *Poétique de la relation*. Paris: Gallimard, 1990.
- HALL, Stuart. “Cultural Identity and Diaspora.” 1990. *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Patrick Williams, and Laura Chrisman. New York: Columbia UP. 1994. 395.
- . “A Conversation with Stuart Hall.” *The Journal of the International Institute*. 17.1 (Fall 1999). 30 March 2014 < <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.4750978.0007.107>>.
- KILMINSTER, Richard. “Globalization as an Emergent Concept.” *The Limits of Globalization: Cases and Arguments*. Ed. Alan Scott. London: Routledge, 1997. 257–83.
- RUSHDIE, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism: 1981–1991*. 1991. London: Granta, 1992.