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Introduction

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Introduction

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The articles in this special edition of *Transtext(e)s* were all originally presented as papers at *Cultures in Transit*, the first conference of the Institute of Transcultural and Diasporic Studies, held at Liverpool Hope University in July 2008. The broad theme of the conference produced an extraordinary variety of discussions both in terms of geographical range and methodological approach, and something of that diversity is represented in this volume. This collection is predicated on the assumption that culture, broadly defined as the memory, traditions, practices and expressions of a particular group, is both dynamic and of intrinsic value. Key challenges are globalisation with its threat of homogenisation in the interests of economic gain, the survival and dynamic development of diaspora communities which are neither fossilised by a static allegiance to their country of origin nor swallowed up by the dominant national culture within which they find themselves, and finally the false authenticity appropriated by the dominant culture in a given national group which threatens the minority culture or cultures.

The first of these challenges, the threat of globalisation, is addressed by Alain Suberchicot, who makes an emphatic claim for the role and value of culture, while acknowledging that it is not independent from existing social realities and economic factors. Suberchicot argues that a definition of culture should include ethical value and that to have such value culture must extend beyond mere buying and selling. Universities must have a key role in preserving an ethically informed culture distinct from mere economics, particularly by the promotion of humanistic values, as opposed to technological specialisation. Suberchicot considers Jacques Derrida's contribution of particular importance, highlighting Derrida's advocacy of democracy as an ethical good. He sees universities as providing a vehicle for the

value of amity and of mutual respect between teachers and students, who should each allow the other to fulfil his or her potential of self-development.

In their article on Mongolia, Dillon, P. Bayliss, Stope and L. Bayliss explore some of the implications of the role of universities, demonstrating the way in which an academic undertaking can easily become a factor contributing to the harmful effects of globalisation. In their study they consider the application of urban-generated western sociocultural theory (predicated on pre-defined structures) to the nomadic pastoral society of Mongolia. They highlight the difference in between western theories of knowledge which are strongly linear and diachronic, and work towards a preconceived goal, and, on the other hand, Mongolian theories which are much more dynamic and space- and landscape-orientated, and adapt human behaviour to changing times and landscapes in ways which are often unpredictable. Their work with Mongolian teachers demonstrated the total inappropriateness of the concept of planned learning outcomes for a society which embraces the concepts of *arga* and *bilig* – the visible and invisible aspects of the potentiality of objects and phenomena. They suggest that Buddhist and Lamaist traditions provide a way of reconciling the gap between experiential education in rural schools and higher education in the cities. While the latter presents concepts, the former creates an ongoing understanding of the concepts through experience.

Elaine Sideri approaches the effects of globalisation through a study of the concept of diaspora. She argues that diasporas are always context-dependent in terms of their relationship to the imagined centre. She illustrates this by reference to the Butami Greeks in Georgia, which also exposes contradictions about the way diasporas are perceived by the centre and by the dispersed communities. A reconsideration of the definitions of diaspora and related concepts such as utopia, dystopida, heterotopia and nostalgia may provide a way of maintaining the transnational prerequisites of the economic landscape while preserving cultural identities and difference.

Amongst the articles, which directly address specific diasporic communities, it is hardly surprising to find one about one of the oldest and most widely spread diasporic phenomena. Keeping in line with Sideri's argument that diasporas are always context-dependent, Devorah Romanek's study on material culture in Jewish diasporic communities in London and Berlin, focuses on two very specific examples within the worldwide Jewish diaspora. Romanek's paper, which is the product of research into attitudes to Jewish bakeries and baked goods in the Jewish communities of both cities, reveals the importance of bread as an agent ensuring identity among both religious and non-religious Jews. It examines the differing effects of context, whereby the larger and more self-confident Jewish community in

London exhibits less concern with bakery loyalty and product characteristics. This study reveals how bagels have become a reference point between cultures becoming distinctly less and less exclusive to the Jewish community. This also mirrors the similar cultural process by which certain kinds of oriental dishes become assimilated into their host community.

Context as well as the relationship of the margin to the centre is also significant in Anca Balcanu's analysis of media's representation of the Romany population of Romania. Examples from the Romanian press tell a story already familiar to western readers, narrating the tension between assimilation and the recognition of differences. However, Balcanu points out another pitfall related to diasporas: the danger of reifying what is essentially a heterogeneous group. While many within Romania discriminate against Romanies referring to them by the derogatory term 'tigan', others in the western nations of the EU are guilty of an exoticisation of the Romany community which is equally distorting. Nevertheless, Balcanu points out that Romany music and dancing have been gradually absorbed into the mainstream popular culture. The author concludes the paper with the tantalising possibility of a minority culture radically changing a mainstream one.

While the European Romany minority is a recognised diasporic group, other circumstances have given rise to hybrid communities including those where comparatively late immigrants compose the majority of the population. Brian Castro writes movingly about his position as a self-constructed hybrid writer and about his cultural rejection of Australian myths of identity. He sees this identity as rooted in a denial of the wrongs of the country's past, including its appropriation of the land, which has created a myth of authenticity. Castro sees the role of writers as vital in the challenge to such false authenticity. The writer, by means of his/her very impersonation and playfulness, is capable of constructing a resistance space for utterances which are prophetic, subversive, ironic and critical. Castro sees the significance of the role of writers in this denial of claims of national authenticity, while simultaneously finding space to understand what he calls the truths of others. Jennifer Rutherford's article continues the focus on Australian mythmaking with a peculiar example. Her case study of the rise and fall of Pauline Hanson, the founder of Australia's One-Nation party, demonstrates the way in which the familiar events and roles of a myth-like story are used to both stabilise and render acceptable the unacceptable, in this case the racist rejection of the other. Hanson's story, or rather the opposition of mythical narrative and real events, enables the Australian nation to create the fictional space in which it can at once believe itself to be a good and generous nation while continuing its antipathy to the feminine, the intellectual, the indigenous and the foreign. Her essay illustrates the way in which this traditional

European form is adapted in the service of New World monoculturalism, a kind of monoculturalism which is also visible across Europe.

Another example of an identity based on a near-mystical association with territory, as well as the sense of victimhood exploited by Pauline Hanson, is manifested in the complexities of minority identities represented by the Sudeten Germans and their association with *volkisch*-nationalism, and with Germany's Nazi past. Guy Tourlamain's chapter on the work and continuing reputation of the Sudeten German writer Erwin Kolbenheyer explores the racial significance of the German concept of *Heimat* (home) and its association with the *volkisch* writers of the first half of the twentieth century. Kolbenheyer's continuing popularity in post-war Germany is proof of the survival of this form of nationalism, which drew strength from the self-representation of Sudeten German exiles as victims of the Czech authorities, the peace settlement at the end of the war, and the perceived 'Americanisation' of the West German state. At the same time his belief that he was answerable only to the German *Volk* contributed to an avoidance of debates regarding the history of the Third Reich.

All the articles in the present volume assert that culture is indeed in transit, across time and space. In fact it always has been, but the developments of technology have had the effect of telescoping both dimensions, so that significant changes are perceived within a given lifespan or even a generation, and cultures are transported physically or virtually across enormous distances. Cultural dynamism is to be welcomed. When cultures fossilise they cease to have real value and become an easy prey to economic and political powers which as some of these essays demonstrate can exploit culture for their own purposes. Culture, like all forms of human expression, is dependent on the concepts of identity and difference. We sincerely hope the essays in this volume will make some contribution to the task of working out a path between the over-assertion of a difference which is divisive, and the imposition of an identity, be it a national political identity or a global commercial identity which denies difference.