

“Transculturality in the Diaspora: Spaces – Cultures – Identities”

**Institut für Postkoloniale und Transkulturelle Studien
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A Conference Report with a Personal Note

I am of recent adoption both to Germany and the German academic community. As a newcomer, I am still in the process of exploring the new terrain, still trying to grasp and translate the dynamics of interaction of my new home. Meanwhile, I observe the landscape around me from a safe distance and try to make myself as invisible as possible, performing the ambivalent function of outsider/voyeur which is a common feature in the first phase of the immigrant's integration into the host country. For various reasons I now feel that the Bremen conference has marked a change in my position.

This was the third conference I had attended in Germany and thus far, my favourite. Firstly, rather than a conference, this was actually a workshop: not too many people, no parallel sessions, a small and comfortable venue, as well as a cooperative and friendly spirit reminiscent of school group work. Additionally, several elements contributed to making me overcome the usual feeling of being 'out of place' (in the literal sense) and culturally alienated. I was hosted together with three other colleagues from Frankfurt in a nice apartment in a building which looked like a ship. From my bed, through large windows, I could see the river on both sides, something which immediately reconciled me with my dislocation (where I come from, water is essential to beauty and happiness). The proximity to Frankfurt colleagues in a site other than the usual office, the late-night pyjama talks – which extended the orthodox academic perspective on transculturality to the most intriguing anecdotes in our biographies – added a sense of comradeship which we hadn't yet experienced. Then, to my delight, I discovered that several conference participants spoke Romance languages, which gave me a sense of connection which had proven difficult for me to find in my anglophone performance (following up one of the main ideas that emerged during the conference, that of identity as performance... but let me say that some performances are more performed than others and the degree of familiarity with the context is a key issue). Last but not least, the interdisciplinary perspective of the conference proved especially stimulating and restored a sense of the pragmatic which I sometimes find lacking both in the literary field and in my life.

Now let me start from the beginning...

On Thursday evening, after being warmly welcomed by the conference organizers, who stressed the importance of intellectual engagement in a transnational world which sometimes takes the ugly shape of violent confrontation (the recent

murder of Dutch film director Theo van Gogh and the consequent attacks on Islamic schools and mosques in the Netherlands could not be forgotten on such an occasion), we were emotionally and intellectually charmed by key-note speaker Khachig Tololyan, who gave a light-hearted and nevertheless poignant lecture on the discourses of diaspora in different disciplines. He looked at diasporic ‘contagion’, not in the sense of disease but rather as a positive quality, suggesting the speed with which something spreads and the mutual power of adaptation and transformation of both guest and host. He explored diaspora as a term in language, a concept and a social formation designated by that term, and reminded us of the necessity to separate intra-communal concepts from those generated by scholars (we academics are enthusiastic about diaspora, he said, but in certain places the term is still problematic). Tololyan argued that diaspora has been mistakenly associated with mobility, while it follows instead a logic of sedentary networking. After enumerating a series of qualities characterizing diasporic communities, he finally stressed the element of self-representation and naming (Am I that name? Am I a diaspora? Does one need a self-consciousness of being diasporic to be called so?) and the importance of scale and speed in the development of diasporas.

The second day was quite intense and equally rewarding. After a hearty breakfast our brains were set off with theoretical questions. Frank Schulze-Engler addressed the transgressive and the transcendent in transcultural thought. He started by clarifying the confusion around terminology (transculturality is not the same as transculturation, the latter term dating back to the 1940s in the field of anthropology) and went on exploring the concrete modes of making the transcultural operative in literary studies, distinguishing between specific areas such as writers, readers and texts. Patrick Williams focused on transcultural aspects in the work of three Palestinian intellectuals – Edward Said, Mahmoud Darwish and Naji Al-Ali – and explored the continuing ‘nakba’ (catastrophe) suffered by a people forced to endure not only territorial but also ontological, narrative, dialogic and ethical dispossession. After lunch at the Krankenhaus Café (strange place for a conference meal, but large enough to accommodate all of us and not bad after all), the rest of the day was devoted to African diasporas. Sérgio Costa glanced through the meanings of the Black Atlantic, in the empirical-descriptive and the political-normative sense, complementing Gilroy’s work by pointing out the asymmetries of power within the Black Atlantic in the specific case of the Afro-Brazilian community (Brazil has the largest population of African descent outside Africa). An interesting insight into French and English tales of the slave trade was then offered by François Poirier, who, looking at both white and black traders, raised the politically delicate question of the continuity between the African structures which sustained slavery as well as the slow and stumbling development of the continent. With a charisma all of her own, Michelle Wright explained how blackness was invented by Western philosophers between the 18th and the 19th century and how this notion has been contested by a counter-discourse of black intellectuals in the diaspora (particularly interesting, but unfortunately not extensively developed for lack of time, was her interrogation of Afro-German subjectivities). Finally, to close the evening on a

positive note, a couple of videoclips to illustrate how British media are popularising cultural diversity were offered by Barbara Korte, who took *White Teeth* (the novel and the TV adaptation) as a prototypical multicultural narrative whose pluri-vocalism and rejection of essentialism open the way to a post-racial, post-post-colonial paradigm. Not many among the audience could share the optimism of Blair's 'New Britannia', but it was already dinner time and a large table was waiting for us at the *Cargo* (an apt venue for a diasporic meal).

The morning of the third day was dedicated to anthropological perspectives, which stressed the performative element in the enactment of ethnic collective identity. Patricia Alleyne-Dettmers, who charmed us with her enthusiasm and shared with us significant episodes of her childhood in Trinidad, offered a case study of the Afro-Caribbean diasporic celebration of Carnival on the streets of Notting Hill, England; a performance which reconstructs in an interstitial space a sense of heritage and community. Jacques Galinier examined the ways in which the urban phenomenon of Aztec cultural revival in Mexico City is being assimilated into local Indian communities, providing an example of how the performative becomes 'authentic'. It was then time for lunch and some of us, in search of 'transcultural authenticity' (what a contradiction in terms!), ended up in a Spanish *bodega* with Italian signs and English-looking dishes. A short walk through the weekend market restored our sense of place, though not of time (where strange medieval personages were engaged in masterful efforts to catch our attention). In the afternoon, Dirk Klopper explored the context of Afrikaner identity in post-apartheid South Africa based on the work of Antje Krog and argued that the European in Africa is not necessarily in a secure position of domination. The last paper on schedule was for me the most interesting given my remoteness to the discipline of geography. Sue Ruddick pointed out the absence of diaspora in geographical discourse in spite of the profound impact that the reality of diaspora is actually making on geographic thought, producing destabilizations and raising new questions in the practice of 'earth writing'.

In the final discussion Gisela Febel made things easy for the rest of us by meticulously summing up what had been said in eight points which I would like to report, albeit briefly: 1) We had been talking above all about strategies and tactics enacted in diasporic situations; 2) The question was raised on how to talk about transcultural identity, if we can still talk about identity at all. Perhaps we can only do it in terms of performance, identification processes or everyday practices of renegotiation; 3) Discussing transcultural and diasporic spaces brings in the question of empowerment, strategies of exclusion and inclusion, and we should continue thinking about that; 4) We looked at cultural strategies of empowerment and discussed the possibility of transcultural policy and agency; 5) The question of the economy of transculturalism, together with the performing and strategic quality of the transcultural, has to be seen in relation to migration and the process of modernity; 6) An important element considered was the sense of memory and history in diasporic practices; 7) We should continue to rethink the concepts we were using and what diaspora means in relation to transculturality. To do so, inter-

disciplinary work is needed (perhaps we can start talking of a ‘pseudo-transculturality’); 8) Two levels of transculturality have been addressed: the transcultural situation in a postcolonial context and the transculturality of the new migration, coming back or going away in a new diaspora.

A lively discussion followed among participants and several other questions were raised: the numerous challenges posed by transculturalism, which are exploding notions of cultures; the ways in which transculturalism can inform the moves of cultural communities; the possibility of transcultural perspectives in political processes of negotiation; the on-going struggle for a transcultural vocabulary which privileges the plural; the need to come to terms with the obsolete nature of the old notion of culture as possession; the political strategies of making the transcultural space visible... . The discussion would have continued, had not an explosion of fireworks saluted our crowd from the river bank. We rushed to the terrace to enjoy the show and our conference came to an end.

I would like to thank Professors Thomas Rommel, Gisela Febel, Sabine Broeck and their wonderful team for these three very special days. And let me say, from my position of displacement, that a magic spell was cast on me during this conference giving me a sense of being at home which was very deeply felt and needed.

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