Post-National Enquiries:
Essays on Ethnic and Racial Border Crossings

Edited by

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CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS

PUBLISHING

Post-National Enquiries: Essays on Ethnic and Racial Border Crossings, Edited by Jopi Nyman
This book first published 2009

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-0593-9, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-0593-3

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The essays in this volume are rooted in the symposium *Post/National Enquiries: Borders, Migrants and the State* arranged jointly by the University of Joensuu and MESEA: Multi-Ethnic Studies in Europe and the Americas in Joensuu, Finland in June 2007. I should like to express my gratitude to our guest speakers, all participants, and especially Dr Dorothea Fischer-Hornung, the President of MESEA, for making this meeting a highly successful event. I should also like thank the Fulbright Center in Helsinki and the Academy of Finland (project 205780) for financial assistance, and the Department of Foreign Languages and Translation Studies at the University of Joensuu for their support.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

JOPI NYMAN

The notions of border and border crossings have been widely used in literary and cultural studies since the 1980s. While some of their applications have tended to decontextualize and depoliticize the terms, recasting them as liberating and transgressing tropes, the concepts should not be dismissed and trivialized, not least because of their ability to advance our thinking on various transcultural and post-colonial cultural phenomena. In other words, the subject inhabiting a space between two—or more—different cultures has special characteristics and challenges the traditional model locating the subject in one particular nation-state and culture. As Johan Schimanski and Stephen Wolfe put it in their attempt to construct a poetics of the border, "we are always situated in relation to the border, and there is never one perspective from which we can take in the whole border from all sides."[1]

The multiplicity of perspectives and the general presence of borders in human life characterizes D. Emily Hicks's description of Latin American writing as a form of "border writing" in her groundbreaking study *Border Writing: The Multidimensional Text* (1991). As Hicks writes:

> much contemporary Latin American literature is a literature of borders: cultural borders between Paris/Buenos Aires and Mexico City/New York, gender borders between women and men, and economic borders between dollar-based and other-currency-based societies. Border writing, in a Latin American context, presents the cultures of Europe and the United States in their interaction with Latin American culture rather than as fundamental cultural models. In border writing, the subject is decentered and the object is not present or immediate but displaced. Border writers re-present that

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[1] Johan Schimanski and Stephen Wolfe, "Entry Points: An Introduction," *Border Poetics De-Limited*, ed. Johan Schimanski and Stephen Wolfe (Hannover: Wehrhahn, 2007), 11.

> attitudes [sic] toward objects as they exist in more than one cultural context.[2]

For Hicks, the presence of various borders has created a "border subject," whose "border writing" may be able to challenge the colonizing and monologic views promoting the aesthetic and cultural values of Western culture and its alleged global hegemony:

> It hints at the subversive nature of this writing, a writing that disrupts the one-way flow of information in which the United States produces most of the mass-media programming in the world and thereby controls the images of itself as well as those of other countries. North American critics of Latin American literature must realize that to continue to stress the "magical" or even certain postmodernist aspects of Latin American literature is to deny the larger, broader understanding of reality that informs these texts.[3]

What Hicks sees as a creation of postmodern discourse, post-colonial theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha have addressed as an effect of cultural hybridity, as a Third Space where the cultures and values of both the colonizer and the colonized transform into something new; for Hicks "[t]he border crosser is both 'self' and 'other.'"[4] In Bhabha's view, this space is one of liminality and in-betweenness that transforms the identity of migrants and others passing through it—thus the idea of border crossing is at the same time attractive and frightening, promising a new identity to the subject but also threatening them with change.[5]

While the theorizations of critics such as Bhabha, Hicks, and Paul Gilroy have generated a powerful critical discourse addressing intercultural phenomena in literary and cultural texts, the need to focus on the realities and experiences of actual border crossers in their various concrete historical and cultural contexts has also emerged. It is the aim of this volume to present and analyze such instances where the values of allegedly homogeneous nations and cultures are interrogated and reconstructed. This volume, stemming from an international symposium

[2] Emily D. Hicks, *Border Writing: The Multidimensional Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), xxv.
[3] Ibid., xxviii.
[4] Ibid., xxvii.
[5] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 4. See also Joel Kuortti and Jopi Nyman, "Introduction: Hybridity Today," *Reconstructing Hybridity: Post-Colonial Studies in Transition*, ed. Joel Kuortti and Jopi Nyman (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 1-18.

organized at the University of Joensuu in Finland,[6] consists of four parts exploring different aspects of cultural, "racial," and ethnic border crossings.

In the first part of the volume, the emphasis is on questions of "race" and attempts to transcend and cross the borders of racial thinking and practice. In the essay opening the section, Tuire Valkeakari provides a critical overview on the role of "race" in the early work of the British critical theorist Paul Gilroy. In her analysis of the development of Gilroy's thinking Valkeakari pays particular attention to Gilroy's critique of purisms and suggests that his texts from *"There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack"* (1987) to *Against Race* (2000) represent a continuum that is both developing and organic. Valkeakari distinguishes three central claims peculiar to Gilroy's thinking: the contextual specificity of racisms, critique of nationalisms, and the role of the black diaspora. More recently, Valkeakari suggests, Gilroy has sought to recast racial thinking and emphasize utopian impulses.

In the second essay Baron Kelly sets out to examine the role of actors of color in dramatic productions where white actors have traditionally been the norm. While traditional interpretations of such cases have been colorblind and the actor of color playing a white role has been seen as merely passing, Kelly argues for the need to contextualize casting practices in the discourses of race and ethnicity. By using the terminology created by the Non-Traditional Casting Project (NTCP), Kelly discusses the development of non-traditional theatre with particular reference to the United States. What is important in Kelly's analysis of cross-cultural casting is his focus on the theatre as institution, rather than on merely individual productions.

The third essay in the first part is Pekka Kilpeläinen's analysis of the utopian elements in James Baldwin's fiction. With particular reference to Baldwin's rarely studied late novel *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968), Kilpeläinen presents a critical discussion of the ways in which the novel seeks to transcend the boundaries of race and sexuality in order to posit what he calls a "postcategorical utopia." In Kilpeläinen's reading of the novel problems of interracial love and normative heterosexuality are probed and transgressed. Unlike earlier critics of the novel, Kilpeläinen argues that the novel participates in Baldwin's more general attempts to criticize dominant social categorizations.

[6] Post/National Enquiries: Borders, Migrants and the State: A MESEA Symposium, University of Joensuu, Finland 15-16 June, 2007.

The essays in the second part of the book address a variety of boundary crossings and cultural interaction in the North American context with a particular focus on whiteness. While the first two essays, by Yiorgos Kalogeras and Roy Goldblatt, investigate the immigrant's transformation from "ethnic" to "white" in the twentieth century, Cathy Covell Waegner's essay explores the representation of historical cross-cultural encounters in the fiction of Toni Morrison.

Yiorgos Kalogeras explores the construction of white identity in Elia Kazan's autobiographical film *America, America* (1963), a film about early 20th-century immigration from the Ottoman Empire to the United States. In his reading of the film's projections of identity, Kalogeras shows its ambiguity of identity positions and argues for an interpretation that takes into account the film's multiple generic, autobiographical, cultural, and historical contexts. Ultimately, Kazan's construction of Anatolian identity reflects the privileging of postethnicity distancing Kazan from his Greek heritage.

Roy Goldblatt's essay focuses on the changing representation of mothers and their children in 20th-century Jewish American fiction. In his historical reading of texts representing three distinct phases in the development of Jewish American identity and its gradual "whitening," Goldblatt suggests that the disappearance of community and the increased problems in communication between family members are signs of Jewish assimilation into mainstream American individualism.

In the third essay in this section, Cathy Covell Waegner studies Toni Morrison's new novel *A Mercy* (2008) set in the 17th century. In her reading of the novel Waegner pays particular attention to the ways in which *A Mercy* focuses on the racial and ethnic underpinnings of the formation of the United States by imagining an era of missed opportunities.

The third part of the book consists of two essays that discuss the idea of border as a symbolic and/or concrete marker of difference. In her timely essay on the role of the veil in Islam and the emergent practice of veiling in the contemporary West, Gönül Pultar addresses critically the history of the veil and the various meanings attached to it. While the practice of veiling appears from the perspective of the nation-state as a sign of resistance and a critique of values associated with modernity, for many immigrant women in Europe its function is to link them with tradition: it shows that regardless of the presence of modernity in their life through education and work, something important from the past is present in the West, concretely and symbolically.

Minna Rainio's essay discusses the role of the Finnish-Russian border in stories told by people—Finnish and Russian—about their experience of living by this closed border that separated the West from the East from the 1920s to the 1990s. Rainio's essay is linked with her and Mark Roberts's video installation *Borderlands* (2004) focusing on the same border. The important issues that emerge from Rainio's essay concern nation, border, and memory: the stories told of the border have shaped the identities of people living along it for generations up to today. According to Rainio, the division into "us" and "them" is enforced by the borderline separating "here" from "there."

The final part of the volume consists of two paired essays discussing the work of Bharati Mukherjee, a key post-colonial writer who invariably addresses border crossings in her narratives. Jopi Nyman's essay addresses the role of ethnosexual encounters in shaping the identities of her female characters crossing from one culture to another. Triggered by the way in which Mukherjee's migrant characters' formation of a new identity is framed in their various romantic, erotic, and sexual encounters, the article applies sociologist Joane Nagel's theorization of ethnosexuality to Mukherjee's fiction. Nyman argues that as Mukherjee's narratives transform the traditional plot of immigrant romances positing marriage as a way of locating the immigrant in the nation, such a rejection of middle-class values is linked with a counter-hegemonic discourse of gender and nation emerging in the context of globalization.

The book closes with Maria Lauret's analysis of the role of language(s) in Mukherjee's fiction. By focusing on the problem of English in the context of language politics, Lauret opens up a fascinating view onto the widely debated writer. While Mukherjee's narratives rarely address loss of language, bilingualism or code-switching, in Lauret's analysis they are deeply embedded in the politics of the English language and the border crossings that it enables. As Lauret suggests, English has a double role to play: it is both an imperial language and the *lingua franca* of contemporary globalization and its communications. By contextualizing Mukherjee's works—the recent novels *Desirable Daughters* (2002) and *The Tree Bride* (2004) in particular—in the debates and discourses of globalization, Lauret shows how Mukherjee's dramatizations and translations of languages other than English in her fiction do not violate against the marginalized and the local, nor do they privilege the colonial language. In the end, Lauret argues, Mukherjee's fiction, while linking itself with the possibilities that the mastery of English offers to enable migration and promote the global circulation of cultural traditions, is critical of globalization and its objectifying ideology.

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PART I:

CROSSING RACIAL BOUNDARIES