
The interdisciplinary and international contributors to this text address the complexities of understanding individual and national identity issues in multicultural societies. Their focus is on literature, film and theatre primarily, but not exclusively, focusing on the comparative migration history of Australia and Germany. The foreword, prepared by two Melbourne academics, Irmeline Veit-Brause and Walter F. Veit, views the collection of papers as opening the door for ‘the project of a comparative intercultural history of Australian literature. More than the dialectic of belonging and exclusion, the hermeneutic condition of interdependence, as the basic parameter of globalization, is the critical category for such a project’ (xii). This is an interesting development in the year when debates raged about the identification of a distinctive Australian literature with the launch of The Literature of Australia: An Anthology edited by Nicholas Jose. In the foreword to this anthology Thomas Keneally observes that it defines the Australian voice in the broadest terms possible recognizing Australia’s ethnic diversity.

Belonging and Exclusion is divided into two parts. Part I, ‘Performing Belonging: Mises en scenes of Identity On and Off the Stage and Screen,’ endeavors to take an intercultural, rather than a monocultural view of developments in both Australia and Germany. Part II, ‘Narrating Otherness: Negotiating Inclusion and Exclusion’ presents comparative case studies of literature that address the topic.

My grandfather’s naturalisation certificate is dated 1904. He migrated to Australia, alone, at aged sixteen. As a member of an ethnic community I am familiar with the experiences of belonging and exclusion and have contributed to the history of multiculturalism in Australia in terms of community service provision, social policy and cultural understanding. Given my background I found some of the material in Part 1 on migration, including that of the guest worker experience of immigrants from Turkey in Germany, tedious and repetitive and it is made more cumbersome with the overload of detailed footnotes that overtake many of the pages. Whilst I acknowledge that this text is targeted, at a theoretical level, to the academic reader and artistic critic, it contains material that could attract a general reader interested in the everyday accounts of the ethnic experience. The editors of the text write in their introduction that

[the analyses in this book concentrate on the one hand on topoi and concepts which serve as rather abstract traditional markers and narratives in the processes of imagining coherent cultural identities, such as ‘nation’, ‘state’, ‘religion’, ‘language’ and ‘cultural memory’. On the other hand, they draw attention to elements of everyday life, such as food, housing, clothing and sport as markers and narratives of cultural identity and belonging. (7)
In my view the risk of generalisation and stigmatisation at this everyday level is grave. I question whether even the preparations of such texts does less to enhance inclusion than foster exclusion. I recall the work of Gillian Bottomley, an Australian living with her Greek husband in his village of birth. Her books, whilst captivating to some of my female colleagues who urged me to emulate her work, also drew heated debate from members of the Australian/Greek community that her writing reinforced outdated cultural stereotypes. Stereotypes that earned millions for the writer, actress and film maker, Nia Vardalos, of My Big Fat Greek Wedding fame!

One of the contributors to the text, Kerstin Pilz, writes about the Italian migration experience in Australia and Germany and highlights the Australian film They’re a Weird Mob, noting that ‘[t]omatoes and sauce are recurring images in Italo-Australian cinema’ (66). Such generalizations deflect understanding of the complexities and diversity within ‘ethnic communities’ – a diversity fostered by urbanisation, generational change, and educational, social and economic factors. Pilz, moving through a discussion of related films, concludes that

further scholarship is needed to evaluate in more detail the ways in which cinema has contributed to representing and understanding the experience of migration and the role the emergent body of ethnic cinema has in relation to the established traditions of national cinema. (73)

Cinema can err on the side of re-enforcing stereotypic images – or highlighting the extremes of feminine oppression such as honour killings.

In the contribution by Karin E. Yeşilada the attitude of the film maker Fatih Akin highlights the dilemma of bicultural individuals whose identity is solely defined in terms of ethnicity. Born in Germany of Turkish background, Akin does not want his dual identity to pigeonhole him and subvert the wealth of diverse experiences that are reflected in his endeavours. He dismisses ethnical categorization and considers himself a ‘filmmaker’ rather than a ‘Turkish film maker’ (77). He seeks to convey the fluidity of and universality of the individual cultural experience and cultural change. According to Yeşilada Akin, ‘…also underlines that critics from other countries do (should) not reduce him to a migrant identity, and consequently focus on his films rather than on his ethnical belonging’ (92-93) – an attitude I strongly endorse.

The wealth of this text is in the diversity of academic contributors and presentation of a wide range of creative activities. Part II contains a series of detailed case studies centered on the complexities of ‘otherness’. Claudia Lillge’s analysis of J.M. Coetzee’s novel Slow Man (2005) interprets the dynamics of the central character Paul in terms of his marginalisation as an immigrant (108). He uses the metaphor of Paul’s loss of a limb to explore his ethnic displacement compensated by his interest in photography that emerges as a ‘memory medium’ (110). John Stephens and Robyn McCullum explore Australian young adult fiction and films such as Melina Marchetta’s Looking for Alibrandi (1992), drawing on the comparison between ‘texts that locate perspective within the point of view of the minority’, pointing out that these texts are ‘seldom more successful in representing a multiplicity

of perceptions and perspectives than are Anglo-focalised narratives’ (137). Christiane Weller delves into a historical perspective of exile drawing on the texts of Ovid, Malouf and Ransmayr (147). Anne-Rose Meyer explores the theme of terrorism and radicalism using examples from Australian and German writers and concludes that ‘one can clearly detect the themes of belonging, exclusion, and social dissent, which are also important themes in other literary works about terrorism’ (174).

The framework of national identity underpins these comparative contributions even as they seek to break out of clichéd everyday presentations of ethnicity and culture such as ‘tomatoes and sauce’. One hopes that ongoing endeavours, including literary and artistic scholarship, will move beyond this framework and embrace the commonalities and complexities of the diversity of human experience in a globalised context.

Loula S. Rodopoulos