

# Brian Castro: A transcultural writer beyond borders

Brian Castro: uno scrittore transculturale oltre i confini

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## Abstract

*In the midst of the contemporary world of today that is characterized by globalized modernity, increasing mobility of immigrants or displaced people and fluidity of cultures, new debates have raised on transcultural literature as a path of new dynamics of promoting diversity and inter-connectedness. It aims at going beyond one's mother culture, reality, nationality, language and traditions; a sort of an embark of a global journey through literature. Transcultural studies and transcultural literature have flourished in the last two decades to break down cultural boundaries, embracing cultural mutations and opening up new maneuvers for constructing and reconstructing new notions of home and belonging. Contemporary individuals living in-between and diverse cultural realities are challenged by the globalized changes and invited to developing a transcultural consciousness to transcend any rigid attachments to their cultures or regions.*

Keywords:

**transculturality, mobility, cultural mutation, otherness, alterity, diversity, home, belonging, culture of encounter**

*Nell'odierna modernità globalizzata, che vive la crescente mobilità degli immigrati e la fluidità delle culture, la letteratura transculturale si apre a nuove dinamiche di promozione della diversità e dell'interconnessione. Porta ad andare oltre la cultura materna, la nazionalità, la lingua e le tradizioni, come una sorta di imbarco per un viaggio globale attraverso la letteratura. Gli studi e la letteratura transculturali sono fioriti negli ultimi due decenni per abbattere i confini, per abbracciare i cambiamenti culturali e aprire spazi per costruire nuove nozioni di casa e di appartenenza. Gli uomini d'oggi che vivono nella molteplicità culturale sono invitati a sviluppare una coscienza transculturale per trascendere ogni rigido attaccamento alle loro culture o regioni.*

Parole chiave:

**transculturalità, cambiamenti culturali, alterità, diversità, casa, appartenenza, cultura dell'incontro**

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studi e ricerche

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The rising numbers of immigrants and displaced people, traveling back and forth over the globe and the unceasing exchange of digital information across countries have been major factors for making cultures open systems rather than static or closed ones. Responding to the wave of the ongoing mobility and cultural changes, contemporary socio-cultural studies of multiculturalism and interculturalism extended to adopt a new cultural approach, naming transculturalism or transculturality<sup>1</sup>. Such studies have evolved in the last few decades not only to encompass alterity but also to promote interconnectedness and empathy with the 'Other' by challenging the traditional notions of culture, belonging, and identity. They examine the liquidity of the contemporary world, encouraging new discourses and scholastic programs to understand the mutations of cultures as a means contribute to a cultural openness that over cross a mere intercultural acceptance.

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#### 1. Transcultural perspective of cultural transition

In sociology and in intercultural studies, it is explained that it is not possible to read a cultural relationship without distinguishing a 'We' from a 'They'. In interculturality, for instance, each entity holds its own roots or origins regardless of how intense cultural exchange is. Therefore, transculturality as a new way to respond to the cultural changes of today can contribute to a deeper anthropological, cultural, and social formation of the identity of the contemporary man. In this way one can experience the existential experience of relationality and otherness, challenging long established cultural, ethnic, national and religious barriers.

But what does 'transculturality' mean? The same prefix 'trans' comes from

1 The transcultural perspective employed by transcultural studies was originally motivated by the concept of transculturation, first coined in 1940 by Fernando Ortiz Fernández (1881-1969): the Cuban anthropologist, creating a vital impact on modern cultural and literary studies. Anthropologically, the phenomenon of transculturation indicates a two-edged phenomenon of merging and converging of cultures, a process which might include constructive and destructive cultural dimensions from which new realities materialize. In his *Cuban Counterpoint*, he tries to illustrate the role of the colonial, economic, and ethnic powers in shaping and reshaping the Cuban culture and society. It was a social and cultural evolution that the Cuban populations had to face, a sort of "a hurricane of cultures"; the problem of "disadjustment and readjustment" as Ortiz describes it (Ortiz Fernandez, 2003, pp. 4-5).

the Latin which means 'beyond', or going 'over'. Transculturality refers to a cultural, social, and anthropological approach that denotes "the recognition of oneself in the other" (Cuccioletta, 2001/2002, p. 3), which is an extension of a mere acknowledgment of diversity as in the case of multiculturalism. It also penetrates cultural exchange from which a new experience and new culture might emerge. In its essence, transculturality is a cultural phenomenon that is based on the encounter of peoples of diverse cultural backgrounds whether as a result of colonization, immigration, or displacement; an experience of dynamic act of "give and take" between two entities that leads to a flux of integration and fragmentation at the same time. It is beyond dispute that the fear of alterity stands always as an obstacle in a transcultural encounter. It is closely connected with the fear of losing one's identity. It is for this reason that the need of interconnectedness with the 'Other' becomes essential, requiring more than just an intercultural interaction of tolerance or a respect of diversity.

Transculturality, then, can be considered a graced experience of reaching out to otherness, fostering relationship, dialogue and friendship basically outside one's communal groups. Anthropologically and socially speaking, it is to extend one's 'I' to reach 'You' in order to construct the 'Us' as the very place from which a culture of encounter evolves, forming bridges of human relations. Articulating the cultural, social, and anthropological change of contemporary individuals living in-between various realities entails living someone else's diversity. It basically entails as Richard Slimbach assumes in his essay *The Transcultural Journey*: "to think outside the box of one's motherland [...] without losing one's cultural center [...] Today, who we are (by birth) and where we are (by choice) is not as relevant as it once was. More persons than ever before are pursuing lives that link the local and the global. They are becoming increasingly transcultural" (Slimbach, 2005, p. 11).

Thinking out of the box one's mother language, culture or traditions means to see many sides of other realities, abandoning conformity, and connecting centers with peripheries.

Based on this premise, transcultural studies which are characterized by an inter- and transdisciplinary quality have adopted an open perspective to diverse cultures, considering ethnicity, nationality, or color as limited spaces to influence identity construction. They consider global transformations and mobility, transcultural studies are a basic factor to constitute interwoven cultures that extend social networks, contacts and relations. Both contemporary socio-cultural and transcultural studies came to verify the entanglement of cultures, their hybridization, liquidity, and multicultural corporations. In *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*, Chris Barker states that "cultures are not pure, authentic and locally bounded. They are the syncretic and hybridized products of interactions across space... globalization has made the idea of culture as a whole way of life located within definite boundaries increasingly problematic" (Barker, 2002, p. 27). That is to say, in the so-called single culture there exists as much foreignness as in its external relations with other cultures;

instead of being isolated they do overlap. In *On the Concept of Culture and Some Cultural Fallacies* the anthropologist David Bidney also states that culture is “a transcendental, metaphysical entity [...] To define culture as a social heritage from the past is to ignore the equally significant element of historical change” (Bidney, 1944, pp. 31-37).

## 2. Transcultural Literature

The transcultural approach gained a great appeal in contemporary literature and comparative literary studies. Being closely associated with world literature and migrant literature, transcultural literature is interested to tackle the complexity of post-modern mutation, adopting new narrative forms and aesthetic techniques, mostly experimental. The objective of transcultural literature is to create a border crossing literary output that is not related to native or regional boundaries, capable of extending to all humanity as means to express the 21st century globalized world. In her *Transcultural Writers and Novels in the Age of Global Mobility*, the Italian-Australian researcher Dagnino, who is largely concerned with transcultural literature, calls this new trend as ‘Literature of mobility’, being opened up to different national boundaries, finding “new arrangements of form and content to adapt to a changed culture and social paradigm ” (Dagnino, 2015, p.143). The same is true to Ottomar Ette, a professor of Romance languages and Comparative literature, who remarks that literatures of 21st century “will be literatures without a fixed abode, literatures that evade attempts at clear territorialisation,” (Ette, 2003, p.13). It persistently transcends the limits of any landscape, becoming more transcultural instead of being deeply rooted in bounded territories.

Hence, since 1980s an enormous interest has grown in world literature with which travel, migrant, and ethnic literatures are integrated. They deal with both cultural values and global processes<sup>2</sup> that are spreading beyond national and cultural borders. The growth of circulating the masterpieces of Western European, English and American literary works beyond their country or language of origin has also spread-out the interest in works written by non-Western writers, achieving global recognition as works of world literature. Circulated in English or excellent in translation, such literary works came to be dynamically present wide-reaching. They aim at displaying cultural and social experiences of belonging, mixed receptions of multicultural traditions that are based on relationships rather than ethnic, cultural or national affiliations. Transculturality as a cultural and literary approach depicted in their writings is seen as a mechanism towards a cultural awareness of otherness and the self at the same time.

2 Global processes refer to “globalization” which tends to describe that series of processes and transformations that affect the present societies in all their sectors (economic, social, cultural, etc.).

In this regard, it is important to mention some of the main transcultural writers such as, Alberto Manguel (1948-) Argentinian, German and Canadian; Castro (the main concern of this paper), Chinese, Portuguese, and Australian; Tim Parks (1954-) English and Italian; Ilija Trojanow, Bulgarian, German, and Kenyan; Pico Iyer (1957-), British-born of Indian origin, Kamila Shamsie (1973- ), Pakistani American novelist, Tawada Yoko (1960), Japanese, living in Berlin, etc. Such writers are in a quest to capture the hybrid realities of the border blurring phenomena of the fusion of cultures, revealing a transcultural sensibility as a method to confront the traditional tendency to locate culture, the individual and even literature within a specific category. Being incapable of locating themselves within precise ethnic, national or cultural margins, they find themselves writing across cultures (Asian, European, American, English, etc.), promoting cross-cultural flows for the purpose of going beyond “the diversity of cultures to the even the diversity of individuals, in order to reach a broader cultural model capable of appealing not only to specific minorities but to the universal potentials of human understanding” (Dagnino, 2012b).

Transcultural writers endeavor to comprehend cultural transformations and attain a new perception of the so-called ‘cultural identity’<sup>3</sup>. They challenge the notion of cultures as single entities capsulated by inherited traditions or social norms. Transcultural English studies, along with contemporary socio-cultural and anthropological studies came to be applied to literary works, gaining a great appeal by contemporary writers, especially those who lived in multicultural contexts. They write across nations, in quest of self-definition and understanding of one’s cultural identity within the transitory nature of the world. It is a key characteristic of transcultural literature, especially as it is produced by writers who themselves have been immigrants, travelers, or displaced.

Eurocentric detachment is another feature that transcultural writers tend to display in their fiction, along with overcoming the twofold dichotomies of multicultural and postcolonial writings that center on the colonized and the colonizer; the dominator and the dominated; ethnic minority and majority; native and foreigner, etc. That is to say, transcultural writers tend to dissolve the “binaries of center/periphery and national self/other” (Dagnino, 2015, p. 10). Dagnino underlines that the current socio-cultural scenario of this age has led to the advent of “a new generation of culturally mobile writers, whom I call ‘transcultural writers’... writers who, by choice or by life circumstances, experience cultural dislocation, live transnational experiences, cultivate bilingual/pluri-lingual proficiency, physically immerse themselves in multiple cultures/geographies/territories, expose themselves to diversity and nurture plural, flexible identities” (Dagnino, 2015, p. 100).

3 From a cultural and social point of views a cultural identity derives from one’s nationality, ethnicity, social class, community, language, culture, etc. Such belongings give a distinct position to individuals and groups in the world, defining them by their social, cultural or national heritage that is different from others. For further information see (Woodward, 2002).

Basically, transcultural literature corresponds to the sensibilities of such writers who seek to liberate themselves from the constrictions of culture, language, confined literary canons and the tendency of being regionalist writers. They adopt new poetics in terms of literary paradigms and discourses responding to the migrant, diasporic, or nomadic experiences the individual of today might be living. Going afar the terrain of grounded national origins, transcultural writers believe that it is “the freedom of every person to live on the border of one’s inborn culture or beyond it” (Dagnino, 2015). It is for the individual to choose with what aspect of life, place, or group he identifies himself as he wanders about various foreign settings. The image of the individual as a wanderer or a nomad is quite dominant in transcultural literature, indicating the broad framework modern man has to build and rebuild his identity on as he passes through cultural disorientation and orientation, moments of detachment and attachment, exclusion and inclusion.

### 3. Brian Castro: a writer beyond Borders

Within this transcultural lens, Castro perceives that it is his task to reinterpret the dilemma of the individual and communities living in-between cultures along with the domination of traditional notion of home and cultural representation. A writer of true multicultural background, he was born in Shanghai and currently lives in Australia of which he writes: “I’ve lived here [Australia] for thirty years I still have the perspective of being the insider as well as the outsider” (Castro 1999, p.11). Coming from Anglo-Chinese and Portuguese/Spanish/English lineage, no wonder that his biography interrelates with the work he produces. Raised in a bilingual family whose ancestries are European, Asian, and Anglo-Saxon, for parents whose marriage was that of Orient and Occident, Castro keeps wandering as nomadic from one country to another and from one language to another. He states in *Writing Asia* one of his essays he published in *Looking for Estrellita*: “The polygot is a freer person, a person capable of living in words and worlds other than the narrow and the confined one of unimagined reality. When we translate from one language to another we not only reinvent ourselves but we free up the sclerotic restrictions of our own language. We feel free to transgress, to metamorphose, to experience the uncanny, where we receiving...the quantum immediacy of another culture. Other cultures and languages reinforce and enrich us by powerfully affecting and destabilising our familial tongue. We gain by losing” (Castro, 1999b, p.153).

The capability of speaking languages other than the mother tongue signifies being open to enter into the mindset of the ‘Other’ as a method to reinvent the self and to generate action and interaction of people. As Castro puts it, it is the embracing of ‘the quantum immediacy’ of another culture, which is its substantial and energetic entity. In translation a similar interaction takes place, a two-fold process of retracting the separation between the source and the target language and the creation of a new reality by which the target language gets enriched by the differences of the translated one.

Moreover, Castro is very much concerned with the problem of identity, migration, mutation of cultures and the progression towards self-definition. Despite the impact of Australia and China one can obviously find in his works, he rejects writing under the domination of one culture or specified literary tradition. For him, it signifies a restriction imposed on imagination. As a writer of multicultural background, Castro does not feel that he can be categorized into any racial group of writers. Rather he challenges the inclination to follow a public demand. Since he started his literary career, he rejected to be called Asian Australian as other Asian Australian authors who kept struggling to gain wider domestic and international recognition and readership to fit into the mainstream of postmodern literature. In *The Private and the Public* one of his essays on writing and culture, Castro asserts that: “identity is multiplicity, made possible by constant movement...the desire to identify [...] Disabling the desires, it forces self-consciousness upon the writer. The command is to begin again, to revise, to rewrite in culturally acceptable terms. The public culture then introduces an immense noise, which sounds something like this: Nation, nationalism, identity, place, cultural-tinge, self-confidence, myth, cultural production, genre, rationalism, commonsense, us, we, them, tradition, postcolonialism, internationalism, immigration, multiculturalism, gender, ethnicity, patriotism, etc. Surrounded by this noise, I am immediately afflicted with paralysis. Sometimes it is days before I can write again (Castro 1999b, pp. 85-86).

Based on the complexity of the global mobility and the liquidity of post-modern world, his prose writings and novels in general question the conception of developing stable cultural identity or single belonging, emphasizing the lack of fixities or stabilizations. Being one of the new wave of transcultural writers, Castro also believes in the diffusion and fusion of cultures and hybridization as a crucial component of the mixed cultural body of contemporary world.

It is worth saying that for the purpose of this transcultural expansion towards an embracement of someone else's experience, there exists the risk of losing part of one's original culture. This loss can be the very reason of identity crisis and the lack of self-articulation in the face of all the current cultural and social transformations. Based on the perspective of transcultural writers such as Castro, the objective that they tend to bring to surface is neither to disown one's links with cultural or national origins, nor to deny their significance. It is rather to promote a free sensibility that goes beyond any cultural limitations. Castro, for instance, cannot deny neither his oriental nor occidental origins, yet he refuses to be restricted by them. In an interview, he says: “I know that I have an Australian passport and obviously I have certain duties to perform for my host country. But I don't feel that kind of nostalgic patriotism that you see on television. Moreover, I find a lot of that very false...if we speak in essentializing terms, no, I don't have any sense of allegiance” (Dagnino, 2015, p. 48).

The above statement seems demonstrative of the sense of disintegration the contemporary individual suffers in contemporary postmodernity. Castro apparently states the feeling of the lack of belonging not only to one's home-

land but also to the hosting country. However, for him it is an articulation of having a global and free soul rather than a sense of fragmentation and rootlessness.

In a similar way and within the same global-like and blended cultural spirit, Trojanow, another transcultural writer, exclaims in an interview, reflecting on the person he is, the meaning of home<sup>4</sup> and the possibility of being somewhere and everywhere: “I’ve a very strong sense of belonging to planet Earth, which sounds a bit esoteric but it has to do with my continuous awareness that we need a paradigm shift in the way we relate to nature. I feel I have many forms of belonging... For example, I sense a very true belonging within the German language, despite the fact that my mother tongue is Bulgarian and that I grew up playing and joking in Swahili. I sense a belonging when I’m walking in the streets of Sophia, when I’m in Mumbai, or when I’m in many countries in Africa. I miss Africa in general... I never use the word roots, I’m not a tree” (Dagnino, 2015, p.31).

#### 4. Castro’s Literary Output: A Transcultural Encounter with Otherness

Castro works mostly fictionalize characters that voyage away from their ethnic, national, racial or cultural origins in a quest of a meaning of their identity. His nine novels, written in English (which have been translated into Chinese, German and French) along with the over thirty essays and fifty short stories that he wrote, reveal an obvious resistance to racial and cultural classification and national politics of place, underlining the hybridity of minds. As means to cross cultural boundaries and to go beyond any literary categorization, he uses experimental narrative techniques such as fragmentation, paradoxes, overlapping settings and locations, multiple narrative perspectives by which the reader gets indulged “to comprehend how the narrative might relate to its cultural, historical, and social context” (Brennan, 2008, p. 6).

His multicultural and bilingual characters live the dynamics not only of physical movement in search for their selfhood but also the dynamics of character fragmentation, transformation, and identity reconstruction. Their mixed or crossbreed origins by which they are characterized make them experience moments of darkness, frustrations as well as disintegrations. Michael Ian Deves remarks in *Brian Castro: Hybridity, Identity and Reality* that Castro’s protagonists’ quest for self-definition lead them to “learn more about themselves and find out more about the world, and may therefore ‘develop,’ but will not be-

4 The Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman discloses a similar vision in his *Culture in a Liquid Modern World*, which expresses the framing matrix of the present global world of fluid social relations. Developing a network of social relations would lead the individual to cultivate a reflexive and multiple self, affiliated to no place and any place. Thus, he says: “I feel at home everywhere, despite the fact (or perhaps because of it) that there is no place I can call home” in a world of “spongy and porous boundaries in which it is difficult to ascertain who legally belongs and who is a stranger.” (Bauman and Bauman, 2011, pp. 2-3).



come 'whole' people 'comfortable' with their position" (Deves, 2013, p.220). The very fact that Castro is opposed to any fixity as part of his belief in the transformative ontology of cultures and people is one essential factor to find his characters not reaching total identity stabilization. Characters such as Seamus, the Australian-born Chinese of *Birds of Passage*, Tasmanian Aboriginal Thomas McGann in *Drift*, Antonio of *Shanghai Dancing* are all hybridized individuals, demonstrating that traditional racial scars are no longer valid. Castro portrays individuals as they see themselves rather how they are envisioned in the eyes of others.

Sometimes he makes characters dissolve one into the other, lacking any assimilation with the cultural mainstream in which they live. It is a way to challenge stereotypical ethnic or cultural presumptions that incline to cage the 'Other' within a definite perspective. Castro affirms that "probably being transcultural means to have the ability to put yourself in other people's shoes, and thus live also their lives, the way you perceive them. .... a way of actually not just making contact with another human being but understanding even though imaginarily, what it mean being you" (Dagnino, 2015, p. 50).

Availing himself the use of double narrative technique in his novels, Castro creates voices that are interwoven together to embrace different individual points of views to provide a better perspective. At times it can be very intricate to distinguish which is which, but it attempts to highlight a cultural and anthropological space of plurality and of different experiences. Writing in various narrative voices is a literary postmodern technique to approach human understanding, to cultivate responsiveness to alterity. A similar narrative practice is adopted by Trojanow who states in an interview that "you cannot talk about encounters between different people and about the dynamics of these encounters if you don't give the different participants (or characters) a voice" (Dagnino, 2015, p. 50).

Sometimes it is indispensable to re-read certain passages in order to put the parts of the story together which really seem like pieces of puzzle. This can explain why Castro has relatively limited commercial and readership achievement, though he was widely received by critics and gaining awards. Due to the experimental nature his novels display being written in a very postmodernist approach, the reader is called to make an effort to examine and digest Castro's dense literary style. To go in details into this literary product is beyond the scope of this paper. Thus, three novels are selected as typical examples to generally exhibit his transcultural perspective.

Castro's novel *Birds of passage*, for instance, penetrates the story of Seamus O'Young, an immigrant Australian-born Chinese who lives in Australia a century after Lo Yun Shan. The latter is a Chinese who goes to the Australian goldfields during 19th century. Both are in quest for an understanding of their identity and wholeness of their soul. The novel elucidates a reading of Asian Australian experience, the notion of hybrid identity and the importance of living the diversity of the Other as part of the process of identity reconstruction and empathetic experience. Accidentally Seamus finds an old journal written in Chinese by someone called Shan and decides to translate it; an act that brings in correlation the two storylines together via a double narrative tech-

nique through which Castro points out the relation between the two men, suggesting that Shan is Seamus' ancestor.

As Shan had felt disposed to live and experience his journey as other passengers did by listening to the crew and speaking their language, Seamus tries to understand the closeness he feels of the situation the author (Shan) is describing: "I feel I am the counterpart of this man who was writing more than a century ago" (Castro, 1999a, p. 4). Seamus manages to develop through articulating Shan's journal an empathetic relationship which as he says 'fills me with excitement,' feeling that 'Not only am I the author, the originator, but I am his progenitor, having impregnated myself with these fictions' (Castro, 1999a, p.58). In a virtual way, Shan comes to inhabit Seamus.

In his essay *Auto Biography*, Castro asserts: "It (hybridity) is what the 'I' is. A proliferation of selves. A juxtaposition of differences" (Castro, 1999b, p. 30). He assumes that one's personal identity is ontologically and anthropologically hybrid constructed. Based on this notion, the individual's process of identity-building would affront the challenge of retaining one's foreignness and letting go part of it at the same time. Seamus describes it as the 'translation of yourself'. It denotes the transition into a new reality, a transcultural one, with which Seamus seems to identify himself to acquire his own transition. The speculation he makes of Shan's journal is what provides him with a dynamic access to his unknown Chinese past, a crossing of two worlds, 'Different worlds open up. I inhabit all of them' (Castro 1999b, p. 48).

*After China*, on the other hand, is a novel that demonstrates another reflection on ancient China and its magical stories as a cultural realm of the East versus the West. The architect, the protagonist of the novel, exiled from China meets a woman writer in Australia who is incurably ill. He tells her traditional Chinese stories and myths as a transcendental element to overcome cultural and national boundaries. The novel also meditates on death, constructing and writing, allowing the reader to rethink about new methods of reconstructing one's life and identity. The architect, You Bok Mun arrives to a point in which he merges with the Writer, the unnamed female character after developing an intimate bond between them that rises above cultural barriers.

The fact that the protagonist, You is also the narrator of the novel makes of the 'I' and 'He' all the same person; a narrative technique used by Castro to emphasize that "writing entails the negation of the self. [...] It is an 'I' which is also 'not-I' denies any sense of single stable authorship [...] the 'I/not I' is intimately related to 'you'" (Brennan, 2008, p.89). This blurring lines between the 'You' and 'I' signify the need to border crossing not only cultural difference but also the need of the transformation of the self into the 'Other'. Castro sees in this modernist narrative technique a liberating possibility and creative approach of cross-cultural insemination, moving from the conformity of one reality or oneself.

In the woman Writer, You finds his otherness, his Chineseness, or his multiple self as Castro's denotes that the 'I' "deliberately invokes multiplicity". In various parts in the novel, the architect and the woman Writer seem to merge: 'I often wonder about all that,' says You, "Actually I think it's me who's having an influence on her. She's becoming more Chinese... Unless she's undergoing

a kind of transformation, copying my outer self...my beari” (Castro, 2003a, p.44). Between the two protagonists an intimate relationship grows after the architect comes to realize the gravity of the writer’s inevitable illness by which he is driven to save her. Despite his incompetence and sexual anxiety, You comes to be attracted to the Writer and vice versa: “I think she likes me because I’m Chinese... I think she likes me because I’m foreign, even to myself” (Castro, 2003a, p. 27). This intimacy that grows regardless of the foreignness of each is strengthened by the stories he relates to her, most of which are derived from his Chinese past; transcultural encounter with otherness

Based on borrowing You’s stories, the writer’s work at the end comes to life after her death, which symbolizes an incorporation of his life with hers, an empathy of souls. She interwove her own writings with his narrations in a way that ‘the more he read the more he understood how he had been incorporated into her writing, its resonances being carried downstream to him’ (Castro, 2003a, p.143). Interestingly enough, her new book is dedicated ‘To You’ (Castro, 2003a, p.143), which on one hand, denotes an acknowledgement of their undisclosed love; on the other hand it presents a gesture to incorporate the book with every reader where the binary of self and other dissolves and the ‘you’ might metamorphose into ‘me’. Through her book, the woman Writer succeeded to cross linguistic-cultural boundaries by conveying one foreign world to other persons in words. Based on You’s stories the woman Writer tried to be in some else’s shoes, extending herself to see the world from a different angle not hers. Her attempt is not trying to describe or convey something via her own mind-set, but via the ‘Other.’

In *Shanghai Dancing*, a fictional family auto/biography mainly located in Shanghai, Antonio Castro, the main character, is moved by an urgent call to leave everything behind for the purpose of exploring his family’s multi-layered origins. Similarly to Seamus in the *Birds of Passage*, Antonio decides to go into a transcultural journey, heading back to his past in a quest for the articulation of his identity. One moment he is in Australia in the present time, then in Shanghai at pre-war Macau-China before and after World War II, moving back to 17th century Liverpool, and then roving again to England with long way around Brazil, Japan, and Australia.

The narrator takes the reader out of the fictitious narrative norm, swinging between the first person, second and third person narrators. The narrative itself drifts as Castro interweaves auto/biography, as he calls it with real and fictitious events, narrated by a multi-voice narrator of a floating identity whose target is to scout around his multi-generational saga, looking to track his family roots. *Shanghai Dancing* merges geographical locations, historical situations, and persons from the western world to Asia; a polyglot mix of people and places as well as of literary genres, having the aim of resisting cultural divide, bridging instead a fragmented humanity. No wonder that the novel is full of the sense of disorientation and instability intentionally imposed to intermingle diverse cultures, creating a dialogue of encounter. After living in Australia for forty years, Antonio digs into his sociocultural heritage, discovering the hybrid nature of his identity, attempting to unfold the mysteries behind it. To do so, Antonio makes this exploration by means of “visiting the

geographical locations of his multiple ethnic roots. While such a quest is fuelled by an essentialist desire for subjective stability, Castro rejects any one origin as definitive through his postmodernist play with language, or his use of language to defer any single stable foundation; thus he refuses to submit to essentialist homogenization” (Gibbons, 2016, p. 228).

Moreover, the constant movement of the protagonist becomes a dancing motif, depicted in terms of the manifold narrative voices used in the novel, demonstrating the shifting of writing style and various changes of time and place. The reader is invited by this swaying form of writing to acknowledge the dynamic process of cultural mutation and global interactions that ‘wanders up and down’ as a kind of resistance to any static linear movement or systematic progression of a sociocultural construction of identity. Instead, life is portrayed as ‘sliding scale’, of a continuous amorphous substance where man is ‘on a pilgrimage’, interacting people of mixed origins, facing both the danger of sameness and the fear of difference. To exhibit this, Castro also uses the image of the hotel as the very place of continual movement of people where strangers and foreigners meet. For instance, as Antonio meets Tommy Lee, the butler of in the Peace hotel in Hong-Kong in which his father used to stay he is told that “your father lived in grand hotels for more than half his life. You have acquired the same disease, which you cannot afford. You stroll through lobbies, function-rooms and restaurants and even though the staff soon makes it a point of recognizing you, you try to be faceless by speaking little and not understanding much, and they soon learn to leave you alone. But the grand hotel is much more than anonymity, for its constant changes, flux, turnovers, create the intimacy of an extendable world, a transit point, a confluence of lives” (Gibbons 2016, p. 336).

The above text highlights the notion of temporality and extension of our world. Both seem to function as means to live in a transcultural space where strangers meet, sharing one place together to make meaning out of one’s own strangeness. Similarly is Castro’s notion of creating a space that cross over any cultural or national divide. He encourages the importance of losing the long established ideas of home for sake of creating sense of belonging elsewhere. In *Arrested Motion and Future-Mourning: Hybridity and Creativity* Castro writes: “My vision of writing was formed not from a cultural romanticism but from dependency and a yearning for a place elsewhere. This homelessness was not a mourning for the past or for a utopia, but a melancholic design: a safe-keeping not so much of beauty but loss” (Brennan, 2008, pp. 92-93).

Moving physically and virtually across places and history becomes an interlacing route of liberating the classifications of ‘we’ and ‘they’ into creating a new ‘us’. Discovering and acknowledging that sense of doubleness or tripleness which is both troubling and productive, Castro tries to discern his interwoven Western and Asian mixed background and history. The emphasis is set on the humanist relationality as a key aspect of going beyond a defined boundary of identity and geographical location set by stereotypical preconceptions. This humanist relationality is mainly based on cultural difference and stepping over the threshold of nationality or ethnicity for the purpose of creating an identity applicable to changes and ready to interact with otherness.

In the *Poetics of Relation*, Édouard Glissant depicts an image of rhizome, which is a modified subterranean root of a plant that is often producing other roots and shoots from its nodes, spreading underground and surfaced net-like stems. Glissant connects the notion of rhizome to “the idea of rootedness but challenges that a totalitarian root. Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other” (Gibbons, 2016, p. 229). It sounds quite similar to Castro’s focus on anticonformism in *Shanghai Dancing*. By tackling this racial trauma that touches various characters in the novel, he critiques the reality of homogenous, dominant culture; instead “uprootedness meant no instinctual love but wild and painful freedom” making Antonio “a perpetual stranger” (Castro, 2003b, p.376). The strangeness is never intended to be a negative aspect, but it rather operates as otherness, the means of understanding relationality: “the single root kills everything it encounters around it, whilst the rhizome is a root that goes out in search of other roots (Onghena, 2008).

## Conclusions

Transculturality confronts the fear of loss of one’s original not solely to promote the right to be different, but to consider diversity as a source of durability rather than insubstantiality. The meaning of home becomes other than a place one can go back to, or simply a building, or a piece of land, but rather a piece of heart that one can carry wherever he goes and a work in progress to construct a cooperative community.

Castro’s novels and prose writings that are considered part of literary cultural studies represent and re-present the question of identity based on the perception of transculturality and hybridity that entails the process of demolition and construction, sudden shifts and disorientation. Similar to the Cuban anthropologist’s notion of transculturation, Castro proclaims the dissolution of binaries between center/periphery and national self/other that estrange the individual. Thus, amidst the sense of alienation of the global world of today and the issue of identity crisis, the question “Who am I?” might have a one possible answer, which is: ‘I am who I am because you are who you are.’ Or it might remain open to interrogative and argumentative answers that are yet to be reached. That is to say, identity and cultural metamorphosis would be decentered in relation to all other cultures.

However, raising this question in itself is quite important to materialize an understanding that our own multiple layered identities are based on relationality rather than ethnical or cultural rootedness. Therefore, Castro’s concept of transculturality and hybrid identity contributes to surpass the national, romantic and traditional understanding of cultural roots and customary types of ethnicity and belonging. He sets his fictional protagonists as explorers of the meaning of otherness specially that which is within, referring to the process of living the diversity of the ‘Other’ as an inseparable ontological part of the individual. In other words, Castro emphasizes that identity is a relational building process that forms an integral part of every individual.

Moreover, transcultural literature that embraces new modes of form and content, has corresponded to the contemporary cultural and social paradigms, and is capable of creating an awareness not merely to exult one's roots but multiplicity. Literary transcultural studies highlight the value of the culture otherness, which comes not only to be appreciated but considered as part of one's authentic and multi-layered identity. Transculturality enforces substantial existence of the 'You' into the 'I', endeavoring to promote new communicative forms of shared humanity and coexistence. Worldviews of transcultural writers and thinkers of mixed cultures invoke potential paths towards inter- and trans-disciplinary studies, leading to innovative maneuvers for the diffusion of a wide range of cultural symbols, seeing in alterity and diversity a path towards unity and interconnectedness.

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