

Essay

# Transcultural Space and the Writer

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**Abstract:** (1) As a long time writer, I always found, even before I began to publish, that my work was difficult to categorise, even while categories seemed essential for publication, reception and visibility. (2) In this personal essay, I apply the notion of the transcultural to a short writing [auto]biography. The methodology adopted for this purpose is a form of autoethnography: “a form of self-reflection and writing that explores the researcher’s personal experience and connects this autobiographical story to wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings”<sup>1</sup> to explore how my immigrant background and transcultural lived experience is reflected in my creative writing, and to give an account of how my literary output has been placed in various but always restrictive pre-existing categories. I am also encouraged by Mikhail Epstein’s proposed “scriptorics”, the study of the one who writes. Each section of the essay is divided into two: the first sections provide a succinct version of the issues in a developing writer’s life, framed by the need for the practice and production to “belong” somewhere; the second sections take them to a posited “Transcultural Space” where the work seems more authentically to have originated and in which it seems to be more perceptively read. (3) The result is not so much a conventional academic article as a fiction writer’s reflection on her work in the embrace of an inclusive and meaning-making realm.

**Keywords:** transcultural space; transculturalism; fiction and transculture; scriptorics and transculture; experimental writing; feminism and transculture

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## 1. Introduction

In *Transformative Humanities: a Manifesto*, Mikhail Epstein proposes what he calls *scriptorics*: A discipline dedicated to the writing human: “those for whom the very act of writing constitutes their way of life and worldview”; its key tenets are questions like “who writes? For whom?” [2]. Epstein’s proposal encourages the present writer, author mostly of novels and short fiction, to offer an overview of her writing biography as most productively framed by the concepts and sympathies embraced by the transcultural, in a context where identity is increasingly understood as labile, subject to alteration, to situational definition. It is as if the transcultural were always the destination, though it remains to be seen if it proves to be another transitional space or one that is so comprehensively inclusive that it has no limits. This essay may be useful to literary critics and researchers interested in exploring the effects of physical, cultural and psychological mobility on creative literary productions.

## 2. The World of Englishes

### 2.1. It Starts with Language, with Reading

She first heard stories and songs and verses and sayings and prayers in Hungarian, and there were French verses, as her mother and grandmother spoke French as well. But when Inez began

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<sup>1</sup> I take this definition from Carolyn Ellis [1].

reading, it was in English, and once she began she never stopped. She read everything she could get her hands on; she was allowed to take books from the adults' library once she had exhausted the children's. It must have begun with fairy tales from Europe and the Bible (magisterial King James version of course) and Australian children's stories: Gumnut babies, the kangaroo, the magic pudding. Inevitably, Enid Blyton adventures gave way to Dumas and Verne and then Flaubert and the books on psychology and theology in her father's study, the odd racy bestseller, comic books too somehow. From the start an eclectic reader, she looked for books mentioned in books; always she would seek the writers other writers mentioned. She couldn't tell you which of those she read in what order, or recall all of it.

Is it the medium itself that creates the addiction? Or is it the way reading brings your thoughts alive, makes you wonder and wonder, about words, about sentences, about language, about how you could put anything into words, about how there is more to life than being stuck where you are. (Reading makes you feel both less so and more so.) As an immigrant child she was always aware there could have been another, a different, life, and maybe that is what she was looking for, to know what might have been, how she might one day find it. Later, after most of the reading of her early life had made its unrepeatable impact—surely no writings affect you as much as the first ones you read, the ones you read over and over—eventually she learned about the kinds of distinctions that should be made: the respected and the disreputable, literature and trash, high art and mere popularity. The unease over such distinctions was encouraged by their bombardment by a new popular culture movement.

What intrigued her from the start was the variations in the English language. Who's to say what's proper and correct in the English language? There were so many Englishes—this is something she's writing and talking about a lot these days [3].

She had been noticing this from the very start of using language: there was but one name for the language and yet there were so many variations. Different schools, different districts, different kinds of people, different kinds among the ones who are meant to be one kind. What she's listening to is English spoken in Australia at a range of schools—state, selective, private; English spoken by those whose mother tongue it was, and there were variations among them; English spoken by adults who had learned English late in life, nothing having prepared them for being migrants in Australia and having to learn the lingo.

## 2.2. *Trans-Cultural Space: Entering the World of Englishes*

In the present, Inez enters Transcultural Space. Enters, is entered by: it's a space in alien and Dreamtime dimensions. In here, all other categories have been made redundant, outmoded or spurious. Yet it's above all an inclusive space, so you can even bring your previous categories with you, and see what happens to them in here.

The space has been described in her invaluable work by Dagnino [4] thus:

*transcultural continuum/transpace/transplace.* An all-inclusive space of subjective consciousness and cultural possibilities which does not deny the formative importance of native cultures (and, to some extent, their accompanying worldviews) but at the same time allows an openness to the reception, integration, negotiation, and permeation of other cultures, languages, worldview *transpace/transplace.* Another way of defining the transcultural continuum. Transpace/transplace is the transcultural dimension that lies beyond the divides, often commercially or ideologically emphasized, of cultures. It represents a nonoppositional point of confluence or overlapping of cultures that in many ways expands Bhabha's notion of the third space, the in-between space where hybridization occurs.

Come inside, let's look around, listen, feel.

Listen, there are so many languages in here, people speak what they feel like speaking. You may come across conversations about the value or utility of a particular language for particular purposes. But everyone in here knows some version of the world language; it's English now and the word has but a historical connection to the people of England; the language is not defined by, not authorised by, the England where it purportedly originated, at first spread by former forms of imperialism. In here, we speak English. Not England language. (Yes, let's use England as the adjective for "from England". As in cricket: "the England team".)

English has increasingly been altered and hybridised and simplified and complexified, it takes on sayings from wherever it is employed, it inflects its local versions with local vocabulary and references. Listen to all the accents, all the rhythms and registers. Evolution, mutation, mixed marriages, selections natural and un: all happened to English, and it never stops. The way writing in English might be evaluated is transformed by the recognition of such phenomena. Traditional correctitude is not always apt. Those whose business is evaluation need to consider this.

No-one is monolingual in here. Some speak several languages fluently; some speak a couple, some many. Some speak smatterings of various languages. Everyone knows words, phrases, expressions, from various languages, people naturally blend them into the language they're speaking. Hybrid languages proliferate. No one's concerned to separate a language from a dialect.

The idea of a single kind of "correctness" in the English language is a dodo.

There are ever more young authors writing in the languages of their host countries. ... Some write in the language of their host countries while retaining the mental blueprint of their mother tongue, giving rise to surprising linguistic *mélanges*; others create defamiliarising effects by mixing the vocabulary of two or sometimes multiple languages [5].

### 3. Outsiderness Becomes Insiderness

#### 3.1. *It Always Starts with Being an Outsider; Being from "Over There"*

When the others played sports she kept reading. When television arrived in Australia she kept reading. A kid who'd always rather be reading becomes a teenager, an adult, who would always rather be reading. Not truly always, she's always going to be curious about life and living, experiment and experience, but she will always need frequent time alone, time to immerse in reading.

So that's one kind of outsider she was.

"They're all coming here, we're not going over there" grumbled a man at a bus stop wanting everyone to hear, grumbled loudly his observation which simply proved that Australia was better than anywhere in the world. Also proved that no-one from *over there*, those migrants and refugees, those foreigners with their distasteful smells and sounds, would ever be anything *but* "from over there"; they never will be From Here.

Nationalism comes a lot more sophisticated and pussy-footy than that too.

In the 1970s Australians asserted their right to their own accents, motifs and stories: cultural nationalism swept in, actors' characters and radio announcers began to speak in broad Australian accents rather than try to sound British, designers exuberantly employed the shapes of gum leaves, Aboriginal motifs and the Sydney Opera House, writers told stories heralded as "about us, about Australia, showing us who we are".

But it was still only ever the Australia of people From Here.

Inez couldn't tell Australia about itself, but she wanted to write even before she knew it was possible.

She wrote in secret, she still had no context she could name.

#### 3.2. *Transcultural Space: Outsiderness Is Insiderness; Not the End of Difference*

Everyone's here in Transcultural Space because of some kind of non-belonging outside of here; in here everyone belongs because of their non-belonging. Their outside non-belonging was thrust

upon them or claimed or realised, it was clearly evident or it was subtle and subdued; in any case it bestowed its gifts or ambiguous gifts.

In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be *located outside* the object of his or her creative understanding—in time, in space, in culture... In the realm of culture, outsideness is a most powerful factor in understanding [6].

But know this: it is not the end of difference. There's space for a melting pot, there are countless versions of hybridisation and fusion (cultural, personal) and there is endless difference, and it does not even need the "celebrating" called for outside.

The differences complement each other and create a new interpersonal transcultural community to which we belong, not because we are similar but because we are different [7].

The belongers might also choose to be in here. (Everyone has belonged somewhere sometime to some degree.)

#### 4. Experiments Never End

##### 4.1. *It Was Called Experimental Writing*

The secret writings of her secret beginnings were poetry but no-one ever saw it, and one day she no longer had any copies of what she used to write. You have to be precise in poetry, also suggestive; you have to use the right word also the startling word. You have to examine your experience, you have to let your experience reveal itself to you with all its clear truth and teasing mystery. You are allowed to use language as it comes to you, you're allowed to make it yours. Poetry taught her to write prose; she spent hours at her notebooks. No-one should see her writing, not for a very long time, and then, slowly and tentatively, she admitted her secret practice and intentions. Eventually she went to a women writer's group (Sydney, 1981) and read her work to others for the first time (pieces about travels) and also she recognised something in *their* work, the work of people who wrote seriously and well, that told her that what she wrote was actually writing not only a preparation for writing. I came out of the closet, she would say, that's when she came out as a writer.

The work was categorised as "experimental writing".

Experimental, because forget about neat plots, twists, closure. They wrote "pieces" rather than "stories". It was all about finding a voice, trying things out: capturing the voice of the moment, saying it your own way. It was about speaking out of sub-cultures and margins, getting published in small press anthologies, with covers designs from the counter-cultural printing presses that ran off posters for new bands, anarchist street parties, demonstrations.

##### 4.2. *Transcultural Space: An Ongoing Experiment*

To experiment is constantly to interrogate and test what you think you know, to be open to new ways of considering, to break structures apart and find new patterns in the pieces. This is the essence of existence in Transcultural Space. The experimental mind set applies to both the production and the reception of literary works.

We might ask, is Transcultural Space itself an experiment?

Isn't any space? But in here we know it, we rejoice in it, we delight in discovering any received assumptions so that they may be exuberantly interrogated.

#### 5. From Feminism To Gender Fluidity

##### 5.1. *It Was Called Feminist Writing*

She was categorised as a feminist writer also, often in the same place (anthologies of "experimental feminist writing"). Because so often you had to say whether or not you were. Because if the question had to be asked, the only answer could be yes.

If it remains at all remarkable, worthy of being remarked, that you believe in the self-determination of women, and in the need for the end of patriarchal structures and biases, you must still be called a feminist writer.

Once upon a future time no-one has to ask. Inez wrote stories of single women striving for independence in settings where usual normalities did not apply.

In the 1970s and 1980s, living in Sydney, when she was starting to publish, all kinds of queer cultures—*avant la lettre* or never claiming that *lettre*—made their mark on inner city culture and also that of the suburbs, small towns and so on. Cultural gayness, now considered apart from homosexuality, and more broadly cultural queerness changed the contextual culture. The culture of her city was immensely influenced by queer arts practitioners, and knew it. Inner-city cultures were international; inner-city denizens had more in common with each other than with the small towns of their nations. The understanding of “culture” was separated from the national looking-glass.

### 5.2. *In Transcultural Space: Where Gender Is Fluid*

In *Transcultural Space*, you can take for granted that gender is fluid and everything that follows. Feminist, camp, gay, queer, trans...it all became part of the transcultural, it all formed, to the extent there is one, the common sensibility.

Everyone in *Transcultural Space* has a sexuality and a gender of their own, not necessarily named. There are overlapping categories of gender. Gender and sexuality each are on a spectrum and you can move along it, you can even be in more than one place on the spectrum.

Maybe the binary might occasionally be convenient. There might even be room in here for die-hard fixed-in-place heterosexuality; Inez doesn't see it, but maybe first you have to believe in it. What there isn't is heteronormativity.

This is evident in the writing that comes from here, it speaks to and from this space, the sensibility informs the work and does not require explanation.

None of this might have the slightest apparent relevance to some of the conversations and activities in here.

## 6. From The Multi-Cultural to Real Diversity

### 6.1. *The Multi-Cultural Writer*

Along with “experimental” and “feminist” the anthologies that first published her work were subtitled with the term “multicultural”.

At first it seemed that at last there was a recognition of a sensibility formed by the experience of an immigrant identity.

Among her earliest published work, Inez supplied her version of growing up migrant in a very British-colonial 1950s Australia [8]. But the Anglo hegemony was nothing like over, in fact it strengthened itself by adopting an Australian version of multiculturalism it called the “mosaic”.

The mosaic model was chosen, in Inez's considered opinion, and she'd tell you this any chance once she figured this out, so that each colour in the mosaic, representing a separate ethnic, national or linguistic entity, remained separate and identifiable by its signature colour while there would be a principal colour in this mosaic, that of the Anglo-origin hegemony, which remained dominant in public life, media and the arts. The ideal of the “melting pot”, a kind of ideal of a society, was eschewed, for the hegemony does not want to melt.

Everyone proclaimed that they adored “diversity” but a “multicultural” writer was meant to write only about being “between two cultures” and the dear diversity remained extrinsic to the dominant, and treated as if its primary purpose was to enrich and validate the mainstream. Post-graduate thesis-writers contacted Inez to ask her about the discrimination she had faced and the “Hungarian community” she had (they told her) grown up in; multicultural was also a name for victim, and people who'd grown up with a language other than English at home were known to live in ghettos, were

expected to be very angry or very proud or possibly both. They were considered liable to wear some peasant clothing from the place of their ethnic lineage. Multicultural writers were meant to be loyal to their origins or maybe in anguish about them and the multicultural communities were ever so much appreciated for the wonderful cuisines they brought to the mainstream.

Australia declared itself a multicultural nation and arts bodies (publishers, grants-givers, curators, *etc.*) made sure that in no time one had to tick a box for being of multicultural background.

Where was the multi in multiculturalism? Only in the number of so-called cultures contributing to the whole, each of them remaining, indeed encouraged to remain, as separately mono-cultural, each remaining, as Amartya Sen says, “enclosed in separate identities pens” [9].

There was a quite a sense of self-congratulation from the hegemony whenever they nodded and pointed at the “multicultural” nature of Australia, while anyone who could claim, or was landed with, this identity category tried to make the most of it, but soon came to that wall between themselves and mainstream culture, that which considered itself normal, average and above all able to tell the only stories that were for everyone.

## 6.2. *Transcultural Space: Taking up the Torch from Multiculturalism*

The best use of multiculturalism was that, as Mikhael Epstein says, it paved the way from the dominance of one canon to the diversity of cultures:

Transculturalism moves further, from the diversity of cultures to the even greater diversity of individuals, transcending their rigid cultural identities. The vision of nonviolent and nonuniform globalization coincides with the transcultural perspective in which more and more individuals find themselves “outside” of any particular culture, “outside” of its national, racial, sexual, ideological, and other divisions. The global society can be viewed as the space of ultimate diversity: diversity of free individuals [7].

In Transcultural Space, diversity is untrammelled and difference untroubled. No-one is assigned a rigid cultural identity: there is no such idea in here. Individuals are assumed all to be different from each other to some degree; they are as various and diverse as they can be, want to be. Hence they find like-minded people and soul mates according to whatever aspects of their ever-altering self finds itself alight with recognition, empathy, fascination. The writer needs no permissions or directions to write from here.

## 7. The Global Foreign

### 7.1. *From Travel Writer to Global Soul*

Where is home? Inez is asked. Wherever I’m sleeping tonight, she says, wherever I’m headed when I say, going home now. Once long ago she wrote “I’ll always be homesick wherever I am” and later she wrote “that never stopped being true”.

She wrote about sojourns and explorations in open-ended early travels in Asia and Europe. Calling upon a famous, indeed clichéd distinction that ceased to have much meaning around the time it was coined, a critic categorised Inez, or a narrating voice Inez used, as “not quite tourist not quite traveler”.

There were already many other Western people disturbing those categories, with unconfirmed return tickets, smatterings of local expressions, insistence on local food, local markets, local manners. Inez traveled among them and away from them; she observed them and she observed herself, writing in local cafes, learning a bit of a local language and noting the language of exchange: local waiters talking with travelers, travelers of various origins comparing notes. Neither tourist nor traveler fit the category of people who increasingly decided to come back for longer, do something here, a business a job a project, retirement. Buy some property, live here some of the time. There were precedents, even a long tradition, of such decisions but now the scale was epoch-making.



She did not think of herself as a travel writer, particularly; least of all when anyone suggested she could supply newspapers and magazines with her accounts. She did not write the way the weekend Travel Section required.

Inez was described in a book called *The Global Soul* [10] when its author who met her in Toronto reported that she was born in Italy of Hungarian parents, grew up in Australia, had lived in SE Asia, was on her way to a writing residency in USA and had just spent some months researching in India. The book was full of such exultant examples, people who could not be confined to a single national identity and kept on moving.

So she was a global soul, ok, nice, but it wasn't a publishing category.

It was a good notion, though, the description of a massive phenomenon, suggesting we need a better first question for people we meet than "where are you from?"

As a traveler you can return; you can not return from your soul going global.

## 7.2. Transcultural Space: Feeling Foreign Everywhere

The traveling person knows how much parts of you are not where you are, that is, are not where your body is. She knows the feeling of having bodily arrived while the soul tears itself away and follows more slowly. The feeling of being in transit becomes familiar.

The feeling of getting lost in strange cities.

You have to be infinitely adaptable, and that includes when you haven't prepared to be.

It's like that in Transcultural Space.

The feeling of being "at home" does not attach to a country or even a city entirely; it can be found in a kind of cafe or bar, a kind of conversation, the ambience of someone's house. It's where you experience yourself as authentic without having to think about it. It's where you find a transcultural space within some other space. In physical space, the feeling is temporary. More lastingly, it's where constant foreignness becomes familiar.

So, the writer thinks, one might choose not to claim, or aspire to, being "at home everywhere" but, instead, the more desirable condition of being a foreigner everywhere.

Refugees, forced migrations, displacement and trauma are reasons some have no return; some have a new nation in Diaspora.

For Inez who took off in a more willful (if seeming imperative) way, the difficulty of return is more about not having property, a home, nor a living family in her first and dearest city; there are the oldest friends but it's not as if she can turn up and say she will live with them. The city has changed, the gap she made by leaving has been filled. It's a place in *time* she left.

Once you've lived the neo-nomad life, or the life of a multiple migrant, then you will also feel a touch of foreignness returning to places you ought to feel you belong to. No matter how often you have seen it or how well you once knew it, everything you notice has a tinge of the exotic, the foreign, the remarkable; the sense that what you find non-ordinary is ordinary if you're from here.

As Helene Cixous wrote about dreams, "foreignness is a fantastic nationality" [11]. In Transcultural Space foreignness is the way to feel at home, foreignness is your nationality.

## 8. Beyond The Post-Colonial Binaries

### 8.1. The Post-Colonial Margin

How are you going to define post colonial? It can't be everything that comes out of a nation that once was officially a colony. There is a politics and a sensibility essential to the post-colonial; colonial history and the way it never ends inform the subject material whatever it is, the characters whoever they are; this is at best recognised implicitly or explicitly in the text. But is that all, or, is that enough? Is it in the intention or in the reading? In this case it's not up to the writer to fit the category.

Her book about tourists in Bali had the word *edge* in its title [12]. The narrative agent deliberately placed itself and the main characters as outsiders on the island; they are not short-holiday tourists, for

each has a personal mission, but in relation to Balinese culture they are strangers, spectators, no matter how much they reach realms unavailable to the more casual tourist. The culture of tourism itself is the novel's subject; the simulacrum becomes the real; beneficial and destructive effects of tourism are not easily separated, the exchanges and encounters between people demolish notions of borders or affinities being a matter of national, ethnic or historical inheritance.

The next book, a non-fiction, a memoir of a challenging year as a volunteer worker in Papua New Guinea, questioned the philosophies, the ideals, the assumptions—conscious and un—in the development industry, considered as a kind of colonialism; notions of progress and evolution discomfited the memoirist. Its tone of grim revelations and willingness to criticise the host national culture as well as her own made the book spectacularly unwelcome at a time when shocking revelations of viciously racist policies of the past in Australia were in the air, and a tone of New Age-y romanticism about the lives of tribal black-skinned people was a fashion even among intellectuals [13].

The most complex fiction she wrote [14], based on several lengthy travels in India, channeling Indian voices and events, thematically about the relationship between tradition and globalization, considering whether globalisation was Westernisation, and exploring the strife over intellectual property and the politics of knowledge, was turned down by Australian publishers ("I've been to India and it wasn't like that") but published to acclaim in India. This edged her even more to the outer margins of the category Australian writer and but of course she isn't an Indian writer.

It was a curious position to be in, and it was in the aftermath of that publication that Inez left her last home in Australia, to move around the world for years, to develop a screenplay adaptation of the Indian novel at a film school in Amsterdam, a transcultural space where people from a range of national and language backgrounds worked together on their creative projects.

In recent fiction Inez sent an Australian character to Amsterdam to become a vampire [15] and placed another in Berlin there to join forces with some ghosts [16].

As Dubravka Ugresic says:

That is why I have passionately propagated the notion of transnational literature, which could be a new cultural platform, a literary territory for those writers who refuse to belong to their national literatures, or to belong to their national literatures only. I think that establishing a theoretical ground for transnational literature and opening other options than national culture and literature is an extremely important cultural job [17].

It isn't even always a matter of a deliberate refusal, it's more a matter of impossibility.

## 8.2. *Transcultural Space: The Energetic Co-Existence and Dissolution of Binaries*

Post-colonialism's vocabulary does not fit, it is transcended by, the transcultural; categories of dominant and subordinate, coloniser and colonised, subalterns and superiors, orientalists and occidentalists. Their usefulness, the discourses they engendered, are not the air of Transcultural Space.

Wait, you might ask, but what about the realities of a world where one is categorized by others and treated accordingly; where you yourself might dismiss their categories but cannot thereby prevent their perceptions and their prejudice, discrimination, violence? Look, I answer, when we enter Transcultural Space we are in a space where such phenomena cannot exist. It's a notional space, an ideal, and we can decide how it feels to live there. Everyone and everything is subject to, altered by, absorbed by, integrated with its energies.

In Transcultural Space, the energies—in the form of ideas, sympathies, artworks—circulate, taking and giving aspects of all they touch, thereby dissolving hierarchies and binaries of identity. In Transcultural Space every difference co-exists.

And all of this *matters* in a world that needs ideals to be articulated:

Once again, a rule of thumb for transcultural diversity: *oppose yourself to nobody, identify yourself with nothing*. No identities and no oppositions—only concrete and multiple differences. The deeper is differentiation, the better is the prospect for universal peace [7].



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