

2. Axioms & Methodology

I have no ancestry. Only ancestors. (Le Guin 272)

Of all vulgar modes of escaping from the consideration of the effect of social and moral influences on the human mind, the most vulgar is that of attributing the diversities of conduct and character to inherent natural differences.

(Mill, *The Principles of Political Economy*, Book 2, Chapter 9, § 3)

I share my basic assumption and complaint, though not its consequences, with Walter Benn Michaels. In his book *The Trouble With Diversity* (2006) he claims that we have learned to love difference and that “[i]nstead of trying to treat people as if their race didn’t matter, we would not only recognize but celebrate racial identity.[...] [W]e love race – we love identity – because we don’t love class” (Michaels 2006, 5-6). He continues:

A world where some of us don’t have enough money is a world where the differences between us present a problem: the need to get rid of inequality or to justify it. A world where some of us are black and some of us are white-or biracial or Native American or transgendered-is a world where the differences between us present a solution: appreciating our diversity. (Michaels 2006, 6)

As a result, he argues, the notion of diversity actually, rather than superseding or supplanting racism and essentialism, “perpetuates the very concepts it congratulates itself on having escaped” (Michaels 2006, 7). In addition, he claims in *The Shape of the Signifier* (2004), the function of diversity and difference has been transformed, as “the differences between what people think (ideology) and the differences between what people own (class)” have been replaced with “the differences between what people are (identity)” (Michaels 2004, 24). In

other words, politics have become identity politics.¹ I agree with Michaels that a focus on or even celebration of identity and differences in identity is problematic. It reifies identity by suggesting it is an ontological category, i.e. something we “just are” and will remain, while neglecting the many and much more malleable lines of conflict that are ideological and informed by what we believe.²

However, I disagree with the consequences Michaels draws. His assessment of the USA as loving difference is, at the very least, debatable. As the presidential elections in 2008 or Samuel Huntington’s book *Who Are We?* (2004) demonstrate, and as Anthony Appiah (2005) and Samuel Ludwig (2003) convincingly argue, celebrations of difference, while ideologically upheld as part of US-American cultural history and heritage, are often only superficial and partial when seen against the demands for, and attempts of, the maintenance of that homogeneity visible in advocacies of monolingualism and restrictive immigration policy.³ Analytically more problematic is Michaels’s rigid opposition between ideology (which for him means class only) and ontology (which he limits to identity). While the opposition clearly serves a polemic purpose, it is too simplistic. He merely replaces one essential category with another, in turn himself ignoring various other kinds of differences and downplaying the interdependence between the two categories. In my opinion, the consequences of Michaels’s complaint are much more fundamental, namely that the notion of cultural identity and difference is problematic per se,

1 | More precisely, Michaels argues that the “American left” works with a wrong conception of class, namely one that assumes it to work similarly to identities and cultures.

2 | His argument in its entirety has to be seen within the US-American context of a grid-locked tradition of political debate between an “intellectual left” and a “(neo-) conservative right,” and as a piece of academic self-fashioning; within that tradition it is somewhat consistent that his position has been criticized as a piece of liberal racism. For an extensive appraisal of the connection between class and culture, see Gandal 2007, especially 1-24.

3 | As Appiah notes, “[t]he rhetoric of diversity has risen as its demographic reality has declined (Appiah 2005, 115). Samuel Ludwig calls this “thin pluralism” in his essay of the same title (2003).

which should not be surprising considering that both “identity” and “culture”⁴ in themselves are highly over- and under-determined terms and concepts.⁵

4 | For an introduction to and survey of the most important usages, lineages and faultlines, see Claus-Michael Ort’s chapter in Ansgar and Vera Nünning’s *Konzepte der Kulturwissenschaften* (2003). Post Scriptum: in his seminal book on the medium of comics, Scott McCloud defines culture as comprising all those activities and artifacts that are irrelevant to procreation and survival. This seems to make some sense until one remembers the argument by Freud that, in fact, our artistic activities and productions are nothing but the result and expression of our *Eros* and *Thanatos* drives. It is also worth remembering, Slavoj Žižek points out in *Tarrying With the Negative* (1993), that communities are not only imaginary but constitute, perpetuate and self-assure themselves in festivities and rituals via concrete, material things and practices, e.g. food, clothing, etc.

5 | The issue of class mentioned here in passing would deserve another monograph for itself. As another conceptually (not to mention historically and politically) loaded aggregate category, I find it problematic for reasons similar to those underlying my relativization of cultural identity (although I do not see at this time how we could do entirely without the concept of class), which is why I will be talking mostly about socio-economic differences. Where I do use “class” I am not using it in the strict Marxist sense but in two of the three senses proposed by Raymond Williams in his *Keywords*, i.e. as a marker of *group* (“social or economic category;” 59) and of *formation* (“perceived economic relationship;” 59). As will become clear further on, it will be treated as one faultline of identification and differentiation among others that is part of a dynamic system of identifications and differentiations. However, this does not mean that, for example, race, gender and class function identically. They are interdependent – race and gender will crucially determine the likelihood of poverty, for example –, but they function differently; membership status varies significantly regarding transience/permanence, possibility of exit, control over auto-/hetero-definition, etc. While gender and race are hardly malleable (phenotypically; though they are malleable to some degree, apart, of course, from the content of the identification), class membership can, at least theoretically, be changed. This is, as Winfried Fluck has argued together with Welf Werner (2003), one reason why the USA is traditionally less troubled about sharp socio-economic differences: differences as a result of gender or race are unfair because genotypic (one cannot be blamed for one’s gender or race), while class differences can be overcome (one can be blamed for “laziness”). Fluck has also argued (2002) that in the course of the second half of the 20th century, economic matters and class membership have receded behind the focus on an “expressive individualism.” The issue of culture and class has recently been addressed in a special issue of *American Studies* edited by Michael Butter and Carsten Schinko (2010). Despite all problems involved, it is worth noting, as Butter and Schinko point out, that for the last decades class and

It seems almost facetious to point out that the term and concept “culture” has about as many definitions as it has instances of use, most of them vague – if an attempt at a definition is made at all. For the past three centuries (after its incremental detachment from its original Latin usage), it has variously been used in opposition to nature, civilization or society or, inversely, as an equivalent of the latter two; it has been understood as part of an enlightenment project of individual and collective moral amelioration (adopted and elaborated by German Idealism and philosophers such as Hegel and Herder); as normative (high culture and “the best of what has been thought and said;” e.g. Matthew Arnold) and descriptive (as context-dependent cultures, e.g. by the ethnologist Edward Tylor); as a symbolic system (e.g. Cassirer, later Parsons and Luhman), a whole way of life (e.g. Williams, but also Freud), a web of signification (e.g. Geertz), patterns of life and expressive forms (e.g. Hall), patterns of thinking, feeling, and mental programs or software of the mind (Hofstede), etc. One could roughly distinguish between social, semiotic and discursive concepts, but also between holistic generalizations (culture as inclusive, as a whole way of life of shared patterns of behavior, cognition, and affect that includes politics, morality, social interaction, economics, etc.) and “atomistic” differentiations (culture as “residual,” i.e. what is “left over” after the various other “spheres” such as the social, political and economic sphere have been delimited), or, as Floya Anthias summarizes, between content, process and structure (see below). What it boils down to is that it appears to be “in the nature” of “culture” to be almost indefinable; Kroeber and Kluckhohn list more than one hundred and fifty usages of “culture” in their influential 1952 review (of more than 400 pages). Perhaps the most straightforward manner of dealing with this conceptual plethora is Ute Daniel’s in her *Kompendium Kulturgeschichte* (2001):

Das ist einer der Gründe, warum weder hier noch im folgenden eine klare Definition von Kultur oder von Kulturgeschichte zugrunde gelegt werden wird: Kultur(geschichte) definieren zu wollen, ist Ausdruck des Anspruchs, trennen zu können zwischen dem, was Gegenstand von Kultur(geschichte) ist und was nicht. Ich kann mir jedoch keinen Gegenstand vorstellen, der nicht kulturgeschichtlich analysierbar wäre. Ein weiterer Grund dafür, den definitorischen Zugang zum Thema dieses Buchs zu vermeiden, ist, daß ein solcher Zugang Klarheit zu einem sehr hohen Preis herstellt: Der Preis wäre die unendliche Mühe intellektueller Aufräumarbeit unter den unklaren und ambivalenten Sachverhalten und Denkopoperationen, welche sich in solch eine definitorische Linienziehung nicht fügen – ja, die gerade diesseits und jenseits einer solchen sauberen definitorischen Schneise erst so richtig wuchern. (8-9)

socio-economic differences, though having once been declared part of the “holy trinity” of race, gender and class, have been a significant blind spot of American studies.

[That is one of the reasons why now and throughout there will be no clear definition of culture or cultural history: such an attempt to define culture and cultural history is an expression of the supposition that it is possible to differentiate between what is subject of cultural history and what is not. I cannot, however, think of any subject that could not be analyzed as part of a cultural history. Another reason for eschewing a definitional approach to the topic of this book is that such clarification would come at a high price: The price would be the abysmal labor of an intellectual spring-cleaning among the unclear and ambivalent states of things and thought operations which will not submit themselves to such definitional demarcation – which, in fact, proliferate outside such a clean definitional swath. [Translation mine]]

What I am willing to concede is that my focus on person and community implies an anthropological understanding of culture; my focus on literature a symbolic one; and my focus on practices and communication a performative and discursive one. In fact, I would argue that culture is all of the above: it comprises ways/patterns of human acting, thinking and communicating that are structured by, and given meaning within, signifying systems that a given community considers “cultural;” this includes artefacts such as literary texts, since they, too, are communicative, symbolic and performative actions. These ways of acting, thinking and communicating have a symbolic, discursive, and performative dimension *all at once* – this coincidentally implies that they have to cross the (context-dependent) threshold at which they become meaningful as “cultural” over and beyond their immediate semantic and pragmatic meaning and function. Furthermore, they are multi-coded and scalar. This means that a given act (with “act” understood in the widest sense of the term) is never “only” cultural, but is usually also meaningful within other signifying systems, such as social, political or legal ones. It is usually when the signifying system a given community considers “cultural” dominates the meaning of an act that this community then considers that act *mainly* “cultural.” For example, voting is an eminently political act, but it also occurs, of course, within a given cultural context, within which it has additional “cultural” significance; a literary text is usually considered cultural, but it can also be eminently political. If we understand culture in this way, it *cannot* have a stable, homogeneous, coherent and clearly definable identity and content.

PREMISES

As both Anthony Appiah and Zygmunt Bauman in their recent longer discussions of personal identity point out (Appiah 2005; Bauman 2004), the concept is as topical as its proliferating usages are diverse and often vague. Their discussions differ in their interests. Bauman presents an analysis of what

he regards as the vagaries of personal and communal identities in a modern and postmodern world, Appiah's interest lies in the ethical preconditions and consequences of personal and communal identity constitution. Both agree, though, on the basic aspects and conditions that prefigure and shape the constitution of personal and communal identity:^{6,7}

6 | There is another complex and rather heated debate lurking in the background here: Appiah and Bauman write about "real" human beings, societies and life, I write about fictional characters. The fundamental faultline in this debate is the question whether or not we make sense of fictional characters in the same way we make sense of human beings, and vice versa. The debate is too complex to summarize here in full, but it is worth noting that this debate is heated and controversial only in its strong version (we treat fictional characters either *exactly like* or *entirely unlike* human beings). The weaker claim that we use some of the strategies/tools we use for making sense of real people for fictional "people" is much less controversial. Since we cannot possibly escape our human cognitive experiential framework (our mesocosmos, so to speak) in anything we think, feel, or do, it seems unproblematic to argue that we can productively analyze fictional characters using categories and concepts developed for human beings, as long as we remain aware of the fact that fictional characters are artifacts.

7 | The terms I use are my own or, within and between scholarly disciplines, lingua franca usage. Many other terms have been used to describe, sometimes proscribe, features of identity, such as "performativity" (Judith Butler), "hybridity" (Homi Bhabha) or "rhizome" (Deleuze/Guattari). If I forego these and other terms, it is because I hope to avoid cant as much as possible or because a given term is restricted to specific situations and conditions, as is the case with hybridity, and has been unduly or unspecifically extended. Bhabha, for example, develops his concept strictly within a particular postcolonial context. It has subsequently been generalized to the point where it has come to mean simply a dialectically irresolvable "both/and," which in turn has frequently reified into a bland "third term." As I will discuss in greater detail below, many aspects of this discussion and argument have a long, often ignored history. A number of recent concepts advertised as innovative and new are actually at least a century old. For example, with regard to personal and communal identity, Isaac Berkson already talks about a "range" of "small and graded differences" (Berkson 113), and so does Joseph Štýbr (1919). Transnationalism receives a sophisticated and still useful analysis by Randolph Bourne already in 1916; in 1906, Gino Speranza, secretary of the Society for the Protection of Italian Immigrants, writes:

The conception of citizenship itself is rapidly changing and we may have to recognize a sort of world or international citizenship as more logical than the present peripatetic kind, which makes a man an American while here, and an Italian while in Italy. International conferences are not so rare nowadays. Health, the apprehension or exclusion of criminals, financial standards, postage, telegraphs and shipping are today to a great extent, regulated by international action... The old barriers are

- (1) *Auto- and Hetero-Identification*. An apparently banal but fundamental distinction has to be made between who we think we are and who others think we are. Incongruity between auto- and hetero-identification is a significant source of dissonance and conflict. Total congruity would appear to be impossible.
- (2) *Multiplicity & Overlap*. Personal identities are “multiple” in that we identify and are identified along various different categories (age, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economics, community, profession, health), and “overlapping” in that very rarely only one of these categories matter (Appiah 2005, 100). Sometimes, overlaps in significant categories, for example gender/age/community, may also cause dissonances and conflicts.
- (3) *Negotiability & Interaction*. Identities are “eminently negotiable and revocable” (Bauman 11), they are neither fixed nor determinate as a “homogeneity of Difference” (Appiah 2005, xvi). This means that they constantly change, if not always drastically or noticeably. Also, identities are performed and maintained in interaction and negotiation with others, so that we can never be the sole hermetic source of our identity. As Appiah points out at length, neither subject-centered nor social-centered accounts of identity alone suffice because the first overemphasizes creativity while the second neglects creativity (2005, 17-18; 54).⁸ It follows that, though unwieldy and not very elegant, we should speak of processual/dynamic and interactive/recursive auto- and hetero-identification rather than identity.⁹

everywhere breaking down. We may even bring ourselves to the point of recognizing foreign ‘colonies’ in our midst, on our own soil, as entitled to partake in the parliamentary life of their mother country. (quoted in Foner 2005, 62)

8 | With a rather blunt “so what?” Appiah argues that we should accept the noncoherence of the two standpoints and analytically appreciate their respective heuristic value.

9 | It should be noted that while these features appear to be characteristic of modern societies, and indeed are often made out to be in critical complaints about the increasing disintegration and fragmentation of personal and communal identity in the modern and postmodern world, most of them are not. Historians, among them – but not only – Michael Foucault or Thomas Laqueur, have indeed shown that identifications in earlier centuries often ran along significantly different faultlines that were thought to delimit significantly different contents, for example regarding sexuality. However, not only has this frequently been misinterpreted – in a rush of modern and postmodern hubris – as meaning that identities were less complex and more stable in pre-modern societies, a claim to which much recent research has given the lie; the fundamental constitutive processes, regardless of the particular historical contents and distinctions they create, seem to be logically and relatively (meaning here: specifically differences in degree, not category) identical. The more general epistemological problem underlying this issue is one of realism in the philosophy of science, and in this context specifically whether we

- (4) *Transience/Triviality*. Some identifications may be “relatively trivial or transient,” (Appiah 2005, 100), such as membership in a music subculture and/or a particular clothing style, some may not, such as gender and age. This, too, however, is a question of degree and of context. One can imagine situations in which age is trivial, but gender or even clothing style is not, or others in which profession may seem much more transient than health.
- (5) *Stratification and Differentiation*. As Bauman stresses, “identification is also a powerful factor in stratification” and segregation (Bauman 38; 74). Identifications may unite and integrate, but they may also divide: “Identity battles cannot do their job of identification without dividing as much as, or more than, they unite. Their inclusive intentions mingle with (or rather are complemented by) intentions to segregate, exempt and exclude” (Bauman 79). Few differences make no difference, though it is important to maintain that differentiation does not inevitably lead to stratification and segregation. Otherwise there would be no point in trying to eliminate racism.¹⁰ Since stratification is dynamic and rarely permanent, it is heterarchical rather than hierarchical. This means that differentiating factors may be differently stratified over time.¹¹
- (6) *Systemic Interdependence*. Identification is context-sensitive (Appiah 2005, 100) and part of a web and system of differentiations, which in turn is dynamic. This means that personal identification cannot occur without communal identification, and both take place within a particular, formative

create “reality” with the terms, concepts and categories that we use or whether we find “reality” and become aware of its complexities with our “new” questions rather than “inventing” or “producing” it. Much speaks for the hypothetical realism that Karl Popper or Gerhard Vollmer propose: though there is no direct and unmediated access to the existing world, we have to suppose that it exists and that our models and descriptions of it may asymptotically approach it; all else, as they impressively show, leads to contradiction and incoherence. However, this does not mean that we continuously glean more of the “truth;” rather, we learn what may reasonably be said to be false.

10 | On occasion, Paul de Man’s reference to the Archie Bunker scenario (what difference does it make which way one ties one’s shoelaces?) in the context of a rhetorical and semiotic argument (to which linguistic pragmatics has an answer) has been misunderstood to mean that there cannot be difference without hierarchy and thus that there cannot be trivial differences. As Appiah (2005), Bauman (2004), and many others have demonstrated, this is not true.

11 | Note that heterarchy (the initial theoretical equality of all factors in a system) does not preclude hierarchies. However, heterarchy conceptualizes hierarchies in a heterarchical system of organization as temporary, dynamic and transient. A more recent, related term is “rhizome.” The concept is mostly used in information studies and political and social theory (it was first used by Warren McCulloch).

sociohistorical background (say, the Weimar Republic or the US-American Civil War). Both are interdependent. This means furthermore that personal and communal auto- and hetero-identification are also *at work*¹² in constituting communal belonging, though the agent of the respective identification may not be a single subject but a human or discursive “we.” This has significant consequences for communal identification and thus for notions of cultural identity, as will be shown below.¹³

- (7) *Communality*. Just like there are multiple identifications, in most instances there also are several communities with which a subject identifies and/or is identified; “few if any of us are exposed to just one ‘community of ideas and principles’ at a time” (Bauman 13). These communities in turn also are more or less
- a) *integrated* (homo- or heterogeneous) (Bauman 13). For example, exclusive religious or “subculture” communities with a high entry cost exacted in the form of strict principles and waivers to ensure long-term membership and costly “right to exit” are usually much more integrated than those whose membership is more transient and uncontrolled.
 - b) *historical, dynamic and negotiable*. For example, identification as German-American in the mid-19th century USA was significantly different from such identification during the first World War due to obvious historical reasons; socioeconomic identification is highly negotiable depending on the criteria used to define membership.
 - c) *interdependent and differential*, such as gender and race or age and health.
 - d) *imagined and scripted* in the sense of “ideas and principles” believed to be shared (Appiah 2005; Bauman 2004; Anderson 1991), as is often strongly the case in diasporic communities. Collective identities provide scripts, narratives for how to live life, not just in relation to others, but also “to structure possible narratives of the individual self” (Appiah 2005, 22).
 - e) potentially *ambiguous* in the experience and acceptance of their ideas and principles by their members (Bauman 62). This pertains, for example, to communal identifications which one was born into and within which a difficult “right of exit” obtains.
 - f) *more or less open* in their “right of exit,” i.e. the possibility for members to leave a community, such as the Mafia, or, for that matter, the Amish.¹⁴

12 | This is meant literally as processual.

13 | A quite similar conception of identity has been proposed by the sociologist Irving Goffman as “multiple selves.” The focus on systematic interdependency might, to some readers, echo the tradition of a holistic rather than atomistic natural philosophy.

14 | Many philosophers and scholars have argued that communities are constituted thus, Franz Boas being among the first. He argued against the concept of race and for

Considering these features, it should be clear just why the celebration of diversity and ontological difference is problematic. Any ascription of identity will have to be incomplete, asymptotic and selective; the factors playing into personal auto- and hetero-identification are potentially inexhaustible, and they are dynamic. The same is true for communal identification, as it is inextricably bound to personal identification, and characterized by the same features and their inexhaustibility.¹⁵

AXIOM I: CULTURAL IDENTITY

It is only a small step from this recognition to see why my primary axiom (I) is the relativization of cultural identity, i.e. any such aggregate grouping is subject to the factors listed above and is one auto- and hetero-identification among a given heterarchical set of others. More concretely, if we conceive of communities the way proposed above, how should it be possible to ascribe a cultural identity to them in toto, or to each one of their alleged members? Of course, there may be certain cultural practices, principles and ideas that many of its members adhere to. But these, too, are part of a web of other significations and differentiations, as I argue above, and they do not constitute a homogeneous community. In fact, my challenges to cultural identity are the same that are often leveled against race: the factual (race does not exist) and the epistemic (we do not have criteria to establish racial belonging) challenge. “Culture,” and thus “cultural identity,” despite the “hefty workout” (Appiah 2005, 114) it has been getting, is almost impossible to define. Often enough, “culture” serves merely as an umbrella term either for all human activity of a given community, for the sum of its artistic productions – often selective and restricted to the canon –, or for those practices left once political, economic or social ones have been subtracted. In discussions of “mainstream” culture, integration, race and ethnicity, it is often accompanied by some metaphorical correlative equally

the concept of different communities, the cornerstone of a cultural rather than racial anthropology.

15 | Somewhat more trenchantly, Nina Glick Schiller points out with respect to current research into transnational communities that not only are there different understandings of “community” but also that the term runs the danger of confounding “ideology with sociality” and impeding “the analysis of political and economic power” because it “evokes an ideology of shared interests” while ignoring class and power struggles (Glick Schiller 2003, 108). Gitlin points out that culturalist approaches run the danger of ignoring these important factors so that “cultural identity” comes to serve as a kind of “surrogate politics” (Gitlin 404).

indefinable and over- and underdetermined, such as melting pot, mosaic, pizza pie, or salad bowl. At the worst,

culture and even religion can become essentialized to the point that they can serve as a functional equivalent of biological racism – culture, put another way, can do the work of race, when peoples or ways of life are seen as unchangeable as pigmentation. (Foner 2005, 217)¹⁶

In the context of a critique of hybridity, Floya Anthias provides one of the best critiques of “culture” and “cultural identity” in her 2001 essay “New Hybridities, Old Concepts: The Limits of ‘Culture’ She identifies three uses of “culture” in sociology: 1. culture as content (products such as literary texts, films, etc.); 2. culture as world-view, i.e. process or mechanism; and 3. “culture as form or structure,” i.e. “patterned ways of knowing and doing” (627). She then argues that belonging and personal and collective identity “do not depend solely on cultural practices or beliefs” (622), that the notion of culture as “a core element of identity and belonging” (620) eschews various other factors such as gender and class, and that “cultural resources are only one of a set of resources used by ethnic groups” (629).

Writing about hybridity, she points out that “approaches to ‘hybridity’ may unintentionally provide a gloss over existing cultural hierarchies and hegemonic practices” (619) and attacks the idea that hybridity transcends old ethnicities and constitutes a new form of identity (620) that allows for transgressive cultural formations that “*in and of themselves* function to dispel the certainties of fixed locations” (620; emphasis in the original). On the contrary, not only does hybridity as a recombination of existing and new practices happen in all cultures and does not necessarily lead to “transgressivity or empowerment” (622), it may even support racism, ghettoization and nationalism: “The mixed cultural patterns of second- and third-generation diasporic actors underplay the ways in which gender and religion, for example, serve different ends in different contexts” (630); thus, focusing on the transgressive “underplays alienation, exclusion, violence and fundamentalism as part of cultural encounters, particularly where there is social asymmetry as in colonialism” (631). Detecting similar problems with regard to the concept of “diaspora,” Anthias concludes that a “view of hybridized diasporas, which neglects the political and power dimensions of social relations, falls into the same culturalist essentialist traps as earlier notions of ethnicity” (637).

Obviously, some notions of culture lend themselves more easily to homeostatic homogenization than others. Systems theory, for example, with its

16 | Foner bases her argument on modified observations made by Fredrickson 1997 and Patterson 2003.

non-anthropocentric focus on information, function and interaction, is a less likely candidate than subject-centered or ideological concepts, though this is paid for by its totalizing tendency and neglect of the “human factor.” For the purposes of my argument, the relativization of cultural identity is independent of the specific notion of culture one works with (whether semiotic, structural, discursive, ideological, agential, etc.)¹⁷ as soon as that notion is used in the way I criticize: namely as a concept that is supposed to possess or bestow an “identity.”

There are, for example, roughly eleven million South Asian Americans in the USA as of 2010; one can hardly expect them all to share the same beliefs, perhaps apart from some generalizations so vague as to be of almost no use at all (not to mention the significantly more encompassing umbrella term Asian American).¹⁸ Even if the numbers are lower, the “critical mass” for a community to be auto- and hetero-identified as a community can, in most instances, plausibly be assumed to also give rise to the criteria listed above, with the exception of small exclusive communities such as the Amish (and even these tend to be much more dynamic and complex than visible from the outside). Even in this kind of highly integrated community, though, one may expect additional differentiating criteria. Due to various factors such as exit, influx, and contextual changes, the composition of the group changes and so do beliefs, practices and habits. For example, in addition to being heterogeneous, the Japanese American community at the end of the 19th century was substantially different from the one following World War II, among other things due to the Gentlemen’s Agreement and the imprisonment of many Japanese Americans during the war; the same is true for Irish Americans between the mid-19th and mid-20th century. In addition, the self-identification of many ethnic groups in the USA for various reasons such as prestige or history constantly changes in contradistinction to other, apparently similar ethnic groups, which is the case for South Vietnamese Americans vs. Laotian Americans, as well as for Jamaican Americans vs. West African Americans. It is no coincidence that the various maps and atlases of ethnic groups provide substantially different numbers: *The Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* from 1980

17 | Although I cannot elaborate on this in this context, I do not think that any of these conceptions are exhaustive, nor do I see them as mutually exclusive but rather analytically complementary.

18 | Asian American studies scholars are well aware of this, even if this avowed awareness does not always have consequences for the corpus selection, analysis, and contextualization. For an exception, see Ty and Goellnicht 2004. Please note at this point that I will forego any hyphenation for large aggregate identity categories throughout this essay.

lists 126 ethnic groups; *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Multiethnic American Literature* from 2005 lists 38.

It seems almost fatuous to point out that the majority group against which the minority groups are differentiated as being “culturally different” and thus ethnic, namely American, is even more difficult to define, even though attempts have been and are made. Moreover, there are several other factors such as gender, socio-economics, age, sexual orientation that in certain circumstances might play a much more important role than putative cultural differences. In light of this, it is indeed a justified question whether the labeling of Lahiri’s storyworld as South Asian American – or the labeling of other story worlds as Chinese American, Japanese American, Greek American and so forth – really provides more than a frame of reference for the historical, political and legal constitution of the group. Of course, there are cultural identifications and differentiations that play a role in the stories in addition to class or gender, or even illness, though not always, but it is quite impossible to suppose a cultural identity common to all of the characters.

If we accept this basic axiom and the observations about personal and communal auto- and hetero-identification it is based on, we have to accede, I argue, a number of concomitant axioms and consequences. In addition, we have to address some potential objections, misunderstandings, and irresolvable problems.

AXIOM II: CULTURAL IDENTITY CORRELATES (RACE, ETHNICITY, HYBRIDITY, ETC.)

There is no logical reason why, once we relativize cultural identity, we should not relativize notions of ethnic and racial identity, as well as the more recent so-called “diasporic” or “border” or “new mestiza” identities, as long as racial and ethnic identity, as well as the others mentioned, are primarily used as cultural identities and as functionally equivalent.

Race and ethnicity in particular have been subject to intense debate for decades, and I am obviously not the first to question their utility and to reject them.¹⁹ Race is popularly used to denote belonging based on a presumably shared genotype of all members, which is then assumed to express itself in phenotype and other presumably inherited characteristics such as “intelligence,” “talents” and behavioral and moral preferences. Ethnicity, on the other hand, is often

19 | For an overview and continuation of the critical debate, see Burke 2009, Mizruchi 2008, Ueda 2006. For the histories and interconnections of race, ethnicity and related issues, see Healey 2009, Schaefer 2005, Azuma 2005, Werbner 1997, Glick Schiller 1992.

understood as a category of cultural identity denoting shared practices, norms, values and traditions of a given minority group.²⁰ The problems start right here. First of all, scientifically, this biological conception of race is untenable. While genetic differences between human beings exist (even though they are minimal, deceptively obvious phenotypical differences notwithstanding), there is no genetic race.²¹ Ethnic groups (being a subordinate unit of community and thus logically subject to the features I have outlined above), even if its members share some basic ideas and principles, are, with the few exceptions of truly hermetic groups, too heterogeneous, dynamic and negotiable as to cohere other than, perhaps, in the minds of some of its members. This is why both have been, as indicated above, challenged on factual and epistemic grounds. Both do not exist (i.e. they have no equivalent in the natural world), and membership is impossible to definitively determine. In addition, they are not clearly separable. Race is and has often been used similarly to ethnicity as a category of cultural practices and preferences; already Alain Locke notes their interconnection in a number of his works;²² many critical works on diverse US-American ethnic and/or racial groups more or less equate race and ethnicity.²³ Inversely, many historical examples give evidence, as Nancy Foner (2005) or Donna Gabaccia (2002, 1998) show, that ethnicity has frequently been racialized, for example with regard to Irish and German Americans in

20 | The question of ethnicity is frequently related to the question of power and hegemony, as ethnicity usually refers to the presumed common cultural features of a minority group. Logically, of course, the unmarked majority group (e.g. “white” in the USA) is also an ethnic group. This aspect further complicates the issue (not only because “white” itself is a highly flexible – sometimes minority! – marker, as its history shows), as the simplistic opposition between majority and minority and the correlative opposition between powerful and powerless cannot be upheld. For example, socioeconomic factors can play a much more important role than ethnicity in establishing access to resources, participation, representation, etc. Also, as Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu or Loïc Wacquant have shown, power is never single-sourced, mono-directional and oppressive only.

21 | In fact, genetic differences tend to be higher between individuals *within* one geographical population. Approximately 99.9% of the genetic makeup of humans is identical. For a detailed discussion, see Jorde and Wooding (2004), Witherspoon et al. (2007), and Kaplan and Winther (2012), all of whom are geneticists.

22 | So do Schaefer 2005, Wu 2003, Abizadeh 2001, Sollors 1995, and Appiah 1995.

23 | See, for example, Azuma 2005 (who discusses the discrimination against Japanese Americans in racial terms), Nguyen 2002 (who discusses Asian Americans in racial terms), Cheng 2000 (who writes about racial and ethnic groups under the heading of race), or Gilroy 2000a (who does not consistently distinguish between race and ethnicity).

the mid-19th century, southeastern Europeans in the late 19th century, or Asian Americans all throughout the 20th.²⁴

In answer to these issues, critics have variably suggested that (1) race and ethnicity should be used identically;²⁵ (2) race should be subsumed under ethnicity or vice versa;²⁶ (3) we should talk about racial or ethnic identity in order to emphasize that while “race” and “ethnicity” are problematic, they still denote identity categories that could not be captured otherwise (Appiah 1995);²⁷ (4) we should develop new concepts of race and ethnicity²⁸ such as postethnicity²⁹

24 | Often, cultural differences are assumed to have a correlative in physiognomy.

25 | Again, they often are, see above. I agree that while ethnicity and race may variably signify different contents, they are functionally identical.

26 | Sollors writes that both race and ethnicity constitute “processes of group formation and [...] naturalization of group relationships” (1986, 36-37) and that separating ethnicity and race leads to false generalizations (1986, 38). He too notes that before the popularization of the concept “ethnicity,” “race” served the same purpose and function.

27 | In the late 1980s, Sollors somewhat normatively still insists that “it must be possible to acknowledge and describe concrete ethnic differences without necessarily reifying the concept of ethnicity” (Sollors 1989, xv).

28 | For a summary see Gerber and Kraut 2005; for a collection of essays see Sollors 1996a.

29 | David Hollinger writes that a

postethnic perspective favors voluntary over involuntary affiliations, balances an appreciation for communities of descent with a determination to make room for new communities, and promotes solidarities of wide scope that incorporate people with different ethnic and racial backgrounds. A postethnic perspective resists the grounding of knowledge and moral values in blood and history, but works within the last generation’s recognition that many of the ideas and values once taken to be universal are specific to certain cultures. [...] [A] postethnic perspective builds upon a cosmopolitan element prominent within the multiculturalist movement and cuts against its equally prominent pluralist element. (3)

It is noteworthy that Hollinger relates his concept to “rooted cosmopolitanism” (5) and follows up on contributions to the same topic by Mitchell Cohen in *Dissent* (1992) and Bruce Ackerman in *Ethics* (1994) more than ten years prior to Appiah’s influential book of the same title. In many respects, Hollinger makes points similar to mine. For example, he replaces identity with “affiliations” to emphasize the social processes by which a person “becomes affiliated with *one or more* acculturating cohorts” (6). He also notes that the “communities that are the primary sites for the formation of our identities, for the working out of our politics, and for the clarification of our moral and cognitive standards can have very *different structures, shapes, and purposes*. These communities come into being under a *great variety of circumstances, are perpetuated*

(Hollinger 1995) or simply entirely new concepts such as multiculturalism³⁰ (Sauling Wong 1995); and, lastly (5), we should abandon them.³¹

I propose that for the purposes of investigating group formation, inversion, boundary construction and social distancing, myths of origins and fusions, cultural markers and empty symbols, we may be better served, in the long run, by the vocabulary of kinship and cultural codes than by the cultural baggage that the word 'ethnicity' contains. (Sollors 1995, 39)³²

Unsurprisingly, there is sharp disagreement regarding every single one of these propositions. For example, as Nancy Foner points out, African Americans (or at least their spokespeople) generally do not embrace ethnicity

as a model for their group self-consciousness; the reason for this reluctance to abandon race in favor of ethnicity perhaps has to do with the desire to emphasize that America's black population has confronted, and continues to confront, obstacles to equality

for many distinctive ends, and are driven by very different distributions of power" (105; emphasis mine). Furthermore, he argues that "[s]tates will continue to exist, of course. What they will respond to, however, may not be a nation. It may be, instead, a *multitude of constituencies* united less by a sense of common destiny than by a *will to use the state as an instrument* of their particular agendas" (147; emphasis mine). If I do not make more use of his concept it is because ultimately Hollinger maintains the concept of ethnicity, writing that "postethnicity is more respectful of ethnicity" (5).

30 | In his short introduction to Wong's essay, David Palumbo-Liu describes this idea as conceptualizing cultural identity as "intricately and variously connected, disjoined, interwoven (in both transitory and enduring ways)" (Palumbo-Liu 290).

31 | Paul Gilroy neatly summarizes and critiques the opposing radical viewpoints that race is either nothing or everything in his *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2005, 144-145); incidentally, he too on occasion lapses into talking about wholesale "cultures," e.g. the "feral beauty of postcolonial culture" (142).

32 | Having subsumed race under ethnicity, Sollors' proposition that we abandon "ethnicity" in fact also means that we abandon race. This, too, has in turn been criticized. See also Paul Gilroy's *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (2000a). Interestingly, the book has a different title in its British edition: *Between Camps: Race, Identity and Nationalism at the End of the Colour Line* (2000b). I do not think it is negligible that the metaphorical "beyond" of the US-American edition is replaced by the equally but quite differently metaphorical "between." The US-American title might be a reference to Werner Sollors' groundbreaking *Beyond Ethnicity*; it certainly shows that racial conceptions and their faultlines are different in the USA and Britain because of their different systems of racial differentiation, as well as that the discussion in different contexts has a different utopian tinge.

and opportunity, and persistent racism, of a kind that European immigrants and their children did not experience. (Foner 2005, 215)

This, however, would seem to be a qualitative objection rather than a categorical one, apart from the fact that some immigrants, regardless of hemispheric origin, might disagree.³³

More insistent and fundamental are the objections against the rejection of race and/or ethnicity outright, which Toni Morrison complains is “understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture” (Morrison 10). The objections are usually based on a three-part argument that can be found in a variety of critical discourses, mostly in the context of social groupings, e.g. gender:

- 1) The functional & ethical objection: just because race/ethnicity are constructs does not mean they do not have very real implications and consequences, and therefore, some kind of reality, similar to the idea of free will; it is naïve to think that we can abandon racism by abandoning race, in fact we are intentionally turning our eyes blind to certain problems because we do not have the terms for them anymore;
- 2) The logical objection: just because they are constructs does not mean they are weak constructs.
- 3) The utility objection: they have, regardless of their ontological status, a tremendous heuristic value.

The fundamental problem, Charles Altieri writes, prefiguring Michaels, is “comparatively easy to recognize,” it lies in

the tensions between ideals of identity politics and efforts to create a heterogeneous multicultural stage on which competing versions of identity can coexist. The challenge is figuring out how alternatives might be possible [...] [T]he effort to construct identity gets transformed into a celebration of participating in multiple identities, and sophisticated theory provides a self-congratulatory alternative to the kind of cultural work that requires aligning the self with specific roles and fealties. (Altieri 38)

33 | Irish Americans suffered severe discrimination during the mid-19th century, so did Greek, Eastern European and Chinese immigrants at the end of the 19th century, German Americans during WW I, and Japanese Americans during WW II. While none of them suffered chattel slavery, discrimination against them did repeatedly result in death through physical (personal but also institutional) violence or economic privation. In this regard, too, communal “cultural” identification should be seen in the context of socioeconomic grouping.

In their book on racial formation in the USA, Michael Omi and Howard Winant specify this structural observation with regard to race by remarking that “[t] here is a continuous temptation to think of race as an essence, as something fixed, concrete, and objective. There is also an opposite temptation: to imagine race as a mere illusion, a purely ideological construct which some ideal non-racist social order would eliminate” (Omi and Winant 54). Likewise, Shweder notes the same tendency with regard to ethnic and immigrant groups:

Another current – the poststructuralists, anti-culturalists, and skeptical postmodernists in anthropology – has, in so many ways [...], been calling for a deeply corrosive reading of all representations of ‘others.’ These anthropologists have raised doubts about the reality and existence of bounded groups. Under the banner of a critique of ‘essentialism,’ ‘monumentalism,’ or ‘Orientalism,’ or of just plain stereotyping, they have become critical of all attempts to portray members of other cultures with any characteristic face. The poststructuralists have been working very hard to subjectivize or dissolve the very ideas of ethnic group ‘identity’ and of objective ethical ‘truth.’ At this point, one can hardly expect them to see the point of trying to give an answer to moral questions about how much cultural diversity ought to be allowed within the confines of a liberal democratic nation state. Nevertheless, in our current splintered world, this is the kind of question that anthropologists [...] are going to have to address more and more, if for no other reason than that in a splintered world, cultures sometimes collide, often to the detriment of immigrant minority groups. (Shweder 266)³⁴

In part, I agree. For particular purposes, “race” and “ethnicity” may, for the time being, still be useful heuristic categories, for example for historical research into trans-, inter- and intra-national migration flows, for legal research into civil rights and immigration laws, for political research into immigration policies, for quantitative sociology using census data to reveal larger trends in language use, education, or generational conflict, or for anthropology analyzing larger social group formation.³⁵

However, many recent studies even in these disciplines have abandoned the notion of race and ethnicity and are prefaced by cautionary remarks regarding the ethereality of personal and communal identification and the heterogeneity and volatility of communities. The increasing tendency towards transnational

34 | The same argument has recently been used to level criticism against the proliferating transnationalist research paradigms under the labels of “border literary histories,” “globalization” or “critical regionalism” (Limón 2008).

35 | Even in legal and political contexts the increasing self-identification of many US-American citizens as multi-racial or multi-ethnic seems to point towards an eventual redundancy of these categories. For quantitative sociology, nonetheless, the abandonment of large group categories seems unlikely in the near future.

and transdisciplinary research paradigms seems, at least in the best projects, to further the realization that concepts of cultural identity are highly problematic. More importantly, I find the opposition demarcated in the quotes above dissatisfying, simplifying and distorting, especially Omi and Winant's further suggestion that to imagine or call for an "ideal non-racist social order" is utopian and thus impossible and off-limits.³⁶ Not only does it seem doubtful that various disciplines are rendered methodologically incapacitated by pointing out the inherent weaknesses of the concepts of "race" and "ethnicity"; also, saying that there is no ontological equivalent to the concept of cultural identity, race, ethnicity or the like does not mean that there is no communal identification along the lines of differences in cultural practices, principles and beliefs, which one may very well talk about and analyze. It does mean that we have to be very careful about reification and homeostasis, and pay careful attention to the complexities of personal and communal auto- and hetero-identification and to various other differentiations. Put more bluntly, contra Shweder, cultures do not collide, people and their practices do, for various reasons, only some of which have to do with differences in cultural practices.³⁷ "Culture" often is simply the easy scapegoat.³⁸

36 | Omi and Winant effectively ignore one of the strengths of fiction, the creation of possible alternatives. It seems a sad and unproductive conclusion that we should not be allowed to "imagine that things could be otherwise."

37 | This is, as I maintain and will discuss in more detail below, especially important for literary and cultural studies if we want to do justice to the complexities of fictional worlds.

38 | Note that this axiom also has serious consequences for debates about integration and assimilation. If there is no such thing as a homogeneous, well-defined, stable mainstream culture, it becomes difficult to define just what immigrants are supposed to *culturally* assimilate to. As Portes and Rumbaut remark, "immigrant adolescents do not have a single answer to what is meant by becoming 'American' or becoming 'ethnic'" (2001a, 219). They conclude from their data and quantitative longitudinal survey that neither assimilation nor ethnic pluralism theories fare well (2001a, 301-303). More importantly, the opposition itself is misleading. As Berkson's discussion of theories of Americanization shows,

individuals will vary greatly in the degree and kind of their loyalty. Even when we are thinking primarily of political loyalties there is a great range of variation in the manner and readiness with which the citizen is prepared to perform his duties. [...] When a cultural loyalty is involved the range of variation is surely wider, for there is no legally established minimum for spiritual allegiance. In addition to this the multiplicity of cultural forces assumed to play upon the individuals in any ethnic group will surely tend to increase the individual variability in retention of the ethnic attachment. (113)

Ironically, many recent concepts developed to more adequately conceptualize the complexities of personal and communal identification and conflict, and to avoid the reifying notions of race and ethnicity, in their various critical implementations often more or less implicitly re-instate just such reifying notions, if under different labels such as “hybrid,” “diasporic,” “border,” “creole,” “cosmopolitan,” or “new mestiza” identities. Worse, some operate with the assumption of what I call “privileged epistemology” of authenticity, which I will explain below.

The first and revealing problem about criticizing these concepts is that it is, laxly put, difficult to say what exactly one criticizes. As Peter Burke observes with regard to cultural hybridity, the various concepts in use are “maddeningly elastic” (Burke 1). It would obviously be bad scholarly practice to

Also, assimilation does not work monodirectionally. As Cuban scholar Fernando Ortiz points out as early as 1940, assimilation works both ways (1995). Whenever the differences in cultural practices of communities come into contact, the result is almost never simply monodirectional assimilation by the minority or subordinate group, but a transcultural, i.e. pluridirectional, dynamic and interactive exchange and merging. This realization has recently been incorporated using different terms in a “revival” of assimilation theory, which has often been rejected as hegemonial and suppressive:

Perhaps the controversial nature of the debate about the contemporary second generation, and the power of the transnational model, have placed the assimilation model back on the table. Alba and Nee (1997), for example, suggest that assimilation theory should be resurrected without the prescriptive baggage formulated by the dominant majority. (Brettell and Hollifield 17)

However, I would point out that if successful integration is defined strictly legally, ethically and socially, it becomes much easier to define stipulations for immigrants. Joseph Štýbr once more:

Therefore it appears to me that it is impossible to Americanize a man in the sense lately so often expressed and demanded: that he should forget his native land, that he should forget his mother tongue, that he should forget everything he was before he came to this country and should become 100 percent American. All we can justly ask and expect from him is that he become a loyal citizen of this country and obey its laws and respect its institutions, and with that he will pass for a good citizen. (153-154)

For critical contributions to immigration, integration and assimilation, see Ueda 2006, Foner 2005 and 2003, Gerber and Kraut 2005, Gabaccia 2002, Tichenor 2002, Kivisto 2001, Jacobson 1998, Isbister 1996. Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut have developed a sophisticated, empirical account of what they call “segmented” acculturation that distinguishes dissonant, consonant and selective acculturation (2001a, b; 1996; Portes 1996). For summary tables of their various distinctions, see Portes and Rumbaut 2001a, 68; 306.

reject all these concepts per se and in toto, considering their widely different usages and definitions. But it is also impossible to discuss all of them in detail, not only because they are numerous and each have complex etymological and disciplinary histories, but also because they are used differently in different disciplines, and even within disciplines there is occasionally caustic disagreement as to their precise meaning. It is safe to say, though, that most of these concepts originate or have been revitalized within newer, often interdisciplinary and interconnected research paradigms (e.g. postcolonialism, globalization studies, diaspora studies, transnationalism, cosmopolitanism, border studies) in a variety of disciplines (e.g. sociology, political sciences, anthropology, ethnology, cultural studies, historical studies, linguistics) that try to answer to what they perceive as an increasing, and increasingly complex and dynamic, interconnection of all aspects of human life and activity, with the ensuing faultlines.³⁹ Unsurprisingly, most of these research paradigms have a universalist underpinning.

In some of their versions and definitions, there is, from the vantage point of my axiomatic argument, no reason to object to them, on the contrary: many argue points similar to mine, using other terms. For example, in her presidential address to the MLA in 2005, Domna Stanton writes that

[w]hen we MLA members teach languages other than our native or first idiom and the cultures and histories embedded in those languages, when we read ‘foreign’ texts in

39 | For a succinct critical overview and discussion of many of the concepts involved, see Burke 2009. For representative studies, see, for example, Suárez-Orozco 2004, Friedman and Randeria 2004, Ilmberger and Robinson 2002, Appadurai 2001 on globalization; Appiah 2006, Stanton 2006, Breckenridge 2002 on cosmopolitanism; Gilroy 2005, Huggan 2001, Behdad 2000, Fludernik 1998 on postcolonialism; Mayer 2005, Fludernik 2003, Mishra 1996, Clifford 1994 on diaspora; Limón 2008, Liang 2002, Mignolo 2002, Lenz 2000, Hawley 1996 on border studies; and Mizruchi 2008, Kelly 2003, Trotman 2002, Boelhower and Hornung 2000, Antonette 1998, Werbner and Modood 1997 on more recent multiculturalism. Caveat: In the evocations of an increasingly interconnected and globalized world, it is often ignored – owed to the hubris of a teleology of complexity – that the world has for literally thousands of years been quite interconnected, dynamic, heterogeneous and “transcultural” (just as personal identities have never been simple), as recent global histories show (for example Jürgen Osterhammel’s magisterial history of the 19th century (2009) or the collection of essays edited by Conrad et al. (2007); see also Alexander Demandt’s recent biography of Alexander the Great [2009]). One should recall that while the internet and the world wide web have certainly facilitated and accelerated communication and exchange, the invention of the telegraph in the 19th century constituted an at least equally drastic global change in communication.

the original or in translation, we advocate an encounter with *people who are markedly different from and at the same time much like ourselves*—a complex encounter made in a sympathetic effort to see the world as they see it and, as a consequence, to denaturalize our own views. Those pedagogical practices involve cosmopolitanism by implicitly rejecting parochial, chauvinistic beliefs in the exclusive value of our language, culture, nation, or ethnos and by inherently embracing diversity as fundamental to the *construction of the self in—and as—its relation to others*, the I-in-you who accepts with joy the multiplicity of identities that make up the richly woven texture of human existence. (Stanton 629; emphasis mine)

She goes on to say that cosmopolitanism should encompass “both the national and the transnational, the local and the global,” that we are in a “circle of enlarging allegiances” with “dynamic voluntary attachments” (636) and that we can identify “multiple belongings not defined by physical place or space” (636).⁴⁰

Similarly, Anthony Appiah writes that “we have obligations to others [...] that stretch *beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind*, or even the more formal ties of a shared citizenship,” and that we should “take seriously the value not just of human life but of particular human lives, which means *taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance*” (Appiah 2006, xv; emphasis mine). He admits that there are differences, and that they are real, but argues that “[i]t’s just that we’ve been encouraged [...] to exaggerate their significance by an order of magnitude” (Appiah 2006, xxi).⁴¹ More importantly, “all cultures have enough overlap in their vocabulary of values to begin a conversation. But they don’t suppose, like some universalists, that we could all come to agreement if only we had the same vocabulary” (Appiah 2006, 57).⁴² As to the assumption that “culture” is something that can, or should be, preserved and defended against the threat of a homogenizing globalization, he observes that this ignores the fact that globalization itself is often indeed a

40 | It is interesting that she does not once comment on the political consequences of her argument, which would appear to imply an anarchist political system.

41 | He tells a number of stories to illuminate that many differences we tend to think of as great or possibly unbridgeable are merely differences in the vocabulary of value, and that here, conversation is possible. Extreme views, such as about the legitimacy of terrorism or genocide, simply do not offer themselves up to conversation, so that it does not make sense to try to converse with or persuade someone who really holds these views.

42 | He notes three kinds of disagreements about values: (1) no shared vocabulary; (2) same vocabulary, different interpretations; (3) same values, different weight (Appiah 2006, 66). Although Appiah still uses “culture,” his disquisition makes clear just how shaky and indefinable the concept is.

threat to homogeneity, and that such a “threat”-scenario presupposes a rather purist, authentic, static and closed view of culture, which cannot be owned or preserved (Appiah 2006, 101-113). In fact, according to Appiah, *most of us are already leading a cosmopolitan life* (Appiah 2006, 113), although this does not necessarily say anything about the quality of that life.

We can find many similar ideas and propositions in different disciplines, contexts and critical writings. Nancy Foner writes that “culture” is always only a partial explanation, and that political and economic forces, as well as social institutions, are very important: “creative culture-building takes place in the context of external social, economic, and cultural forces in the new environment and the cultural understandings, meanings and symbols (and social practices) immigrants bring with them from their communities of origin” (Foner 2003b, 33). Winfried Siemerling writes that “perspectival multiplicity and multiple belonging” are not exclusive to diaspora cultures” (Siemerling 8), and that the encounter with people who have different practices and beliefs – not only cultural ones – entails a constant potential transition, translation, and “alteration of the self” (Siemerling 21). Günther Lenz emphasizes that a focus on cultural identity and difference risks neglecting “the interrelationships among *various, often conflicting dimensions of difference* (differentiation) [...] such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, religion, language, region, or age” (Lenz 362). In a similar vein, Helmbrecht Breinig’s concept of transdifference places an emphasis not on replacing (binary) difference,⁴³ but on complementing it with transdifference, i.e. taking into account all those complex, dynamic and interconnected issues that cannot be adequately grasped with binary differentials (Breinig 2002):

[t]he concept of transdifference does not do away with binary logic but assumes that the construction of difference is an indispensable, yet intrinsically problematic tool for human constructions of order. This should not come as a surprise, since transdifference has to be seen as complementary to, and therefore not simply ‘beyond’ difference. Thinking in terms of transdifference may be motivated by a deeply felt dissatisfaction with the reductiveness of binarisms coupled with a longing for the overdoming of binary thinking; it is, however, inevitably redirected towards difference. [...] The term transdifference refers to such areas of language, thought, and experience that are excluded by the either/or while retaining difference both in its logical and experiential aspects. (Breinig 23)⁴⁴

43 | In fact, Breinig accedes the strength and necessity of our binary predispositions despite the inherent problems pointed out by deconstruction and poststructuralism.

44 | With its focus on transdifference, my approach may sound similar to intersectional studies. It differs in that (1) I take the differentiations and categories from the texts and do not presuppose them; (2) my approach is not anti-categorical; and (3) I do not primarily focus on discrimination.

Laura Doyle's recent essay "Towards a Philosophy of Transnationalism" in the new *Journal of Transnational American Studies* – appropriately in the same issue with Paul Lauter's essay "From Multiculturalism to Immigration Shock" – emphasizes a similar thought: writing about nations and their relation, but also about individuals, she notes that dialectics is not only a binary dyad but carries with it its original Greek meaning of "across." Accordingly, there are always more than just two elements, two actors, two interdependencies, two channels of identification. There are multilateral actors, with witnesses, in addition to "twoness." Taking this seriously, identitarian and culturalist thinking and analysis with one focus only (on ethnicity, race, etc.) just does not suffice.⁴⁵

As a consequence, I reject personal and cultural identity concepts, respectively particular versions and implementations of them, that meet one or more of the following four complaints.

1) First of all, we should reject versions and implementations of concepts like hybridity, border, transcultural and the like that are vague and ill-defined. For example, it is easy to see that personal and communal identifications and differentiations are "rhizomatic" once we know that this merely means they run along multiple lines, are not monocausal, and are interconnected and -dependent and recursive. It is more problematic to accept that a cosmopolitan identity "must always escape positive and definite specification, precisely because specifying cosmopolitanism positively and definitely is an uncosmopolitan thing to do" (Pollock et al. 1), or, in the same collection and context, that "Sanskrit and Latin writers" are deficient because they "had yet to read Derrida" (sic!) (Pollock 18). "Border identity," if defined as "complicated by a condition of 'borderedness,'" that "challenges [the] sense of self-identity" (Liang 259) does not get us very far. Also, it is usually restricted to the Mexican-USA border and, as catastrophic as the conditions there are, ignores other, equally problematic, but less visible and obvious divisions, such as the 8 Mile Road in Detroit and similar racial and economic dividing lines in US-American cities. Not to be misunderstood: Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The*

45 | Looking at some older contributions is a healthy reminder of the fallaciousness of the teleology of theoretical progression, i.e. the assumption that our critical theories become increasingly better, "truer" and more complex (where, to make things worse, more complex often is equated with better). Isaac Berkson, whom I have already quoted above, discusses theories of acculturation with an insight that is, with small adjustments, as topical and viable as any today. He criticizes simplistic oppositions between cultural homogeneity and heterogeneity and between total assimilation and retention of group identity, calling into question essentialist and holistic notions of culture and identity per se by arguing that there are various important differences that play a role in the constitution of the individual and her/his cultural practices, such as differences "of locality, of economic conditions, of political affiliation, of education" (49).

New Mestiza is a poetic and impressive evocation of the often deplorable and sometimes abhorrent circumstances of life at the Mexican-Texan border for those on the wrong side of it. In many respects, it resembles Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. Extending her observations to the assertion of a Mestiza-identity, however, unduly reduces the complexities and dynamics of socio-economic, legal and political issues at that border to a problematic essentialism. In the long run, such a strategy will do more damage than the short-term empowerment that it might seem to allow. A last example for this kind of obscurantism is the proliferation of "transnational." Looking at the critical literature, it seems that transnationalism is everywhere. Many usages, though, do not distinguish between the various kinds of transnational ties that people, and not only migrants, maintain, and the sometimes sharply different social and political implications of those ties. There is, for example, a significant difference between sending remittances, upholding communication, actual commuting, or participation in political networks.⁴⁶

46 | The most precise definitions come, rather unsurprisingly, from sociologists. Nina Glick Schiller defines transnational processes as "political, economic, social and cultural processes that extend beyond the borders of a particular state and include actors that are not states but are shaped by the policies and institutional practices of particular states" and that "cannot be reduced to specific networks of connection across the borders of specific states," for example internet, environmental change, or ideologies (2003, 104). She distinguishes between transnationalism from below (transnational migration) and transnationalism from above (states, multinational corporations) and cautions that while "from below" is often thought of as transgressive and grassroots, "[i]n actuality, migrants represent a wide range of classes and political and economic interests. Many transmigrants work to maintain existing systems of power. Even poor migrants may support or participate in struggles against oppressive circumstances in one location while being committed to status hierarchies and systems of exploitation in another" (2003, 106). Her main four points are worth quoting in more detail:

- (1) "not all persons who migrate become embedded in more than one location;"
- (2) "people may be incorporated in both the old land and the new and may publicly identify with only one of these locations;"
- (3) "migrants can participate in transnational political networks that evoke a homeland without maintaining political relationships to that homeland. Often, it is only when people become well embedded in their new land that they participate in transnational political connections to the old one and become long-distance nationalists;"
- (4) "certain identity processes of migrants are global instead of transnational. For example, people who live in disparate parts of the world and imagine themselves as a single, diasporic people who share a common history but do not maintain any

2) Secondly, I reject concepts that do not yield any kind of methodology, least of all for the analysis of literary texts, which is still my primary concern. Paul Gilroy's analysis of racism in the UK is brilliant, but his exhortation of a "planetary humanism" (Gilroy 2005, 4) does not explain just how this translates into practice, although we can, and should, appreciate its utopian vision.⁴⁷ Julia Brown's cosmopolitan criticism "has no direct bearing on the opinions or prejudices of existing societies or even of the critic himself, who as it were brackets these things in order to receive what the work of art has to reveal that is new." To the question how this should be done, she merely replies that to "those who would insist that it is impossible, in even a provisional way, to rise above one's prejudices, or to suspend the presuppositions of class, ethnicity and the like, Wilde would have only one answer: such persons should not be writing criticism" (Brown 108-109).

My two other complaints are more fundamental and interconnected. I reject concepts that (3) still work with the idea of a coherent "cultural identity" and ignore not only its conceptual shortcomings but also the many other factors that play into personal and communal identification; (4), often a corollary of (3) that is at least equally problematic, we should be wary of concepts that base their argument on simplistic juxtapositions (minority/majority, hybrid/homogeneous, atavistic/composite, diasporic/sedentary, authentic/alienated) and an assumed privileged epistemology or ontology (of authenticity, empowerment, subversiveness, etc.) of the "subaltern" term. Let me explain this in more detail.

Édouard Glissant is well-known for his influential writing about créolization and cultural hybridity in the Caribbean. He emphasizes the totality and interconnection of the world (Glissant 18) and repeatedly makes reference to the idea of the rhizome in order to point out that any system with more than two variables quickly becomes unpredictable, especially in cultural contact (Glissant 59). Yet he, too, cannot resist homogenizing and reifying a «cultural identity» by treating hybridity as an essential and exclusive feature

form of social networks that connect them to one another or to a specific homeland state are engaged in a global, not transnational, process of identity construction." (2003, 106)

For definitions with other, but equally concise, foci see Levitt and Waters 2002 or Foner 2003. In literary and cultural studies, a transnational focus was exhorted by Shelley Fisher Fishkin in her 2004 Presidential Address to the American Studies Association entitled "Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies." This has not gone uncriticized; see Fluck 2007.

47 | A vision that is, by the way, close to Gayatri Spivak's concept of planetarity. See also Donald Pease's discussion of a shift from national literatures to planetary literature (2007).

of Caribbean identity. Worse, he then continues to contrast a hybrid Caribbean identity with a stable and homogeneous Western/European identity, repeating a move quite common in much postcolonial criticism, where peripheral equals subversive, hybridity equals potential empowerment, and subaltern equals authentic (which is perhaps the most nebulous and misleading term of all). Even if we forget about the problematic binaries for a moment, one need not look far to find examples of all kinds of hybridity (cultural, economic, legal and others) or, in Glissant's terms, *créolization* all throughout Europe, not only at the coasts, which are traditionally made out to be the hotbeds of «cultural» contact, but in mainland Europe as well, for example in Silesia, Transsylvania, the Rhineland, or Alsace-Lorraine.

Another illustrative example are concepts of diaspora and hybridity in postcolonial and multicultural discourses.⁴⁸ Often enough, “[p]ostcolonial narratives of diaspora and exile situate the stranger as the archetypal figure of a globalising modernity” (Werbner 1997b, 6) and thus run the risk of establishing diaspora as the master trope “for the analysis of modern and postmodern identities and communities” (Lenz 381). When used in the service of an uncritical multiculturalism, “diaspora” tends “to exaggerate cultural ‘difference’” (Werbner 1997b, 21) and in effect romanticizes itself as the ideal social condition (Paranjape 238)⁴⁹ for aspiring cosmopolitans and political dissidents. Where postcolonial theory markets hybridity, diaspora et al. as ideals of “oppositional, redemptive, transformative” communities (Behdad 399), their factual conditions are uneven, unequal (Behdad 400), often characterized by hardship and exploitation rather than a preoccupation with an enlightened, politically dissident cultural identity. As Fludernik says: “Nobody has the same dream entirely; and nobody’s diaspora therefore looks wholly like their neighbor’s” (Fludernik 2003b, xi). The consequences of this deceptively simple

48 | One sign that “diaspora” has firmly arrived on the academic map is that its politics are the subject of heated debate. The arguments run along lines similar to those around the terms “postcolonialism,” “postcoloniality” and “hybridity:” discourses of the latter are critiqued for their “[s]yndicated oppositionality” (Huggan 9), for “marketing the exotic” and for politicising and mystifying cultural difference (Huggan 13; 31) now quite comfortably accommodated by hegemony (Hutnyk 119). Collaterally, “[h]ybridity is meaningless as a description of ‘culture’” because this “‘museumises’ culture as a ‘thing’” (Werbner 1997b, 15) so that the celebration of hybridity by diasporic intellectuals is seen as just a “form of moral self-congratulation” (Werbner 1997b, 15). “Diaspora” has achieved a similarly fashionable and ‘despicable’ status.

49 | Mishra argues that diaspora is attractive because it is “not linked to the control of the nation’s social, political and cultural myths” (441). This is untrue especially of the USA, whose immigrants constitute a defining and important aspect of an alleged national identity.

statement should be emphasized in the face of wholesale representations of “diaspora” as an exclusively privileged and salutary epistemological framework. Holistic and exclusive conceptions of diaspora tend to posit unity (even if imaginary) where there is none, except possibly for legal and expressly political ascriptions and labels. Even an imaginary unity is fractured, as appears in symbolic struggles (over food, clothing, relationships, etc.) that occur between different diasporas, but also within a single diaspora across several fields of difference. Diaspora conceptions always risk positing a unified cultural identity because they inadvertently downplay the fact that identification and differentiation, intra- and inter-diasporic, personal and communal, are the result of dynamic and interactive auto- and heterogeneous processes. Diaspora conceptions that ignore this are in a double-bind: they posit a cultural identity, albeit an imaginary one, while working within a framework that would seem to favor multiple subject positions over subjectivity. As Fludernik points out, diaspora politics is a politics of difference. However, although she identifies as individualistic only one of the two meanings of Bhabha’s hybridity (stating that the other is functional rather than ontological), diaspora politics needs to be a politics not of difference – which inevitably tends to become hypostatized – but of differences in order to address “the interrelationships among various, often conflicting dimensions of difference (differentiation)” (Lenz 362). “Diaspora” is only one possible, albeit powerful, ascription available for grappling with the complexities of personal and communal identification (and literary texts).⁵⁰ As

50 | To be fair, as Hena Maes-Jelinek and also Sandra Ponzanese have pointed out quite some years ago in the proceedings of the ASNEL, it seems more popular these days to attack postcolonial criticism and its affiliated concepts than to defend it (Maes-Jelinek 9; Ponzanese 50). Ponzanese attributes this to an entrenched dispute and positioning that seems eerily familiar from a number of other critical fields and that resembles my comments on “privileged epistemology” made above and below:

[A]s long as most participants cling to the notion that ‘postcolonial’ literatures and cultures are essentially preoccupied with resisting Western hegemony, opposing global capitalism or subverting Western master-discourses, the three-cornered fight between Marxism, cultural nationalism and postmodernism in the ‘postcolonial’ field is unlikely to yield new insights. (53)

It seems that most meta-concepts come under attack at some point or another, usually when they have been appropriated from their original context and transdisciplinarily expanded and broadened to the point that they mean all kinds of things to all kinds of critics. In his introduction to the collection of essays *Critics and Writers Speak* (2006), Igor Maver writes: “After all, the colonial within the post-colonial paradigm has come to represent *all kinds of exploitation and thereby suppression*, in relation to which specific historical circumstances should always be fully considered” (4; emphasis mine). Ato Quayson writes in a similar vein: “Postcolonialism often also involves the discussion

the sole explanatory framework, it cannot possibly do justice to literary texts; nor is it epistemologically privileged.⁵¹

of experiences of various kinds, such as those of slavery, migration, suppression and resistance, difference, race, gender, place, and the responses to the discourses of imperial Europe such as history, philosophy, anthropology and linguistics" (3; emphasis mine). Compare this to John Thieme's introductory criticism of recent trends in globalization studies:

[S]imply to lump all the forms of transnational contact that characterize late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century life together as forms of globalization runs the risk of obscuring the multiplicity of ways in which the term is used, as well as occluding the local specifics of the social contexts in which it is deployed. 'Globalization' has become one of those buzzwords, like 'hybridity' and 'post-colonialism,' that occurs in so many contexts that one might be excused for thinking that, like earlier Western metanarratives, such as the Bible, it has come to mean all things to all people. (13-14).

As a result, Thieme continues, "the new globalized canon has tended to favour a certain kind of 'international' literature: writing particularly concerned with migration, diaspora and hybridity" (15) and has ignored those who cater "less obviously to the globalized discourse of culture in transit" (15). One way to avoid this, of course, is logical and contextual specificity and coherence.

51 | Once more I would like to point to Peter Burke's highly erudite and readable discussion of cultural hybridity (2009). Not only does he provide a detailed discussion of the diverse meanings and cultural histories of a variety of terms associated with cultural hybridity (pointing out that they are metaphorical, often vague, and have to be handled with care); he also makes clear that "there is no sharp or firm cultural frontier between groups, but rather a cultural continuum" (2) and that cultural translation, borrowing, appropriation and hybridization are the norm, not the exception, and are not intrinsically "good" or "bad," "privileging" or "disempowering." Transferring the idea of privileged epistemology or ontology to more mundane realms illustrates its shortcomings. Once we talk about food or clothing (both of which are not necessarily less fraught with symbolic meaning and potential) rather than diaspora or hybridity, some statements become somewhat less convincing (e.g. "the preference for steak and salad over pasta or sushi is subversive" or "being clad entirely in black in an environment that predominantly dresses colorfully is an emblematic expression of a hybrid/border identity critical of mainstream hegemonic culture"). Again, I am not saying that subversiveness and criticism of existing conditions are impossible. But they have to be extremely flexible and adaptable and cannot be allocated to one fixed, privileged position. An example of the necessary volatility and tactical fluidity of critical interventions is the usage of the word "river crab" by activists (among them Ai Weiwei) in China.

Caveat I

In order to avoid misunderstandings, especially considering the intensity and heatedness with which debates about this topic are often conducted in various disciplines and discourses, I feel it is necessary to stress once more that

(1) I am very much aware that my position may appear somewhat “luxurious:” discrimination based on cultural identity and difference (including race) is, and has been, a very real fact with very real social, political and legal consequences, and opposition to it often had, and on occasion still has, to strategically utilize the same categories – with different content – in order to draw attention to it and to legally and politically challenge and disband it. For the longest time, narratives about cultural practices other than mainstream and hegemonic were underrepresented or not at all, exoticized, demoted, and ridiculed. Much important work has been done to establish and ensure civil rights, to challenge conventional representations of cultural practices, to challenge the canon(s), to introduce formerly unheeded narratives about unheard personal and communal histories and events. I see my contribution and the contestations I make not so much as the total rejection and denigration of the various concepts I discuss above, rather than as the logical extension of their arguments and thrust that is possible because of the work already done. But I also think that my point is valid and should be made.

(2) I am also aware that the debates about personal and communal identification and differentiation and their consequences, in so many different words, have been going on for a long time. In fact, many of my propositions and positions are extensions of arguments that, in different formulations, go back at least to the formative work of, for example, Herbert Gans in the 1970s and Anthony Appiah and Werner Sollors in the 1980s, not to mention more general methodological trends such as deconstruction and poststructuralism. Many of these arguments are actually much older, though this is often forgotten. However, the debates are still going strong; in 2001, Arash Abizadeh apparently felt it necessary to emphatically repeat an argument made by Anthony Appiah in 1987. Several of the even more recent contributions (by Fludernik, Foner, Doyle, Siemerling, Burke, or Appiah and Sollors) still make the same or similar points, with altered foci, interests and specifications, and in the name of new research paradigms. There are no signs of the debate subsiding.⁵² More

52 | Various journals have dedicated special issues to related topics, for example *The Velvet Light Trap* to “Seeing Race: Our Enduring Dilemma” (2010); the inaugural issue (2009) of the new *Film Journal* was dedicated to hybridity, borders and margins in English-speaking cinema; in 2010 the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity based in Columbus, Ohio, announced their new journal called *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts*; in 2009, the online *Journal of Transnational American*

importantly, I believe that apart from logically extending familiar arguments, my particular combination of axioms and its methodological implementation (discussed below) can make a new and productive contribution.

(3) What I am saying does not invalidate various research paradigms, nor does it imply that there are only individuals just because I emphasize the problems of group labels: I do find many concepts of cultural identity and the notion itself problematic, inherently flawed and unproductive, and I do find some more recent research paradigms – or at least their epigonic applications – under-defined and over-advertised, unnecessarily obscure, methodologically empty, tautological, and historically forgetful of predecessors. I do not think that this invalidates all “culturalist” research paradigms, per se, nor does this mean that they necessarily or inevitably work with the kind of “cultural identity” conception that I criticize above. “Transnationalism” is a highly popular and, in the right hands, also highly productive research interest. No one would suggest abandoning postcolonialism merely because “hybridity” has come under sharp attack. Mere weariness with all things “trans” or “post” does not justify ignoring attempts to see cultural encounters and interactions not as encounters between two separate entities (“cultures”) but as highly interconnected, dynamic and relational processes, as does the recent collection of essays *From Interculturalism to Transculturalism* (Antor 2010).⁵³ As I have said above, communal auto- and hetero-identification exists. A fixed communal identity does not.

(4) Specifically, what I am saying does not invalidate cultural studies: Anthony Appiah or Zygmunt Bauman are not heedless of differences in cultural practices, principles and ideas just because they find the term “culture” problematic, or at the very least, unproductive. Similarly, I see no reason why we should not be able to analyze and discuss cultural practices, alongside other identifications and differentiations, and their depiction in literary texts just because we reject culture and cultural identity and difference.

Studies premiered with the aforementioned essays by Laura Doyle and Paul Lauter. In 2009, Edinburgh University Press announced a new series called *Edinburgh Studies in Transnational Literatures*. Between 2008 and 2009, the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Bielefeld hosted a large international research group on “Multiculturalism and Beyond” and a number of conferences. In Germany, a number of new Master degrees is dedicated to transnational studies, international/global migration, or new literatures in English.

53 | In this collection, too, some contributions offer mostly old fare in new packaging and throw together as many conceptual terms as possible in as compressed a space as printable. The very first essay is entitled “From Postcolonialism and Interculturalism to the Ethics of Transculturalism in The Age of Globalization.”

AXIOM III: MULTICULTURALISMS

To resume: if we accept the basic axiom (I) and its subsequent axiom (i) *in the way they are justified and specified above*, it follows as a logically correlative axiom (2) that personal and communal auto- and hetero-identification and differentiation are, to varying degrees, and alongside different cultural and other (age, class, gender, etc.) faultlines, *always already* “multicultural,” “transcultural,” “hybridized,” “translated,” “appropriated,” etc. This can be seen as another, much more readily apparent, but strictly formalist reason for my rejection of various concepts of cultural identity: they are tautological, thus their rejection does not present a significant analytical and methodological loss for my purposes, even though their disciplinary and historical usages are of interest and conducive to our understanding of the complexities and faultlines of the corresponding debates, as Peter Burke reminds us.

In other words, it may make some sense to talk about, for example, multiculturalism as political agenda, legal norm, social and educational agenda, or research paradigm – especially for American studies – since it may help put into profile unresolved or historical issues and problems of pluralism and universalism, integration and assimilation, civil rights and recognition, socioeconomic practices and institutions, religious practices, or education and language policies.⁵⁴ However, not only should we talk about various, often quite dissimilar multiculturalisms and distinguish between normative and descriptive variants;⁵⁵ the terminological, conceptual and, most importantly, ethical problems remain:

54 | Monika Fludernik provides a lucid introduction to the history, development and problems of multiculturalism within a discussion of its relation to diaspora (2003). For theoretical discussions, see Breinig 2002; Boelhower and Hornung 2000; Bennett 1998; Kymlicka 1995; Taylor 1992. For critical histories, see Mizruchi 2008; Trotman 2002; Takaki 1993. For critical collections, see Chae 2008; Kelly 2003; Goldberg 1995. It is interesting to note that on its homepage the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) of the United States provides a document called “What Are the Benefits and Responsibilities of Citizenship?” which states: “America becomes stronger when all its citizens respect the different opinions, cultures, ethnic groups, and religions found in this country. Tolerance for differences is also a responsibility of citizenship.” In effect, this amounts to a fairly common definition of multiculturalism.

55 | For example, Marilyn Edelstein discusses the history and import of *pedagogical and institutional* multiculturalism for the US-American educational system in expanding the canon and syllabi and making them more varied. Under the aegis of a multicultural agenda, she notes, the student body has become more diverse “culturally, ethnically, linguistically, experientially, socioeconomically” (14-15), which for some has gone too far, and for others not far enough. For Ronald Takaki, *historiographic* multiculturalism

Not long ago, 'we' used to speak of 'others,' coining words like 'othering' and 'alterity,' together with qualifiers like 'respect' and 'understanding,' 'dialogue' and 'equality,' words that made us feel good – about ourselves. The catchword that stood alone at the summit of such discourse was 'culture.'

No one felt too comfortable when asked to define it. For perhaps this is one of those words we are better off *not* turning into a concept – at least not a clear one, and not too quickly. Because, before we knew it, its uplifting derivatives, such as 'multiculturalism,' were appropriated [...] to mean indifference, tolerance, and condescension. [...] It is no longer possible to say 'we,' or, for that matter, 'other,' because the structure of the thought subtending such words is itself under scrutiny. (Bal 287)

Many versions of multiculturalism, Bal points out, not only work with an unspecified notion of culture, they also work with an anti-universalist "multi" that implies simply a homeostatic but hierarchical "side by side" of homeostatic "cultures" that does not question the structural basis of such conceptualization; in so many different words, her complaint is very similar to mine.⁵⁶ Not all versions of multiculturalism, of course, share this conceptual understanding.

means writing a new and expanded history of the USA in order to counter the "narrow but widely shared sense of the past [...] that has viewed American as European in ancestry" and that draws attention to the fact that "America has been racially diverse since our very beginning" (2). Boelhower and Hornung see *cultural* multiculturalism as the conceptual culmination of a cultural history that, in metaphors, has developed from the melting pot to the mosaic. Here, multicultural frameworks propose "models for the creation of a society in which the different cultures would coexist on the basis of shared human values" (vii). In effect, though the term is not mentioned, this equates multiculturalism with one version of cosmopolitanism (one in which "culture" once more remains undefined). Multicultural theories are, if not under this label, quite old. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, whose observations in his *Letters from an American Farmer* are commonly seen as the first use of the melting pot idea, while he does write about a melting of races, in actuality also emphasizes the persistence of different regional specifics in way of life and experientiality. Isaac Berkson in effect discusses two different multicultural concepts under the headings "Federation of Nationalities Theory" and "Community Theory." As mentioned above, Joseph Štýbr's and Gino Speranza's comments go in a similar direction. As always, a closer look reveals that the historical debates about the past and future "cultural identity" of the USA at the beginning of the 20th century were significantly more complex than often described. The melting pot idea was not discursively hegemonic.

56 | The recently revived German debate about "Leitkultur" and the alleged failure of multiculturalism (which is usually understood in one way only) ironically ignores or forgets the common ideological underpinning of both: the rejection of universalism.

The various critical (Antonette 1998; Chae 2008), multicultural (Palumbo-Liu 2003), or creative (Foner 2005) multiculturalisms try to avoid the trap. As Donna Gabaccia writes in her comparative discussion of eating traditions in the USA (1998), “[w]hat makes the United States multicultural is not so much its many separate culinary traditions as it is Americans’ desire to eat a multi-ethnic mix of foods, and to make this mix part of themselves” (Gabaccia 1998, 227; see also Döring 2003). According to her, this mixing does not produce uniformity but diversity, “blended Creoles” as she calls it (Gabaccia 1998, 228). It is not a “casual consumer choice” and irrelevant in light of racial strife, but rather an important part of life that recurs in music, other forms of entertainment and a variety of daily activities in general. The USA, then, is and for the longest time has been “*not a multi-ethnic nation, but a nation of multi-ethnics*” (Gabaccia 1998, 232; emphasis mine), even if not everyone views this favorably.

However, even considering these commendable versions of “multicultural,” it makes little sense to talk about “multicultural” personal or communal identification and differentiation (or literary texts: see below) because *identification and differentiation always already are “multicultural”* (in the latter sense) – if one insists on using that term at all and thus ignores that it is very difficult to sensibly explain just what is understood as “multicultural.” Put more bluntly, we do not need “multicultural” even in its productive definitions once we accept the definition of personal and communal auto- and hetero-identification proposed above.

Correlates

What does all of this mean for literary studies, for my topic, and for my methodology? After all, the main focus of this book is literary texts, specifically fictional narratives. Just because a concept is more or less useless as a social concept – logically weak, unproductive or without extant correlative – does not inevitably mean it is useless as an analytic concept, e.g. for literary texts: we evidently can productively talk about the function of fantastic creatures in fantasy or – as yet – impossible technology in science fiction; and Benedict Anderson analyses the rise and construction of nations with the help of the concept of imagined communities, which by definition are intangible. However, culturalist criticism both with a representative (literature as “ethnography”) and a constructive (literature as “transgressive”) emphasis tends to use “cultural identity” as a social concept. Unsurprisingly, the inconsistencies and weaknesses of that social concept carry over into its analytic application, with the results that I have cited above.⁵⁷ Of course, we can look at how fictional

57 | Anderson, of course, does not fail to point out time and again that the imagined communities he is talking about are *imagined*, with all that this entails.

narratives construct something like a cultural identity. But not only will an analytically weak concept render weak results; most sufficiently complex fictional narratives are about a whole lot more than “cultural identity.”

As I will argue and show, the axioms proposed above have further axiomatic consequences for how we talk about literary texts, specifically those with a focus on cultural practices, and thus my topic, my selection of texts, and my methodology.

AXIOM IV: CULTURAL IDENTITY & LITERATURE

Most importantly, we should be cautious when or if using labels such as ethnic, racial or multicultural literature, for definitional, logical and conceptual reasons. The basic formalistic reason for this is, of course, that the problems I have pointed out with regard to categories and concepts of cultural identity in general, also pertain to their usage for labeling literary texts. If ethnicity is a weak and problematic concept, then so is the label “ethnic literature”: likewise for race and multiculturalism. Instead, we should speak of literary texts about cultural practices, principles and ideas. This is perhaps more obvious when we look at the basic possible (necessary and/or sufficient) selective criteria for establishing what should count as multicultural, ethnic or other literature of cultural identity: authorship, content, form.

If we try to determine the “cultural identity” of a given literary text in accordance with the “cultural identity” of the author, a practice common in the collation of anthologies, we immediately run into substantial problems. Ignoring for the moment just how difficult – and conceptually problematic, see above – it is to establish the cultural identity of an author (not least because names may be misleading and available information scarce, ambiguous, and itself narrativized), the biographical background does not necessarily determine the literary text in any unambiguously detectable manner, nor is “biography” a necessary criterion for writing about certain experiences and topics (this is a claim with serious and highly debated consequences, as I will detail below).⁵⁸ It is a truism that “biography” – or, put more precisely for this particular context, the phylogenetic, ontogenetic and various individual corporeal and cerebral experiences and the resulting cognitive frames and behavioral patterns – shapes artistic production in some ways.⁵⁹ We cannot escape ourselves. None of these possible ways, however, are unequivocal and/

58 | This would imply the outright ridiculous consequence that Faulkner can not have written literature about multifarious cultural practices, among other things.

59 | The usage of biography in this context is obviously not the narrative/generic one.

or inevitable, much less clearly detectable in the text.⁶⁰ In other words, just because a writer has a German American background does not mean she or he has to write about that background or about things or people “German American” in general (and many writers have indeed written many texts that have little to do with their biographical background, much less their specific cultural background). Formally, this is obvious: just how ridiculous claims to the contrary would be becomes clear whenever we move away from the loaded concepts of cultural identity to more mundane areas. Why should someone necessarily write about war if they have participated in one? Inversely, it is, and indeed must be, conceivable that we may write about things that we have not experienced.⁶¹ The result might not be convincing, but there is no reason why it categorically could not be. Otherwise, we would have to shun the largest part of all literary texts simply because their authors write about things they have not personally experienced, for example time travel, or perennial isolation on an island, or even severe physical pain. Intuitively, however, this becomes problematic once we move into certain experiential areas that have to do with severe physical abuse such as rape, trauma such as the loss of loved ones, persecution and discrimination due to skin color and/or other factors, or, most drastically, genocide (more on this later).

If we try to determine the “cultural identity” of a given literary text in accordance with its content, we have to determine what kind of content, theme or topic, and how much of it, suffices to make a text “ethnic” or “racial” or “multicultural,” etc. Very few, if any, literary texts are actually “monocultural” in that they focus exclusively on one kind of cultural practice or identification; also, very few texts are exclusively about cultural practices. Such hermeticism would be hard to imagine. On the contrary, most literary texts inevitably deal with various kinds of differentiations, identifications, practices, principles, beliefs, etc, which is why we should call them more or less transdifferent and, less fashionably, heterogeneous. This, too, follows from the axioms above. Many literary texts labeled according to a given cultural identity due to alleged

60 | Two recent anthologies about “becoming American” (unintentionally) demonstrate just how precarious identifications along the lines of an alleged cultural identity are (Stavans 2009; Gillan and Gillan 1999a/1999b). The authors and texts assembled are neither exclusively about cultural practices, nor is there a necessary link between the authors’ background and their productions. This notwithstanding, many of the texts are highly interesting regarding various personal and communal auto- and hetero-identifications.

61 | Dowling points out the irony that Zangwill’s almost “mythic drama of ethnic America,” *The Melting Pot*, really is “a third-hand account from a Gentile source” while “Anglo-Saxon novelists such as Henry Harland, Edward W. Townsend, and Ernest Poole wrote representational fiction about immigrant groups with remarkable success” (360).

theme and focus (or, conceivably, for marketing reasons) also substantially deal with various issues (crime, horror, science, romance, class, etc.) that may at times have very little to do with cultural practices, just like many authors labeled according to “their” alleged “cultural identity” write literary texts that also have very little to do with cultural practices, as the example of Nam Le shows. In many instances, reducing a text to a text primarily about cultural practices distorts the polyvalence and, ironically, the “multiculturality” (as I understand it) of the text.⁶²

Lastly⁶³, trying to determine the “cultural identity” of a given literary text in accordance with its form may be justified from a literary historical perspective, for example in the case of use of vernacular, particular narrative perspectives variations on the level of discourse, or the incorporation of musical rhythms. Few formal techniques, however, are unique and exclusive to one particular group of authors, nor do they necessarily and inevitably “have,” display, or represent a “cultural identity.” It is no coincidence that the *New Literary History of America* by Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors (2009), while chronological, consists of short entries on assorted themes, authors, concepts and dates rather than literary meta-narratives. Even the somewhat more conventional *History of American Literature* by Richard Gray (2004) is cross-referenced in a manner that undercuts simple identifications.⁶⁴

62 | This discussion and the many quotation marks it requires also shows just how convoluted and conceptually tautological debates may become if we insist on the terminology that I argue we should abandon. Apart from this, we have not even addressed the – admittedly difficult – issue of quality. Plenty of literary texts about cultural practices by so-called “minority” authors are unfortunately just as clichéd, stereotypical and simplistic as plenty of literary texts by “majority” or “mainstream” authors whose “cultural identity” does not grant them “privileged access” to certain realms of experience. Ironically, in the simplistic, but common understanding of “multicultural” as “respectful of cultural differences,” this would render such qualitatively questionable “multicultural” texts “un-multicultural.” A structurally similar debate was, though hard to conceive in retrospect, indeed led for some time over the qualification of women to write science fiction. The revelation that one of the most famous and praised science fiction authors, James Tiptree, Jr., was actually a woman publishing under a male alias, thankfully put an end to the debate, except in the most obscure corners.

63 | One could, of course, argue that the reception of a text, both individually and within an interpretive community, may also render it representative of a given “cultural identity,” everything else notwithstanding. This argument is, while viable, nonetheless weak since it is analytically empty. It amounts to saying that everything is art that is regarded as art, whether on an individual level, or in public perception.

64 | Opening collations of multicultural literature (e.g. Smolen and Oswald 2011, Day 1999, Gillan and Gillan 1994, Pack and Parini 1994, King 1993, Mazer 1993), one

However, there are some problems with this formalistic reasoning. Certain experiential areas seem to make special demands on their representation and fictionalization, which is why my claim that there is no reason one could and should not write about things one has not experienced might be formally defensible, but ethically ambivalent. Again and again, memoirs, autobiographies and other allegedly non-fictional texts about certain themes and experiences such as abuse, discrimination or, most drastically, genocidal persecution that turn out to be invented or inauthentic kindle severe excoriation.⁶⁵ Texts that break the “autobiographical pact” between author and reader – which many modern and postmodern historiographic metafictional narratives have done with relish in order to point at the narrativity (and thus implied partial “fictitiousness”) of “history” – meet with criticism whenever they do not at least announce their “mendacity,” and narrative theorists that conflate the difference between fictional and non-fictional – correctly pointing out that there is no failsafe way to determine the difference and that they share narrative strategies

commonly finds further subdivisions such as various “ethnic,” “immigrant,” “minority,” “Native American,” or “African American;” on occasion, this is supplemented with texts by female authors and/or “working class” literature. “Multicultural,” in this case, appears to refer both to the diversity of the collation itself (texts by authors of various biographical background/texts about various different “cultural” experiences), as well as to each subdivision as a superordinate term (ethnic = multicultural, racial = multicultural, Native American = multicultural, and so on). Similarly, it is hard to tell just what precisely to expect of broad collections of Asian American or Native American or African American or Immigrant literature other than the usual suspects and other than – in the best case – a wide variety of texts broadly identified by author or theme. Of course, things are easier to criticize than to practice. In publishing, books need titles and categorizations that almost inevitably are the result of compromises. For a safeguard, it is often the combination of authorship, theme and form that leads to the selection of texts for a respective anthology. After all, the idea behind anthologies is representativeness and exemplarity.

65 | In their “Cautionary Notes for Narrative Theorists,” Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson admonish that autobiographies do stand apart: (1) the narrator/protagonist is “embodied,” i.e. exists and has a real social body; (2) she or he may be writing a censored, silenced or suppressed “history,” for which the claim that it is true is of high importance against the refutation that it is by the powers that be; (3) deriving from this, autobiographies may be an act of witnessing, “an ethical call to empathic identification, recognition, and oftentimes action” (2008, 364-365). The essay addresses only the genre of narrative autobiography (there are, though few, autobiographies in other media, genres and forms). However, I take the general points about historiography and witnessing to be applicable also to other media, genres and forms.

– should at least acknowledge the problems of this conflation (Smith and Watson 2008).

Even fictional texts about special experiences are treated with suspicion based on the assumption that such experiences can not, should not, or must not be fictionalized. When they are, their fictionalization is usually expected to be especially scrupulous and exacting in its depiction of these experiences, though it is seldom clarified just what “scrupulous” and “exacting” may mean in this context. Literary texts about cultural practices often meet with similar demands, which I would attribute to the ideological baggage of ideas of cultural identity and difference they are assumed to carry. As Werner Sollors points out, “ethnic writers operated under a system that has been called ‘compulsive representation,’ for they were often read as informants about the collectivities they were believed to embody” (Sollors 2002, 390), so that “readers have overemphasized and exaggerated the (frequently exoticized) ethnic particularity of the works” (Sollors 1986, 11).⁶⁶

The interconnected assumptions behind this are that (1) cultural practices are special and important practices revealing of a person’s “cultural identity;” that (2) all texts about these practices should, since the practices are so special, also be especially “authentic” in the representation of these practices; and that (3) even the leeway usually granted to literary texts due to their fictionality (where literary = fictional) is overridden or at least restricted by the demand to “authentically” represent these special practices; if the focus is on the constructive aspect of a literary text, the construction should, nevertheless, in some unspecified way be “authentic,” “transgressive” or “counter-hegemonic.” The conceptually problematic notion of cultural identity and representation underpinning this chain of assumptions is here compounded by the conceptual and definitional problems of authenticity and fictionality; and while fictionality is at least a narratologically differentiated and problematized concept, the renewed, proliferating and multidisciplinary usage of authenticity is primarily characterized by a definitional lacuna or paradigmatic substitution with synonyms.

66 | Indeed, many early US-migration narratives are autobiographies and diaries (e.g. Gro Svendsen’s *Frontier Mother* [written in the 1860s, published 1950], Edward Bok’s autobiography [1921], or Constantine Panunzio’s *The Soul of an Immigrant* [1921]); see also note below. However, there also are poems (many anonymous, others by Kahlil Gibran, H.T. Tsiang, Ameen Rihani) and short fictional narratives (e.g. by Caspar Day, Lewis MacBrayne, James Connolly, Adriana Spadonie) about the experience of migration and acculturation, but also about various other themes (e.g. in “The Tooth of Antar” [1911] or “Kalaun, the Elephant Trainer” [1905]) and, noteworthy, narratives that trouble the border between fact and fiction (e.g. Lee Chew’s “The Biography of a Chinaman” [1903]).

Most of the time, authenticity is one part of the binary “authentic/inauthentic” that, depending on the context and discipline, comes in variations such as “original/ imitation, copy,” “sincere/ ideological,” “innovation/tradition,” “truthful/ distorting,” “subversive/ hegemonic,” “minority/ majority, mainstream,” “primitive/ civilized,” or even “oral/ written.”⁶⁷ It has its most influential advocacy in existential philosophy,⁶⁸ where it is used to characterize a life that is lead as a “true,” “creative” and “original” expression of the “essential identity” of an individual; however, even here, it is usually defined negatively against the “inauthentic” life.⁶⁹ Accordingly, modernist discourses of individual autonomy and uniqueness place the authentic individual against the ideologically and socially tranquilized – and thus “dishonest” – individual that leads a life prefigured and dominated by traditional structures (Haselstein, Gross, and Snyder-Körber 10); discourses of avant-garde art (or performance art, or postmodern theater) often define authentic over and against tradition, imitation and copy (Fischer-Lichte and Pflug 2000); and discourses of literary texts and traditions about cultural identity usually posit a minority, non-hegemonic authentic literary expression over and against a perceived homogenizing, oppressive mainstream culture (Spivak; Balkun 2006). Unsurprisingly, deconstruction, poststructuralism and postmodernism have trenchantly taken apart these binaries (or, in the terminology of Derrida,

67 | Depending on the discussion and context, the binaries can be, and have been, reversed. For example, Wolfgang Hochbruck shows in detail just how the notion of Native American orality and its alleged “authentic expression” have been ideologically appropriated for various and often diametrically opposed purposes (1991).

68 | Which itself inherits many of its ideas from Rousseau and his postulation of a hypothetical “state of nature”; this in turn can be traced back to Plato and classical discussions of the “good life.”

69 | In his influential *The Ethics of Authenticity* (1991), Charles Taylor discusses the problems and pitfalls of the modern notion of the individual, authentic self and proposes a – normative ethical – variant of authenticity by arguing that we are only individuals insofar as we are social beings (given that Taylor is often identified as a “communitarian,” this is predictable), and that living an “authentic” life means we should be “true” (in the specific sense that Taylor details) to ourselves and to all the others we communicate and interact with (see also Taylor’s *Sources of the Self*, 1989). In an inversion of negative stereotyping, some late 19th century and early 20th century stories and poems about US-immigrants (for example by Carl Sandburg or Jeannette Dailey) portray them and their customs and lifestyles as somehow more authentic than mainstream, modern, industrialized and “settled” society.

“violent hierarchies”);⁷⁰ more surprisingly, as a number of recent conferences and publications demonstrate (and criticize),⁷¹ authenticity has re-entered various contemporary discourses, most often in the guise of “the return of the real.”⁷²

It should be obvious just how problematic these binaries are with regard to literary texts about cultural practices: there is no definitive authority to

70 | A participant of the ZiF conference series on multiculturalism (Bielefeld 2008-2009) caustically remarked in his presentation that indigenous cultures have no word for themselves as “indigenous.”

71 | Recent publications (Funk and Krämer 2011; Haselstein, Gross, and Snyder-Körber 2010; Russett 2006; Balkun 2006; Fischer-Lichte and Pflug 2000) demonstrate not only the versatility of the term, but also the various problems it raises.

72 | Appropriately, Haselstein, Gross, and Snyder-Körber have titled their collection *The Pathos of Authenticity*. For one of the few definitional and etymological introductions to the term, see Kalisch 2000. In the introduction to their collection of essays *Funktionen von Wirklichkeit* (2011), Wolfgang Funk and Lucia Krämer describe the basic dilemma:

Ein ästhetisches wie ontologisches Paradox steht gleich einem Kafka’schen Torwächter vor jeder theoretischen Auseinandersetzung mit dem Phänomen ›Authentizität‹. Dramatisch verkürzt könnte man dieses Paradox auf die Formel bringen, dass sich Authentizität als ästhetische, epistemologische und ethische Kategorie per definitionem jeglicher Form von eindeutiger Repräsentation notwendigerweise entzieht, oder anders ausgedrückt, dass sich ›echte‹ Authentizität sowohl einer Person wie eines Objekts oder Kunstwerks nicht erklären, sondern höchstens (unzureichend) beschreiben, lässt. Diese Annahme begründet sich darin, dass als bestimmendes Merkmal der Authentizität – zumindest im zeitgenössischen Verständnis – der unmittelbare und unvermittelte Ausdruck eines wie auch immer gearteten, unveräußerlichen (im strikt wörtlichen Sinn) Wesensgehalt [...] angenommen wird, ein Kerninneres, das seine ästhetische wie ethische Überzeugungskraft eben daraus bezieht, dass es sich weder explizieren noch instrumentalisieren lässt. (8)

[An aesthetic as well as ontological paradox precedes any theoretical examination of the phenomenon ‘authenticity’ like a Kafkaean guard post. One could severely abridge this paradox by summarizing that as an aesthetic, epistemological and ethical category, ‘authenticity’ by definition necessarily evades any form of unequivocal representation. In other words, ‘real’ authenticity of both a person or an object or a work of art cannot be explained, only (insufficiently) described. This proposition is based on the assumption that a constitutive characteristic of authenticity – at least as it is currently understood – is the immediate and unmediated expression of some kind of unalienable (in its strictly literal sense) essence or core that derives its aesthetic as well as ethical persuasion exactly from the fact that it can be neither explicated nor instrumentalized. [Translation mine]]

determine just what counts as authentic and what does not; as an aesthetic feature, what counts as authentic one day may count as inauthentic the next; more importantly, this kind of authenticity implies a static and homogeneous notion of culture and cultural identity behind cultural practices, and thus a notion of literary texts as mainly mimetic⁷³ and static representations of “real” and “true” experiences and a “real” or “true” “cultural identity.”⁷⁴ If we treat literary texts about cultural practices as a kind of social report about a special real-world experience, in particular one that is regarded as inaccessible to the majority, the status of such texts as fictional constructions is of secondary importance. It becomes more important that such texts present what is considered – either by the majority or by other members of the specific group – an “authentic” rendering of that special experience. This appraisal of literature as documentary has a literary historical component in that many early ethnic/migrant/racial/multicultural literary texts were essays, autobiographies and diaries;⁷⁵ but it also has a political component in that such texts were, and still are, often assumed to give voice to non-canonical stories and experiences

73 | It is important to note that mimeticism in this context says little about narrative technique and style. Even “modern” and “postmodern” narrative techniques (the quotation marks here are meant to indicate that some techniques often understood as modern or postmodern may occur in pre-modern and less familiar storytelling traditions) may be understood to be an authentic and implicitly mimetic representation of a particular cultural identity, for example Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior*. Mimetic, then, does not mean “realistic,” rather than in some unspecified way “true” to a given cultural identity (echoing the Platonian rather than the Aristotelian understanding of mimesis). Somewhat simplified, realism does not equal mimeticism, and postmodernism is not necessarily anti-mimetic.

74 | It is worth recalling the notorious Silko-Erdich controversy, which succinctly demonstrates the inconsistencies and caricatures that almost inevitably arise in discussions about authenticity. For a critical summary of the debate, see Castillo 2001. Just how real and political the consequences of a polemical usage of this label can be was brought to the fore in Cornel West’s public criticism of Barack Obama (his politics and his person) in 2011.

75 | For example Lorenzo Da Ponte’s memoirs (written 1823-1827 in Italian; he came to the USA only later in his life), Joseph Pickering’s *Inquiries of an Emigrant* (1831), Fanny Kemble’s journals (1835; she came to the USA to marry a US-American), Andrew Carnegie’s autobiography (published posthumously in 1920), Gro Svendsen’s letters home from the 1860s (published only almost a century later as *Frontier Mother*), or the memoirs of Henry Villard (published posthumously in 1904) and Anna Howard Shaw (1915). Probably the most famous autobiographies are those of Jacob Riis (1901), Mary Antin (1912), Edward Bok (1921), and Abraham Cahan (written between 1926 and 1931 in Yiddish, first published in English in 1969). See also note above.

from the margins of society. Insisting on literature about cultural practices as documentary and witness report comes at the threefold price of reducing semantic ambiguity and polyphony, understanding literature as mostly mimetic, and implying the aforementioned problematic notion of authenticity. Where the constructive, instead of the representative, aspect of such literature is emphasized, that construction is, as I have pointed out above, taken to be participating in the wider construction of an “authentic” cultural identity.

In combination with the theoretical assumptions rejected above, this would then lead to the conclusions that (1) literary texts about cultural practices can only be written by authors with the corresponding background,⁷⁶ that (2) such texts are, since often non-canonical and marginal, by definition subversive, more “authentic” and more “multicultural” or “hybrid” than canonical and mainstream literature (echoing the idea of a privileged epistemology/ontology discussed above), and (3) that their fictionality can be neglected or reduced to mimeticism since they are, if not an autobiography, most of the time at least autobiographical, where the adjective is a nonchalant, but entirely useless substitution that eschews the real problems raised by fictionality. Whenever their fictionality is exhorted after all, that fictionality most often serves the real project of a reconstruction or alternative envisioning of cultures and cultural identities that is – due to what I have said about these concepts – just as problematic as the assumptions listed above.

It is relatively easy to see that we can reject the first two claims due to the three reductions mentioned directly above and based on the arguments and axioms already proposed. As Lee and Sollors put it, 1) “[f]or each of these writers, however usually identified under any one category of birth, ethnicity in reality has always meant an eclecticism of family ancestry, a cross of line and home” (Lee 2003, 5); 2) “[w]hen it is not read for its ethnic themes, however, ethnic literature [...] shows a remarkable concern for the American world of modernity” and thus “participates in general American features” (Sollors

76 | Structurally, this would be equivalent to the perhaps more obviously preposterous claim that, for example, Ursula Le Guin has no business writing about slavery, as she has done in *The Birthday of the World*, *The Telling* and *Four Ways To Forgiveness*, and neither has Andrea Levy in her recent *The Long Song*, since they both have never experienced slavery. If we insisted on first-hand experience for writing about something, we would have a very impoverished literary history indeed. Incidentally, Levy’s novel is also a clever comment on fictionality. Not only does her protagonist relate several different variants of the “same” incident – which is her own birth, making her a paralectic first person narrator thinly disguised by the fact that she comments on herself in the third person; she also engages in a long argument about whether a factual rendering of events is adequately “true” to the events, echoing the notorious story/essay by Tim O’Brien about “How To Tell a True War Story.”

2002, 406-407); and 3) “texts are not mere reflections of existing differences but also, among many other things, productive forces” (Sollors 1989, xv).

The last claim relating to fictionality, however, is more complicated and implicates methodological consequences.⁷⁷ This becomes clear when we start looking at the term “autobiographical” that is so often used in the context of literary texts about cultural practices. The substitution of “autobiography” with “autobiographical” (or even “semi-autobiographical”) not only shirks, but even adds to the problem. It is fairly consensual by now that autobiographies employ both factual and fictional narrative strategies and techniques.⁷⁸ The narrator/protagonist is clearly embodied, the text is autodiegetic, and it situates itself within facts and events of the actual world in order to support its, at least partial, “truth” claim. Discourse and story structure, on the other hand, share similarities with fictional narratives. Even if autobiographies by definition trouble the distinction between factual and fictional, they clearly announce their generic attributes and enter into the autobiographical pact mentioned above.⁷⁹ The adjective “autobiographical,” on the other hand, appears to alert to the fact that the text so labeled contains some factual elements of the author’s life (where it is not used simply as an adjectival substitution of autobiography). However, in comparison to “autobiography,” it is a significantly reduced and quite vague claim to the factual, and it does not limit itself to narrative but may also refer to other media and genre. It does not tell us which elements and which parts refer to actual facts and events of the author’s life, and which matter

77 | The issue of fictionality is too complex to summarize here in its entirety. Theories of fictionality can broadly be subdivided into syntactic (focusing on the third-person mode and its possibility to render a character’s consciousness: Hamburger and Cohn), semantic (focusing on referentiality and the ontological and epistemological gap between the actual world and the possible world of a fiction: Doležel, Ronen and Ryan) and pragmatic (focusing on the communication situation and the issue of relevance rather than an alleged “truth value” of a statement: Walsh) approaches. It is important to keep in mind that nonfactual does not equal fictional (lies, for example, are nonfactual but not fictional) and that fictional does not equal narrative (a picture of a fantastic creature is fictional but not narrative, which is also true of the description of that picture); for an introduction to fictionality, see Schaeffer 2012. Obviously, for my purposes, mostly the semantic and pragmatic aspects of fictionality are relevant. PS: The terms can be misleading. What is often called a “syntactical” approach to fictionality has, linguistically, nothing to do with syntax, but with perspectivization.

78 | Narrative in this particular instance is used transmedially to refer as well to other media and genres.

79 | An interesting case is Jamaica Kincaid’s *Autobiography of My Mother*, in which she “impersonates” her mother in order to lend her mother the voice to tell her story that she did not have when alive.

why and how. This amounts to a failsafe and default defense against monitions that parts of the text are fictional (“no one said *everything* really happened this way”). In effect, then, the term “autobiographical” merely serves as a marker of partial “truth” (“*some of this* really happened”), which, in the particular context of literature about cultural practices, in turn serves as a marker of authenticity once more (“this is in parts ‘true’ and representative of ‘cultural identity’”), which in turn treats the text primarily as social documentary. Note that this obtains regardless of specific medium and genre.

Even when we eschew the terms “authenticity” and “autobiographical,” the issue of fictionality remains. It seems that, similar to literary texts about special experiences (abuse, trauma, discrimination, persecution), literary texts about cultural practices are expected to meet special demands regarding their authorship and content whenever they fictionalize these practices, the demand usually being the “authentic” representation of these practices by an author who has an “authentic” understanding of these practices (i.e. biographical source material), where “authentic” implies a mimetic and representational understanding of literature and a homogeneous and static understanding of some kind of “cultural identity.”⁸⁰ The problem is again that, similar to the principally and analytically useless label “autobiographical,” authorship is an unreliable and methodologically flawed source of information, and the “cultural identity” against which the fictional representation of cultural practices might be measured does not exist.⁸¹

In very practical terms, this simply means that it is very hard for us to categorically determine which facts and events of the author’s life matter, and how much – apart from the fact that we have access to them mostly via other narratives and texts –, or just how much artistic liberty regarding distortion, alteration or invention we should, on principle, be willing to accept for the fictional presentation of cultural practices; and this does not even consider the many other lines of identification and differentiation. What and why precisely

80 | That this is a very real demand with very real ideological investments can be seen in the debate over Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Ceremony*, which was attacked for being inauthentic. Without the excoriation, but with the same conceptual premises, many literary texts about cultural practices are probed for their “authenticity,” not only in reviews, but also in critical literature.

81 | This issue has traditionally been discussed as the biographical or intentional fallacy. Under the aegis of New Criticism, which sought to make literary studies more “scientific” and objective in contradistinction to the largely biographical literary criticism of the 19th century, the intentional fallacy went unquestioned. For some time now, with the increasing influence of cultural studies, postcolonialism and rhetorical narratology, the wholesale exclusion of the author from the consideration of a text has been called into question.

should it matter that Julia Alvarez's family set-up is similar to the one in her novel *How the García Girls Lost Their Accent*? If we assume Achy Obeja's *We Came All the Way From Cuba So You Could Dress Like This*? to be mostly autobiographical, she should be dead, which she is not. At which point would it matter that some of the allegedly Mexican American family practices in Arturo Islas's *Migrant Souls* have no correspondence in actuality? Obviously, major counterfactualities could be implausible, but does every detail (of, say, politeness customs) have to be correct? And who would be the judge of that? How important is it that many of the stories in *Chicago Stories* by James Farrell are not discernibly "Irish American," whatever that may mean? How significantly would Pietro Di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* be altered if we thought it was about, say, an Albanian American boy instead of an Italian American one? Clearly, in all these regards, the preconceptions of the audience matter at least as much as the textual details; and these preconceptions may differ widely.

On the other hand, insisting that since literary texts are fictional, the background of their authors and knowledge about actual cultural practices should not matter seems somewhat simplistic and reductionist. Without knowing something about Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes and their relationship, the significance of the "Last Letter" by the latter could not be understood; neither could many relevant passages and images in the poem itself. Much of the humor and other important aspects of Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land* or Jeffrey Eugenides *Middlesex* could not be appreciated without some knowledge about the history and the diverse cultural practices of the respective communities, despite the fact that communal identifications are transient, imaginary, multifarious, etc. As I will detail and explain below, this opposition and its problems more or less dissolve if we understand literary texts as possible worlds, as constructions and projections with differing quantitative and qualitative degrees of divergence from the actual world.

AXIOM V: METHODOLOGY

It follows that my selection of texts has to be based on theme and content *with important specifications* and, *in combination with the axioms above*, with important consequences for my methodology.

Treating literary texts about cultural practices, principles and ideas as literary texts exclusively or even predominantly about cultural practices, principles and ideas illegitimately reduces their complexity. There are no literary texts that deal with children of immigrants that do not also deal with a variety of other, interconnected issues, to the point that we cannot possibly consider all of them. It is this complex system of interdependent and dynamic personal and communal auto- and hetero-identifications and differentiations in

which I am interested. As I have emphasized above, I have chosen the theme of children of immigrants as a selective criterion for the literary texts I am going to analyze precisely in order to make that argument – this ultimately means that my own focus needs to be relativized just as much as any large aggregate identification. I am not interested in whether the chosen texts “authentically” present cultural practices in every detail, since I think that this route of inquiry is pointless; I am interested in the possible worlds they create, construct and project, and how these relate to our actual world. Of course, this, in turn, means that in order to properly understand and contextualize the possible worlds and their “segmented departures”⁸² from the actual world, we have to place that particular possible world within its various intertexts (biographical, historical, legislative, and other).

Taken together, this means that my methodology has to be:

- (1) *transdifferent*. I use Breinig’s term, but similar ideas are proposed under different names and labels by a number of other critics and in other disciplines. The basic idea is simple: rather than merely replacing difference by some concept or term equally prone to reification and homeostasis (as has happened in the many epigonic uses of hybridity), we should complement the – occasionally even important and helpful – binary differentials with the various other possible dynamic and interconnected identifications and differentiations; in the words of Günter Lenz, we should pay attention to “the interrelationships among *various, often conflicting dimensions of difference* (differentiation)” (Lenz 362). This is what Siemerling calls the “both/and” of recognition, transition and translation that occur when people with differing cultural practices come into contact, or what Doyle calls the “across” of dialectics that always involves at least a third – and possible a fourth, a fifth, and so on – element. It should now be obvious that my admittedly somewhat unwieldy formulation of “personal and communal auto- and hetero-identification and differentiation” is inherently “transdifferent.” It is also inherently:
- (2) *comparative*, along various synchronic and diachronic lines. The transdifferent focus implies and necessitates the comparison of the various different identifications and differentiations of one character (personal and communal, socioeconomic, age, gender, education, food, etc.) with each other, and with those of the other main characters in order to comprehend the system of identifications and differentiations that the given text presents. By extension, the systems of identifications and differentiations of one text will be compared to those of the other selected texts, which in turn implies a synchronic comparison (to other texts of roughly the same time) and a

82 | This concept will be explained below.

diachronic comparison (to other texts of other times). My thematic focus already suggests the comparison of the identifications and differentiations of the children with those of their parents (in the chosen texts), which further entails a very broadly transnational dimension since the parents are usually from a country other than the USA while their children are often US-citizens or have come to the USA at an early age.⁸³ It also implies a comparison with other characters (and their identifications) in the same text, and between the identifications and differentiations presented in other texts of roughly the same time (both those that are identified under the same group label and those that are identified under other group labels) and of other times (again, both texts that are identified under the same group label and those that are identified under other group labels). This means that in my actual readings, I will analyze in detail the system/"web" of the various (personal and communal, auto- and heterogeneous) identifications and differentiations in the selected texts and will subsequently compare these systems in the respective texts. Emphasis will be placed on the discourse level of the texts, particularly focalization, since it makes a significant difference whether the identifications are made by a hetero-, homo-, or autodiegetic narrator.⁸⁴ I am interested not only in what kind of system the texts construct and what they offer up as categories and important faultlines, but also whether there are projections of alternative identifications, of "it could/should be otherwise." As a by-product, the diachronic comparison should also shed some light on developments in the kinds of identificatory and differential systems (and, I suspect, do away with the progressive fallacy that more recent texts necessarily construct more complex systems as a consequence of an allegedly more complex world).

The comparative perspective, apart from logically deriving from my axioms, is thus an integral part of my project because, as Foner puts it in her exemplary comparative study, "a comparative analysis can deepen our understanding [...] by raising new questions and research problems and help to evaluate, and in some cases modify, theoretical perspectives and formulate explanations that could not be made on the basis of one case – or one time period – alone" (Foner 2005, 3). It provides "fresh perspectives to old problems" and "increase[s] the 'visibility' of one structure by contrasting

83 | It is also transnational since the regional context of the coming of age of the children is placed in the global context of migration. As Levitt and Waters emphasize, the "dialectic between the global and the local requires a transnational response" (8).

84 | The narrator of *Middlesex*, for example, is paraleptic, i.e. knows things about the past of his/her family that he/she could not possibly know as a "normal" human being. It also makes a difference how exactly a narrative is focalized, for example mono- vs. variable focalization.

it with another” (Bendix quoted in Foner 2005, 3), dismantling “the illusion of total regularity and the illusion of absolute uniqueness” (Foner 2005, 3). It also speaks against the kind of cultural relativism and ethnic particularism that exaggerates “even the smallest symbols of ethnic differentiation [...] out of proportion to represent major cultural differences, differences that are believed to defy comparison or scrutiny” (Sollors 1989, 13) and that would admonish everyone to “stick to their own turfs” (Sollors 1989, 12).⁸⁵ My methodology is also:

- (3) *modal* in the specific sense of conceptualizing literary texts as possible worlds with segmented departures from the actual world. This is important for handling the issue of fictionality (and the related issue of “authenticity”) discussed above. Possible worlds theory derives from philosophy, specifically modal logic and formal semantics, and provides a framework for assessing the viability of truth statements.⁸⁶ It has subsequently been adapted – and more and more popularized – by literary theory in order to conceptualize fictionality and truth statements in fiction. The basic assumption underlying the “texts as worlds” metaphor of (literary) possible worlds theory is that “the fictional text gives imaginative existence to worlds, objects, and states of affairs by simply describing them. In creating what is objectively a non-actual PW, the fictional text establishes a new actual world which imposes its laws on the reader and determines its own horizon of possibilities” (Ryan 2005, 447). This assumption is guided by the recognition that

[f]ictional worlds do not have to conform to the structures of the actual world, just as the world of non-Euclidean geometry does not conform to the world where Euclidean geometry is valid [...] Fictional worlds are not constrained by requirements of verisimilitude, truthfulness, or plausibility; they are shaped by historically changing aesthetic factors [...] The history of fictional worlds of literature is the history of an art. (Doležel 19)

According to this logic, there are different kinds of worlds, all of them possible, and only their confusion leads to misunderstandings. All worlds that are thinkable are possible (Doležel 281), but only our surrounding “real” world is an actual world, while fictional worlds are possible worlds in which there can

85 | Surprisingly, very few critics actually practice a truly comparative perspective, among them Christopher Douglas (2009), Sieglinde Lemke (2009), Dean Franco (2006), A. Robert Lee (2003), Leslie Antonette (1998), and Samuel Ludwig (1996). I would suppose that this reticence is, once again, due to the loaded baggage – and, perhaps paradoxically, the nebulosity – of concepts of cultural identity.

86 | There are, in reality, a number of different theories and intricate issues that do not concern my main argument and methodology.

be “fictional truths” and statements that in that particular world are viable, but would not be in the actual world (Ryan 1998, 147). These fictional worlds come in all kinds of varieties, e.g. complete worlds which “allow[] us to decide logically every conceivable statement about” them (Doležel 279),⁸⁷ incomplete worlds, mythological worlds, which consist of a natural and a supernatural domain, natural worlds, in which our physical laws are valid, etc.⁸⁸ All of these possible worlds “lie within the actual one” (Goodman quoted in Ronen 50). Specifically, “[l]iterary worlds are possible not in the sense that they can be viewed as possible alternatives to the actual state of affairs, but in the sense that they *actualize a world* which is analogous with, derivative of, or contradictory to the world we live in” (Ronen 50), or stands in various other kinds of relation to the actual world. The criteria for this particular relation – called compossibility – may be accurate reference to historical events, geography, technology, species, human inventory, and possibility and probability between the poles of “could be actual” and “could never be actual” (Ryan 2005, 449).⁸⁹ “The possible construction of a fictional world has therefore nothing to do with abstract logical possibilities of occurrence [...] [F]ictional states of affairs are actualized and actualizable in the fictional world” (51). Most fictional worlds are composite and semantically heterogeneous (Doležel 23);⁹⁰ also, since each reader imagines the world of the text differently, we should speak of “possible worlds of the text in the plural” (Ryan 1998, 140).

This much is fairly consensual. However, there are two further critical, but also debated issues of relevance to my methodology. The first is the issue of minimal departure. No fictional text is complete, there are always gaps. The question is whether one considers undecidable propositions as merely due to missing information and the possible world thus as hypothetically complete (minimal departure), or whether one understands this incompleteness and the arising gaps (filled by the reader as much as possible) as characteristic of fiction. I will follow Doležel and Ryan on this issue by assuming, in accordance with the second view, that the particular compossibility and “contrast between the actual and the possible provides a model of the cognitive pattern into which readers organize information in order to interpret it as a story” (Ryan 2006, 633). As Ryan emphasizes, the power of the readers’ need and capacity to imagine is such that they can imagine textual worlds even when they are

87 | This claim is untenable in light of Gödel’s proposition that in all complex systems there are statements which cannot be decided.

88 | For a glossary of possible worlds, see Doležel 1998, 279.

89 | This echoes Todorov’s definition of the fantastic and the marvelous.

90 | They can be homogeneous (following a consistent system) or heterogeneous, uniregional (only one world) or pluriregional, stable or instable (consistency may occasionally be disrupted) (Martinez and Scheffel 127-30).

“unnatural,” i.e. fragmented, contradictory, incomplete, etc.: fictional worlds may be “discourse-created non-actual possible worlds, populated by incompletely specified individuals;” nevertheless, “to the reader immersed in the text the TAW [text as world] is imaginatively real, and the characters are ontologically complete human beings” (Ryan 2005, 448). This is the reason why I will talk about “segmented (i.e. partial, qualitative and quantitative) departures” when assessing the particular compossibility of a given text. This way, we do not have to oppose fictional to nonfictional texts (such as autobiographies or texts labeled “autobiographical”), but can talk about the particular kinds of departures (among other ways through recourse to intertexts) of each fictional text, including biographical facts.

As a number of narratologists have pointed out, it is important to recognize that fictional narratives and non-fictional narratives may differ in referentiality and syntax, but both employ the artifice of narrative, and that narrative itself is always part of a communicative framework that has a pragmatic side. This specifically means that, according to James Phelan (2005), Richard Walsh⁹¹ (2008), and Henrik Skov Nielsen (2011),⁹² narratives may *rhetorically* signal their referentiality or non-referentiality and may also be *received* as referential or non-referential by the reader. Since (1) encoding and decoding do not have to be congruent, readers may interpret a passage as referential that rhetorically signals its non-referentiality, and the other way around; since (2) few narratives are completely homogeneous and consistent in their coding as referential or non-referential; and since (3) few readers will decode a narrative as either completely referential or non-referential, we should recognize that narratives are heterogeneously structured in their (non)referentiality to the actual world.

The second issue is the status of the actual world, specifically whether it is seen in indexical relation to the possible world or as ontologically different.⁹³ Again, I will follow Ryan’s argument against the claim that positing an actual world requires a naïve realism:

if ‘actual’ is an indexical concept, why couldn’t the concept of actual world tolerate historical, cultural, and even personal variations? [...] as long as we try to make sense of the text in terms of human experience and along some kind of narrative pattern, we

91 | For Walsh, the issue of fictionality is just a starting point to discuss the problem of relevance; for Phelan, the issue is part of an ethical criticism.

92 | Nielsen has presented this idea at the 2011 annual conference of the *International Society for the Study of Narrative* in St. Louis, USA, in a much more elaborate and systematic way than I am able to summarize here.

93 | Some theories of possible worlds oppose one actual world to all others (Ryan), some propose that there are multiple actual worlds (Goodman). This issue is not relevant here.

try to distinguish what is objective fact from what is mere projection of the characters' imagination. (Ryan 1998, 151-153)

In effect, this posits a hypothetical real world existing independently of the mind.⁹⁴ This is important because it allows us to appreciate that some fictional narratives have a specific indexical relation to the actual world – in that they tell stories about facts, events and states of affairs in the actual world that were previously untold, censored or suppressed – without having to take recourse to the vocabulary of “authenticity,” “subversion,” etc.⁹⁵

AXIOM VI: CORPUS

I have further made relevant pragmatic decisions that delimit my methodology.

- (1) I have limited myself to narrative, and within narrative, primarily to longer fictional narratives, i.e. novels (although some of them are labeled “autobiographical;” this should, after what I have argued above, cause no objections). This constitutes a purely pragmatic decision insofar as I believe that my conceptual framework and the correlative methodology also work for other genre and media: basically, I analyze systems of identifications and differentiations. I see no reason why it should not be possible to look for, analyze and assess such systems in, for example, diaries, poems, movies, dramas, or graphic novels; and indeed, I will occasionally make reference to literary texts other than novels in order to illustrate a point. Obviously, media and genre rules condition how precisely such systems

94 | This position coincides with “hypothetical realism” in the philosophy of science.

95 | Note that the basic idea underlying possible worlds theory can be found in a number of critical texts and disciplines without being called by that name. For example, the sociologists Peggy Levitt and Mary Waters write that one should “take *cognitive and imagined elements* of transnational livelihood seriously,” not only “actual behaviors and practices,” but also “how social actors *construct their identities and imagine themselves and the social groups they belong to* when they live within transnational social fields” (9; emphasis mine). Werner Sollors’ interests are “not in the raw data of the so-called ethnic experience, but in the *mental formations and cultural constructions* (the codes, beliefs, rites, and rituals) which were developed in America in order to make sense of ethnicity and immigration in a melting-pot culture” (1989, 9-10; emphasis mine). Although they do not talk about fictional texts and possible worlds, they emphasize the constructive, imaginative elements of our access and understanding of world and self, and one important medium to test, speculate and imagine “understandings” of world and self is fiction.

may be formulated and presented. For example, camera perspective may crucially establish differentiations through distance, movement, angle and focus; so may graphic novels through tabular panel arrangement and panel juxtaposition, or the relationship between text and image. Stage directions for drama may, through lighting, or positioning of characters, create strong differentiations; narrative poems pose no problem at all, even if there is no identifiable lyrical I, and even apparently non-narrative poems (or experimental narratives, for that matter) can, according to Monika Fludernik, still convey experientiality (and, of course, a possible world), and thus identifications and differentiations.⁹⁶ I have chosen novels because they most often present extensive, complex possible worlds with different (sometimes significant) divergences from the actual world (more so than most autobiographies) and thus almost inevitably extensive and complex systems of identifications and differentiations, which I find most suitable to demonstrate the viability of my claims.⁹⁷

- (2) I have explained above why I have chosen the theme of children of immigrants: because it brings together an exceptionally large and varied host of different issues (diaspora, (post)colonialism, migration, generation, family, education, coming of age, naming, etc.) and thus invokes a complex system of identifications and differentiations possibly, or perhaps even inevitably, in excess of comprehensive description, which in turn is meant to illustrate and support my conceptual axioms and demonstrate that, and why, a culturalist focus does not suffice. Incidentally, my theme also circumscribes the time span of my corpus; at a closer look, this cannot come as a surprise.

96 | All sufficiently complex fictional texts, regardless of their particular kind and degree of narrativity, project a possible world (no matter how incomplete) and experientiality, and thus some kind of moral universe with identifications and differentiations. I have to admit that I would draw a line at algorithmically generated language poetry.

97 | Dorrit Cohn has made a powerful argument not only for the “distinction of fiction” (the title of her influential book) from other discourses with regard to its nonreferentiality, but also for the distinction of fiction with regard to its unique “potential for crafting a self-enclosed universe ruled by formal patterns that are ruled out in all other orders of discourse” (vii).

Another, less academic formulation of this argument was recently made by the British writer Andrea Levy during a reading from her latest novel, *The Long Song* (2010) in Cologne. When asked why she chose the medium of the novel to present the life of slaves on sugar cane plantations on Jamaica during the 18th and 19th century, she answered that fiction can imagine and give voice to stories, events and fates unrecorded, untold and lost and that it can envision full experiential worlds with the full complexities of life.

Immigration, of course, has been an important issue in colonial- and US-American history for the longest time, though the first colonists did certainly not perceive themselves as immigrants (nor as “Americans”), and only a cynic would discuss chattel slaves as immigrants.⁹⁸ The discursive field of immigration, naturalization and integration began to obtain significance with the early republic, the question of citizenship and naturalization regulations, and the budding idea of a nation with a distinct political, religious, social and cultural identity and history/tradition – from the beginning quite more varied and diversified than often acknowledged – to be defined against others.⁹⁹ In the course of the 19th century, a number of factors contributed to this discourse becoming (and remaining) one of the most preeminent in the USA.¹⁰⁰

For one, there is sheer demography: immigration numbers picked up significantly in the 1840s and remained high (in the millions per annum) up to the quota laws of the 1920s¹⁰¹ due to a number of push¹⁰² and pull¹⁰³ factors. From the 1840s onward, numerous magazines regularly published immigration statistics and debates about immigration – specifically by certain groups such as the Irish, the German, and later the Italian and Chinese – and the future

98 | It is not a coincidence that Oscar Handlin’s remark about the history of the USA being a history of immigration has been so influential; the USA as a nation of immigrants, as John F. Kennedy called it, has been one of the most important ideological staples in US-cultural, intellectual and political history.

99 | As Sacvan Bercovitch has discussed, for the early settlers, especially the Puritans, religious identity was much more important than any other. Accordingly, the theme of the 2nd generation in this particular context appears in discussions about the so-called half-way covenant, i.e. the spiritual conversion experiences (as a sign and precondition of true membership in the church) of the 2nd generation (or the criticized lack thereof). Roger Daniels’ *Coming to America* (2002) provides a glimpse of the actual diversity of the colonies and the USA right from the beginning.

100 | The debate reached a climax in the so-called Americanization debates at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century; Horace Kallen’s famous essay on the idea of the melting pot provides an excellent overview of then-extant arguments.

101 | Countries of origin changed significantly from northwestern Europe, specifically Ireland and Germany, to southeastern Europe, specifically Italy and Hungary, and eventually China and Japan.

102 | For example famines (e.g. the potato famine in Ireland in the mid-1840s), wars and revolutions (e.g. 1848 in Germany), political uprisings and ensuing persecution, pogroms (specifically in Russia after the 1881 assassination of Alexander II.), economic privation, etc.

103 | For example, industrialization and the need for cheap labor, the promise of land due to the Preemption Act of 1841 and the Homestead Act of 1862, a different political system, etc.

of the USA. Increasing immigration was accompanied by a strong nativist movement. While the latter correlated with the changing physiognomy (and thus heightened visibility) of immigrants as their countries of origin changed from northwestern to southeastern Europe and then the Eastern hemisphere, it had its roots in resentments against the Catholic Irish immigrants and their purported “papism” (a resentment later extended towards the Catholic Italian immigrants), concomitantly the German Jews and/or German political “radicals.” It is worth emphasizing that not all contributions to the immigration debates were nativist or simplistic, on the contrary. Anonymous contributions such as “The Irish in America” (*The Living Age* 1852), “The German Element in the United States” (*Catholic World* 1877), “Italians in America” (*Putnam’s Monthly* 1857), or “The Course of Emigration to America” (*The Living Age* 1869) all either praise the respective members of a group and point out their beneficial contribution to the “national character” or express confidence that any differences between immigrants and the host country will be automatically taken care of by the general political and cultural climate in the USA. These articles are no exception, either. Henry Day’s article on “The Chinese Migration” in *The New Englander* from 1870 even paints a utopian picture of the effects of Chinese immigration on the future USA.

Equally important, the schism of the Civil War drastically aggravated the virulent issue of national/cultural identity and unity, so that the Reconstruction Era was, among other things, characterized by an anxiety over this national/cultural identity and unity and the consequent anxiety over threats to it in the form of “non-white” immigrants from other nations with other political systems, revolutions, and their own schisms.¹⁰⁴ For some time, many magazine contributions are more concerned with the Black and Native American population than with immigrants.¹⁰⁵

The issue of national identity and cultural homogeneity was sharpened by a nation perceived as increasingly “smaller” as the two coasts were connected by the first transcontinental railroad built between 1863 and 1869 and the settlement of the vast middle that Turner only three decades later declares as completed. Industrialization and the attendant denser infrastructure and urbanization added their part.¹⁰⁶ Communication technology furthered

104 | As Anderson and others have shown, nation building goes hand in hand with nationalism and xenophobia. However, as Anderson also emphasizes (a point which is regularly ignored), the concept of the nation often has a utopian tinge, especially for those communities that demand, but do not have one.

105 | For an interesting discussion of the connection between African Americans and immigrants, respectively race and ethnicity, see Levine 2007.

106 | The virulent issues of industrialization, urbanization and poverty in the late 19th century often “cloaked” immigrants and their children. As both Levine and Roberts

the perception of a small nation and world with the invention and ensuing improvement of electric telegraphy in the USA between the 1840s and 1880s, slowly to become global during the 2nd half of the 19th century, and followed by wireless telegraphy. In general, drastic changes in communication, visual and transport technology reduced perceived and real distances in the world and encouraged mobility.¹⁰⁷

Lastly, though not to be underestimated, a number of new disciplines and discourses take hold, among them evolution and genetics, sociology, pedagogy and, of course, demography, all of them powerful participants and tools in debates about past, present and future national and cultural identity, integration, schooling, standard languages, etc.

Not surprisingly, questions of immigration, naturalization and integration eventually find their way into literary texts, though mostly nonfictional ones at first; I have already listed in the notes a number of 19th century autobiographies, memoirs, journals, letters and diaries that concern themselves with immigration and immigrants.¹⁰⁸

point out, “urban poor” in contemporary debates often implied “immigrant urban poor” (Levine 59; Roberts 288). Poor street children in mid-19th century sentimental urban novels typically represent “the working classes and immigrant groups” (Roberts 293).

107 | Perceived distances shrank with the availability of photographs (or panoramas as early as the 18th century) of distant places, though the imagined distance was increased by exoticizing if the real distance was too great; this trend was turned upside down once the “exotic” was “discovered” in the immediate neighborhood, e.g. in New York or Chicago. Better transport technology was not limited to land: steamboat technology did to the large rivers what the railway did to the land.

Paradoxically, the world-wide modernization that is set into motion by the expansionism/imperialism/colonialism of European monarchies during the early modern period and the Renaissance (one could argue that the first phase of modernization and globalization already starts with the expansionism of the Sumerians and the Egyptians, later the Romans) and that leads to the emergence of the modern nation-state, eventually calls into question just that nation-state as it becomes global and transnational during a first peak around the turn of the 19th to the 20th century. The ambivalent debates about transnationalism at that time reflect the anxiety about the state and identity of the nation in this globalized “small” world.

108 | Yanella even claims (not quite correctly, see note below) that “[n]o Irish-American literature reflecting on the immigrant experience was published until the early 1890s” (44), when Finley Peter Dunne’s enormously successful “Mr. Dooley” first made its appearance.

The children of immigrants initially do not play a major role:¹⁰⁹ immigration only grew numerically massive in the 1840s, so the children of immigrants at first did not constitute a perceivably distinct group and factor,¹¹⁰ also because much immigration at that point still originated in northwestern Europe, keeping readily perceivable physiognomic differences low.¹¹¹ What differences there were, were often assumed to be taken care of automatically by assimilation and the “unique” US-American “climate” and conditions that Crèvecoeur describes.¹¹² As Oscar Handlin observes, children of immigrants, or the second generation, as he calls it,

became a familiar subject of observation and discussion only when the immigrant population was distinctive enough to constitute a problem. Up until the middle of the nineteenth century, Americans clung to the easy assumption that all newcomers would shortly merge into a single indistinguishable mass; their children would be very much

109 | Thomas Jefferson, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), mentions the “danger” of unfitting immigrants passing on the (monarchic) political principles of their home country to their children, and so does Theodore Roosevelt roughly a hundred years later in “What ‘Americanism’ Means” (1894).

110 | Very few published statistics such as the ones mentioned above concerned themselves with children of immigrants. An 1848 statistic in *DeBow’s Review* (“Immigration into the United States”) argues that “that portion, which embraces the children of foreigners on both father and mother’s side, is in every sense American” (247). Two further statistics in *DeBow’s Review* from 1852 and 1866 at least mention “descendants of immigrants.”

111 | One has to keep in mind that macroscopic demographic developments take decades to manifest themselves.

112 | Despite influential nativist movements, many “opinions,” articles, speeches and essays in newspapers and other public organs up until the 1850s and 1860s express little or no doubt that, whatever the problems of the first generation, the children of immigrants would make good US-citizens: “Of all races, speaking all languages, possessed of different habits and attributes, in a generation or two, an amalgamation takes place, every variety of race lends its tinge to the national character, and the many and divided become one in habit, in language, and as a separate people indistinguishable” (Payer). It is worth noting, and not without historical irony considering current debates in the USA about the status of English as first language among the children of immigrants (the focus is on Mexican Americans), that an anonymous report in *The New York Times* of October 27, 1902, presents figures of the USA Census Office that indicate that children of foreign-born parents tend to be superior in literacy to those of native parents. It is almost idiomatic among contemporary linguists to designate the USA as a graveyard of languages.

alike because the common influence of the free environment would shape the character and even the physical appearance of all of them. (Handlin xiv)¹¹³

This view changed with the increasing number and visibility of immigrants in the 1840s and the following decades, and with the slow change of countries of origin from northwestern Europe to southeastern Europe and to the Eastern hemisphere. When the perceived “otherness” of the immigrants grew, the prospect of their children also became suspicious, especially with then-new popular discussions about genetics, eugenics, race, and inheritable traits. The children of immigrants considered “inassimilable” and with a “bad” “gene stock” were regarded as a threat not only to the demographic setup of the USA and its political system, culture and identity, but – worse – also to the “superior” Anglo-Saxon “gene pool.” The nativists Frederick Saunders and Thomas Bangs Thorpe admonish in their *The Progress and Prospects of America* (1855) that the premonitions of Jefferson have become threateningly real and almost fulfilled, painting a bleak picture of the future of the USA. In the chapter “Perils – Immigration” of his book *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis* (1855), Josiah Strong, too, writes that the children of immigrants are the true and long term danger to US-society.¹¹⁴ The increasing awareness of long-range developments and their results is supported by the other new disciplines that I have mentioned above, such as demography, sociology, but also didactics and pedagogy, especially regarding schooling and language acquisition (Carnevale 2006; Fass 2006).

Even once children of immigrants start to be an issue and theme in nonfiction texts, it takes another few decades for them to become more than a marginal focus in fictional texts, for example in the stories by Abraham Cahan, Mary Antin, Edith Maud Eaton (alias Sui Sin Far), Honoré Willson, Margherita Hamm or Myra Kelly.¹¹⁵ By then, new (and cheaper) printing technology as

113 | Handlin makes this argument within the context of the generational model, according to which “a widening gulf developed between the uprooted immigrants and their children. The second generation thus played a part in a significant epilogue to the drama of immigration” (xiv). This generational model was first suggested and adapted by Anthony Rud (1923), Marcus Lee Hansen (1938), and Arthur Schlesinger (1943). For a critical discussion of this model, see Eckstein 2002 or Nahirny 1996.

114 | Of course, there were also voices to the contrary, for example Carl Schurz in “Manifest Destiny” in 1893. Later, during the 20th century, the children of immigrants became objects of serious (mostly sociological) studies (Anthony Rud (1923), Marcus Lee Hansen (1938), Arthur Schlesinger (1943), see above).

115 | Some of these stories, for example Honoré Willson’s “What is an American? The Suicide of the Anglo-American” (1912), contain nonfiction essayistic segments. Children of immigrants also appear in an abundance of poems and dramatic work, for

well as better infrastructure and distribution channels allow not only for mass media, but also for a diversification and professionalization of the literary market, including smaller “special interest” newspapers and magazines catering to particular audiences (many of Sui Sin Far’s stories and essays originally appear in such magazines, but also in *Century*, *Scribner’s*, *Collier’s*, *Atlantic Monthly*).¹¹⁶ This is complemented by a growing literate and educated middle class with an interest in “primitive cultures” and “authentic lifestyles” as well as in “tales of conversion” to the American dream.

To my knowledge, however, there are very few literary texts and no long fictional narratives that significantly and extensively thematize the issue of children of immigrants prior to the late 19th century. Of course, there are various poems and short stories that address the issue, for example by Upton Sinclair, Bret Harte, Mark Twain, or Stephen Crane; many novels by “classic” US-American writers feature immigrant characters and are concerned about issues of origins and nation, descent and consent (Levine 56), for example in Cooper’s *Pioneers*, Melville’s *The Confidence-Man*,¹¹⁷ or James’s *The American Scene*; but they almost never do so with an eye to *children* of immigrants.¹¹⁸ My core corpus, then, begins in 1934 with Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep*, while the extended corpus begins with Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia* from 1918.

(3) It should be clear from my arguments that my selection of texts can only be exemplary for the illustration of my axioms and methodology, not representative of a number of particular ethnic groups, their alleged cultural identity, or ethnic/multicultural literature in general. That would be impossible. For my comparative purposes, I have chosen the texts for diachronic variety and, within my focus, for variety of cultural practices, principles and ideas, as well as narrative structure and additional themes; as I have remarked repeatedly, there is a host of other texts that could have been chosen and, I hope, will be critically appreciated at some point in the future. I have also allowed myself the bias of choosing, in addition to more canonical texts that I believe cannot be ignored

example in Israel Zangwill’s influential play *The Melting Pot* (1908). Where they do make an appearance in earlier texts, such as the stories “The Irish Peddler” (Gardner 1860) or “The Emigrant” (Anonymous 1870), they are peripheral figures.

116 | According to Dowling, “[e]thnic American literature achieved formation, not fruition, at the turn of the twentieth century. Immigrants in particular only fully impacted American cultural production when they turned to the earliest venues of the mass media – vaudeville, music, silent film, and radio” (373).

117 | Melville’s novel could actually be considered a negative version of Crèvecoeur’s or Zangwill’s melting pot: the protagonist is on board a steamship full of “foreigners,” but it is a “ship of fools” and the characters are distrustful, greedy, and violent.

118 | Of course, Karl Postl (alias Charles Sealsfield) and Friedrich Gerstäcker also write about immigrants in the USA, though in German.

(such as *Call It Sleep*, *No-No Boy*, or *The Namesake*), other texts that I believe should not be ignored or at least deserve more – or more detailed – critical attention (such as *Pocho* or *Mona in the Promised Land*).

Caveat II

There are three more caveats:

- (1) I am fully aware of the universalist underpinning of my arguments, axioms and aims. In fact, I think that what Caroline Brettell and James Hollifield write about the ultimate goal of anthropology is also valid and legitimate for literary and cultural studies: “to engage in cross-cultural comparisons that make possible generalizations across space and time, and hence nomothetic theory building” (Brettell and Hollifield 4). This essay, too, is conceptually at least asymptotically nomothetic, though primarily regarding its methodology rather than in the direction of a unified or “total” theory.
- (2) Our critical interests cannot avoid being motivated by recent and/or contemporary concerns; we always have to start our projects from our current situation and localization: “Der historische Rückblick [...] dient als ein Beitrag zum Verständnis der Prozesse, die die Problemlage der Gegenwart [...] präfiguriert und generiert haben” (Kley 20). In an extension of György Lukács, we could say that fictional possible worlds refer to at least three times: the intrinsic time of the possible world, the extrinsic time of the creation of that world, and the contextual time of its being read.
- (3) Again: I do not intend to devalue the critical work that has been done by ethnic, race or multicultural studies, or approaches suspicious of just my kind of nomothetic “methodologizing.” Instead, I want to propose a complementary (not necessarily congruous, in some respects perhaps even juxtaposed) perspective that – ideally – provides new ideas, vantage points and routes to pursue.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, of course, my motivation for this essay is neither purely theoretical nor an exclusively academic exercise. Storyworlds create alternative, imagined and imaginable, possible worlds. Regardless of whether we consider the confrontation with those worlds as building character through the confrontation with other (potentially commendable) moralities (Alasdair MacIntyre, Martha Nussbaum), as constitutive of our identity through imaginary “test runs” of alternative perspectives and horizons (Charles Taylor), as allowing for

“coduction” (Wayne Booth), as ethical training (Zachary Newton), as providing scripts and frames for our conversational daily storytelling and communicative interaction (Monika Fludernik), or as cognitive training and enrichment (David Herman), these storyworlds can, and manifestly do, shape our ideas about, understanding of, and access to the actual world. They envision, and help us envision, other kinds and forms of differentiations and identifications; differentiations and identifications that make other, perhaps – and hopefully – less detrimental and denigrating kinds of difference, which it is the task of the critic and teacher to explicate, evaluate and mediate. In this regard, this essay participates in the somewhat old-fashioned but unapologetic insistence that literature helps us realize that the actual world can be otherwise.¹¹⁹

119 | Many of the essays in the October 2010 issue of the *PMLA* entitled *Critical Paradigms* testify to this, if based on very different conceptions of literature, of the task of the critic, and for very varied purposes. Of course, the dictum also evokes Adorno’s stance on literature and art in his *Ästhetische Theorie* (1970).

