

Mapping Ethnicity and Its Representation in the Global Context

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Abstract The essay begins by mapping the multiplicity of cultural identity in the global context, drawing from different scholars on the issue to reveal that identity has become a hybrid construct. As such, identity relies heavily on discursive representations in literary and cultural texts. Studies of ethnic identities, therefore, concern how people of different cultural backgrounds interact with each other, how the migrating experiences are narrated and represented, and how such representations reflect the life experiences of the migrants. As a result of the complicated diasporic experiences against global migration, ethnic identity has become an ethical issue which governs human interaction, thus shaping people's understanding of themselves, of others, and of the world.

Key words ethnicity; representation; cultural identity; ethics; globalization

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The issue of “cultural identity” against globalization has been much elucidated by scholars of cultural studies around the century since the need to situate oneself in the global context has become an urgent subject. With the global flow of capital and labor, the movement of people from one place to another, from one culture

to another, has brought about many related questions concerning the co-existence of cultures and peoples. Living in a multi-cultural society suggests that one has to interact with people of other cultures in daily experiences and activities. Therefore, cultural meeting, assimilation, negotiation as well as resistance have become the essential parts of the political act in an age of globalization. Whereas people all over the world are able to enjoy the same cultural products in many ways, they may not encounter the same political, social, cultural and psychological problems. At the same time when the globe is moving towards homogenization in cultural forms, another equally strong tendency remains to keep the heterogeneous qualities of different cultures. In fact, with globalization, “[w]e are not moving towards a common global culture shared by all, but towards greater awareness of the variety of ethnic identities. The end result of globalization is not global similarity, but increased awareness of global difference” (Kidd 195). “Difference” has thus become an apt word to describe the complexities of the modern existence: difference in race/ethnicity, in sex/gender, in age, in language, in religion, in place/location, and in culture. In this light, one’s ethnic identity, as represented in literary and cultural texts, provides an important dimension to understand one’s existence in the globalised society. It is an ethical issue which governs human interaction, thus shaping people’s understanding of themselves, of others, and of the world.

The Multiplicity of Cultural Identity

A document on the problems of race drafted in 1950 by eight scholars for UNESCO, including Claude Levi-Strauss, Franklin Frazier, Morris Ginsberg, and Ernest Beaglehole, is often cited in studies of racial and ethnic identities, in an attempt to differentiate between “race” and “ethnicity.” One of the articles of the Communications goes like this:

National, religious, geographic, linguistic and cultural groups do not necessarily coincide with racial groups; and the cultural traits of such groups have no demonstrated genetic connection with racial traits. Because serious errors of this kind are habitually committed when the term “race” is used in popular parlance, it would be better when speaking of human races to drop the term “race” altogether and speak of *ethnic groups*. (Metraux 142-143)

The discrepancy between the location of racial-ethnic groups and other differentiating categories such as nation, geography, religion and language originates mainly from the long and complicated history of migration, either

international or local. The diasporic experiences over history have made all kinds of boundaries blurred and identities multi-dimensional. Robin Cohen outlines some common features of diaspora, including dispersal from an original homeland, collective memory of the homeland, a strong ethnic group consciousness, troubled relationship with host countries, and tolerance for pluralism (17). Even if diaspora shares the above similar features, the specific migrating experiences and their impacts upon people vary tremendously from place to place, and from culture to culture. Current studies of cultural identity often take the following aspects into consideration:

Firstly, the diasporic routes which the migration has taken will affect one's cultural identities. People may have developed different cultural identifications if they migrate from different places although they are currently living in the same place. This is what Chris Barker means when he announces that "[i]dentities are concerned with routes rather more than with roots" (256). In this light, the cultural identification of a black Atlantic, for example, is different from that of a black African simply because they migrate to Europe or the US via different routes and therefore bring with them different traditions, histories and cultural memories. In this process, for what reasons people migrate also matters since this affects their motivations and objectives and will later influence their re-settlement in the new territory.¹

Secondly, the diasporic space where the migrants choose to settle down serves as another place of struggle for cultural identification. This experience of "putting roots 'elsewhere'" (Brah 179), or rather, an experience of "re-root", remains a focus of studies in cultural identities. According to Avtar Brah, "The diaspora space is the site where *the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is a native*" (205). On the one hand, the "native" people may have migrated from other parts of the world earlier on and carried other cultural traditions with them to this place; and on the other hand, the new diasporians are faced with the immediate task of settling down in the new territories and interacting with the earlier settlers. These two aspects constitute a relational perspective in understanding cultural identities since one's identities are always decided with reference to others.

Thirdly, the migrants are obsessed with a strong sense of longing for their spiritual and cultural "home." As Brah observes,

Where is home? On the one hand, "home" is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of "origin."

On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality. (188-189)

A nostalgic feeling towards the “lost” cultural tradition and a yearning for the establishment of a new home in the new settlement are the two sides of the same coin in cultural identification. Before coming to the new territory, the migrants may have cherished utopian imaginations towards the new land no matter for what reasons they decide to migrate; however, in the process of settling down in the new territory, they may realize that the new home may not be as ideal as they have imagined. Therefore, some of them may develop a strong sense of nostalgic feelings about the past. For many of the first-generation immigrants, the home where they come from become a home lost forever.² In comparison, however, the second- and third-generation immigrants may understand “home” in totally different ways from that of their (grand)parents. They either do not feel particularly attached to the “old” cultural traditions as much as their (grand)parents, or romanticize their cultural roots, ignoring the negative sides as much as they can.

These considerations are the important aspects of discussions when scholars analyze the issue of cultural identity against globalization. As a result of the complicated diasporic experiences, one’s cultural identity is marked by “hybridization”: “the mixing of that which is already a hybrid” (Barker 258). It is decided by “the multiplicity of subject positions that constitute the subject,” hence “a constantly changing relational multiplicity” (Brah 123).

The Representation of Ethnic Identities

Basically two divided points of view have been developed over the issue of cultural identity: essentialist and constructionist.³ Whereas the former believes that one’s cultural identity is inherent, the latter argues for its social and cultural construction.

For the essentialists, one’s ethnicity is decided when one is born. The biological features, including the colors of the skin, the hair and the eyes, decide one’s cultural belonging and will shape one’s understanding of who he/she is. Clifford Geertz lists a few “primordial ties” that one possesses in identification, of which “race” is one (43-44). Manning Nash also outlines a trinity of “index features” of ethnicity which consists of kinship, commensality and common cult (25). However, this essentialist point of view has now been strongly challenged by the social constructionists who see one’s cultural identity as socially and culturally shaped. As such, one’s identity is in an on-going process of construction; hence its fluidity and multiplicity. With regards to how identity is constructed, scholars differ tremendously. For some, “... identification is constructed on the back of a

recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation” (Hall, “Who Needs ‘Identity?’” 16). In this sense, identity is psychological identification with a collective category which can describe a group of people who share similarities. For some others, identity is performed. It is the performance of each individual in daily lives upon certain social and cultural norms, ending with either sincerity or cynicism (Goffman 17-21). Sometimes, identity is viewed in relational terms, since “... it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks ... that the ‘positive’ meaning of any term — and thus its ‘identity’ — can be constructed” (Hall, “Who Needs ‘Identity?’” 17); whereas in some other times, it is viewed as the result of interactions between an individual and the outside world (Bell 138-146). Winston James observes how the second-generation Afro-Caribbean immigrants in Britain develop their identities in totally different ways from their first-generation parents, mainly as a result of the different interactions with the British society (155-161).

According to Joshua Fishman, ethnicity is a tripartite composite of being, doing and knowing (63-69). In the first place, ethnicity is “a bodily and experienced reality.” Secondly, it implies “expressive obligations and opportunities for behaving as the ancestors behaved and preserving their great heritage by transmitting it to generation after generation.” Lastly, it is able to “explain origins, clarify eternal questions, rationalize human destiny” and “purports to offer an entre to universal truths.” These tripartite understanding of ethnicity is able to cover all the previous diversified points of view over the issue of cultural identity. It not only recognizes the functions of innate biological features of a person in identification but is also able to explicate the constructionist perspectives, no matter psychological, performative, relational, or socially interactive.

Apart from the above two divided perspectives — essentialist and constructionist — two other perspectives have also been developed by scholars over history, namely experiential and discursive. The former emphasizes people’s different experiences with ethnicity in different contexts⁴ whereas the latter focuses on the different representations of ethnicity in literature and culture. In the first place, ethnic identity is understood as ways of living and experiencing. Rooted in daily activities, it incorporates one’s psychological identification as well as social interactions with others. It is difficult to talk about ethnic identity in general. Only when it is placed in a particular historical context or a particular circumstance can it be clearly defined and understood. Secondly, ethnic identity is represented in narratives, by both migrants and non-migrants. As Avtar Brah argues, “*ethnicity is*

best understood as a mode of narrativising the everyday life world in and through processes of boundary formation" (237). In this light, "... social categories do not reflect an essential underlying identity but are constituted in and through forms of representation" (Barker 263). In other words, what racial and ethnic features one possesses are up to how language (re)presents them, especially in what particular contexts are they (re)presented. By analyzing the representations of ethnic identity in different contexts, one can observe the functions of discursive power and literary and cultural strategies behind the representations. Since "[r]epresentation is possible only because enunciation is always produced within codes which have a history, a position within the discursive formations of a particular space and time" (Hall, "The New Identities" 162), analysis of the codes will shed light on the power relations that make the representations what they are.

It is the combination of these two perspectives, experiential and discursive, that the essays in this column rest their studies on. By placing the representations within a particular time and space, and by drawing references to a broad range of materials associated with ethnic experiences in reality, it is hoped that different ethnic identities can be understood in a convincing way.

The Ethics of Ethnic Identity

Since ethnic identity concerns human interaction, it is basically an ethical issue. Ethics, a.k.a., "moral philosophy," deals with "the fundamental issues of practical decision making, and its major concerns include the nature of ultimate value and the standards by which human actions can be judged right or wrong," which include, among many other subjects, the principles of life and the obligations that human beings hold toward other creatures on the planet (Singer 627). The meeting of different cultures in the multi-cultural context offers a space of struggle for human values and moral principles, which in turn brings about different modes of existence. Jonathan Friedman outlines two basic models of ethnic integration in his studies: assimilationism and pluralism. The former is marked by a few concentric circles to suggest the "re-identification with the host social world" on the part of the migrant group, whereas the latter is marked by a circle of different sectors surrounding a central sector which represents "the potential existence of a national dominant group" (85-86). These two modes may take on complicated and alternative forms in reality, as Friedman has noted. Chris Barker, however, uses the term "hybridity" to describe the result of cultural meeting and he elucidates six types of hybridization in his studies (257-258). No matter what models to use to map the co-existence of cultures, ethnic identity, either as an experiential reality or

as a discursive reality, involves a strong ethical dimension.

In the first place, identity itself is essentially an ethical subject since it concerns choices, choices that make a person who he/she is and what he/she is. According to Nie Zhenzhao, being able to make ethical choices marks human beings' transition from an animal to a human (94-100), thus a fundamental stage in civilization. To identify oneself, either in the general sense or in ally specific circumstances, it is necessary to choose among many options, the result of which means values and significance. Identity provides a source of value, "one that helps us make our way among those options", since "[t]o adopt an identity, to make it mine, is to see it structuring my way through life" (Appiah 24). Thus, to recognize a person with an ethnic identity means that one has to accept a system of internal values that the ethnic identity has acquired through history.

Secondly, the representation of ethnic identity is an ethical gesture. In this regard, it is important to differentiate between the narration by the migrants themselves and that of the non-immigrants. This differentiation is particularly clarified by Robin Cohen who gives different names to these two different narrations: emic and etic. The former stands for the migrant participants' point of view in the narration whereas the latter stands for the observer's perspectives (5). These representations could be vastly different since the writers take on different ethical standpoints. What should be included in the narrative, how people interact with each other, why they interact with each other in the ways as they are, what result such interactions may lead to, and what significance these interactions may mean to the migrants and to the natives: all these are issues that could only be understood when taking the ethical perspective into consideration, since literature, after all, "teaches by giving illustrations of ethical choices," as Nie Zhenzhao says in an interview (Ross 11). As is seen in many studies of ethnic identity, personal experiences in the multi-cultural environment are often brought into the analysis. Cohen makes an analogy with regards to the functions of the active participants in cultural meeting:

The clay (the history and experience of the group in question) will act like sedimented silicate, providing the necessary and basic chemical compound. And the potters (the active political, social and cultural leaders of the putative diaspora) will have to organize effective institutions to create and shape diasporic sentiments and galvanize them to a common purpose. (16)

Seen in this light, the "potters" play an active role in the making of ethnic identities

in the new territory. Therefore, a full understanding of the representation of diasporic experiences must take into account the ethical perspectives of the writers who produce different narrations of the diasporic experiences. After all, “The theoretical issue concerning identities is not whether they are constructed ... but what difference different kinds of construction make” (Alcoff and Mohanty 6).

Thirdly, the reading and understanding of ethnic identity against the global context also demands an ethical perspective. For the readers with different ethnic backgrounds, reading the stories of immigrants asks for an engagement with ethical relations between the writer and the reader. Since “ethnicities are always gendered” (Brah 126), the intersection between gender and ethnicity becomes an important focus of attention with scholars. G. C. Spivak’s studies on the colonization of Asian women in internationalized companies (68-71) and bell hook’s proposal for the role of Afro-American women in feminist movement (1-16) are fine examples of researches on this intersection. Linda Nicholson, analyzing in details the social and cultural contexts before and after Women’s Liberation Movement in 1960s, describes how the issue of identity has developed into “identity politics” (139-175). As politics, ethnic identity entails a strong power struggle which can be effectively interpreted in light of ethical literary criticism in order to examine “the ethical values in a given work with reference to a particular historical context or a period of time in which the text under discussion is written” (Ross 10). French philosopher Luce Irigaray, starting from constructing an ethics of sexual difference, proposes an ethical relationship between people of different backgrounds, including people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. For Irigaray, sexual difference is the primary difference between human beings, the understanding of which will lead to the understanding of other differences. Sexual identity as well as other identities must be understood in relational terms, “a relational identity that is held between nature and culture, and that assures a bridge starting from which it is possible to pass from one to the other while respecting them both” (129). Thus, ethnic identities must be understood by placing them in different relational frames, such as the immigrants and the non-immigrants, the writers of diasporic experiences and the readers of them. By reading the stories of migration, further understanding is expected to achieve between people of different ethnic backgrounds.

In the last decade, more and more scholars began to reflect on the backlash of globalization and a return to nationalist thinking began to emerge in dealing with issues of ethnic identity. The global migration, however, does not cease to exist. “There is no longer any stability in the points of origin, no finality in the points of destination and no necessary coincidence between social and national identities”

(Cohen 174). Against such a context, studies of ethnic identities will continue to draw critics' attention. As reviewed and discussed in this essay, "ethnic identity" has taken on a plural form not only because of its inherent complexity but also as a result of social and cultural constructions. The issue concerns every individual living in a multi-cultural community since it is related to the very existence in the modern society. It demands an ethical perspective since "[e]thical obligation ... is internal to the identity. Who you are is constituted, in part, by what you care about; to cease to care about those things would be to cease to be the sort of person you are" (Appiah 236).

As outlined earlier in the essay, it is the combination of the experiential and discursive perspectives in ethnic identity that supports the studies in this column. Zhan Junfeng's essay views the issue at its intersection with gender. By analyzing how Thane Rosenbaum's hero negotiates between different types of (Jewish) masculinities, the essay attempts to unveil the changing gender and ethnic identification of a Jewish character in the post-Holocaust world. Cai Xiaoyan's essay studies how the English suburb functions in Hanif Kureishi's story. It is observed that the suburban stereotype in the English literary tradition has already been altered by the immigrants to serve as a place for the performance of their multi-ethnic identities. Qi Jiamin's essay examines how Gloria Naylor depicts the dilemma of African Americans in their encounter with national identity. In particular, the essay focuses on the roles that different places/spaces play at the intersection between ethnic identity and national identity. In all these essays, the writers draw upon historical and social materials in order to situate ethnic identification within a particular context. Based on the analysis of these materials, the essays then observe how ethnic identity is represented with various strategies in literary discourses. These studies reveal how the characters make ethical choices with regards to ethnic identification, in their attitudes towards war, towards violence, towards migration, toward cultural history, and towards multi-cultural community. They also suggest that ethnicity is an on-going dynamic process which relies heavily on social and cultural changes on one hand, and on personal and psychological identification on the other. Despite these efforts, it is important to remember what Homi K. Bhabha says on the problematic nature of representation in the postmodern era, since the image itself "marks the site of an ambivalence": it is "always spatially split — it makes present something that is absent — and temporally deferred: it is the representation of a time that is always elsewhere, a repetition" (100). As Chinese scholars living in the 21st century, we may experience a double spatial split and temporal defer in our studies.

Notes

1. Robin Cohen distinguishes the earlier forms of diaspora from some of its new forms in the age of global economy. See Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2008) 141-154.
2. Iain Chambers believes that since migrancy is always in the form of transit, “the promise of a homecoming—completing the story, domesticating the detour—becomes an impossibility.” See Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994) 5.
3. Suman Gupta reviews the major landmarks of the debate between essentialism and social constructionism in his studies on identity politics. See Suman Gupta, *Social Constructionist Identity Politics and Literary Studies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 22-31.
4. Dominick LaCapra carefully analyzes the varieties of experiences and their effects on one’s identity construction. See Dominick LaCapra, “Experience and Identity,” *Identity Politics Reconsidered*, eds. Linda Martin Alcoff, et al. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 228-245.

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