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*LIMINALITY AND BEYOND:
Conceptions of In-betweenness
in American Culture and Literature*

Editors

Agnieszka Mobley, Blossom N. Fondo, Iwona Filipczak



Uniwersytet Zielonogórski

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INTRODUCTION

Recent theories explain that any cultural encounter engenders the particular and, more often than not, peculiar condition of in-betweenness. Even in the past, when the immigrants faced the assimilative pressures within the American society, their identity could hardly be discussed in essentializing terms. The condition of in-betweenness affected political, cultural, emotional, familial, professional, and many other spheres of life. A number of social critics and cultural theoreticians have coined variegated terms regarding the condition of in-betweenness experienced by the representatives of certain cultural groups in attempt to redefine their identities in American society.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. DuBois referred to double consciousness as a peculiar sense of the need to perceive oneself through the prisms of others. The self-esteem of Black Americans, in other words, was likely to depend on the way they were perceived by the mainstream, i.e. white, dominant society. DuBois's employment of the concepts of "two souls, two thoughts, two reconciling strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" implied, at first glance, the sense of inner conflict or even schizophrenic state of mind. The assimilative pressures that black people underwent destabilized the original self. On the other hand, double consciousness, bearing in mind recent definitions of cultural identities, can be considered more constructively, underlying the awareness of one's complex and at the same time rich identity that one develops in the process of creative fusion of different cultural heritages.

In the late 1930s, Irvin Child researched the responses of second-generation of Italian Americans in New Haven, Connecticut, to the assimilative pressures that involved the redefinition of Italian ethnic identity. He defined the "rebel reaction," as denial of unique Italian ethnicity upon the inculcation of the mainstream American conviction of Italian inferiority. On the contrary, the "in-group reaction" stood for strong affirmation of Italian identity. The "apathetic reaction," in turn, was an equivalent of the sense of in-betweenness as it entailed neither detachment from nor particular connectedness with Italian culture.

What we experience nowadays is a globalized "migrant" culture, in which the surplus of connectivities dismantles the sense of a coherent, bounded identity. Theories of Homi K. Bhabha addressing mainly the colonial and postcolonial background can be easily applied to transnational culture of migrants and people displaced for various reasons. In *The Location of Culture* Bhabha tries to explore the question of new

identities formation and introduces a notion of an international culture “not based on exoticism or multi-culturalism of the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of the culture’s hybridity”, which he calls the “Third Space.” A theorist of globalization, Arjun Appadurai prefers to speak of a global culture without discernible center and periphery, characterizing it as a culture of flows and fluid identities, which enables frequent cultural encounters and which brings into proximity cultural elements of disparate stable structures, which may often lead to hybridizing cultures.

Considering this global migrant culture, it would be appropriate to underscore that the condition of the migrant is the condition of in-betweenness; which emphasizes the constant process of becoming. This collection is therefore interested in responding to such questions as: what are the configurations of in-betweenness in American literature? What new forms are created, and which ones are lost in this culture of contact? In what ways and to what effect does American literature dramatize the concept of the “melting pot?”

Erin Bell approaches the paratextual elements in Tillie Olsen’s “O Yes” as a reflection of the American dilemma of the “color line” in the middle of the 20th century. She shows how the formal divisions constructed by spacing and typography mirror racial bifurcation and the marginalization of black people within the mainstream American society. Her reading of this strong connection between the form and content accentuates the interrelatedness between the short story’s context and the external reality.

Alena Cicholewski looks at a medium of a comic book to investigate the identity of the protagonist of *Ms. Marvel* comic book series through the lens of Homi Bhabha’s theories. She discusses the cultural in-betweenness of the character of Kamala Khan, a Muslim Pakistani American teenager endowed with superhero abilities, and draws attention to the protagonist’s negotiations of identity, which are interpreted as resistance to the Westernized notions of beauty and signal the character’s empowerment, the features which ultimately have led to the widespread recognition of this superhero of color.

Undertaking a reading of Lawrence P. Jackson’s *My Father’s Name*, **Yapo Ettien** explores the profound oppression experienced by blacks who were objectified and dehumanized in the Postbellum American South. He notes how this was preconditioned on the racialization of American slavery whereby notable differences between blacks and whites were foregrounded to serve as a basis for racial hierarchization. This to him created an inferior ‘Other’ of the blacks and justified the myriad abusers to which they were subjected.

Iwona Filipczak explores the complexity of US identities affected by global flows rendered in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Leave It To Me*, indicating the currency of deterritorialized lives, which remain in a complex net of transnational connectivities and dependencies. The discussion exposes the influence of ethnoscaples and mediascapes

on the human imagination and, in the result, on the formation of modern subjectivities and creation of imagined communities as forms of belonging.

Blossom N. Fondo expounds on the condition of in-betweenness attendant upon the cultural displacement of Native Americans. Reading from Silko's *Ceremony*, she traces the identity disintegration of Native Americans faced with the cultural oppression of whites. This, she notes, places them in the traumatic condition of straddling two contradictory worlds.

For her part, **Paulina Korzeniewska-Nowakowska** in her article examines the role of sports dramas in promoting the tropes of white savior narratives. This, she underscores, proffers a biased understanding of the experiences and identity formation process of ethnic minorities. Drawing from Hopkin's *Race*, Caro's *McFarland, USA*, and Hancock's *The Blind Side*, she explains how characters are developed to fit into the pattern of a white savior who saves supporting characters usually of a black or Hispanic descent thus, promoting the notion of these ethnic minority characters being unable to save themselves without white intervention.

Agnieszka Mobley reveals a crosswise, unceasing process of Italian-American identity formation depicted in *Sometimes I Dream in Italian* by Nina Ciresi. The presented characters never attain complete self-integrity in the American cultural realm, where they feel the need to, or are compelled to, employ either Italian or American norms and value systems in variegated decisions regarding their existence. This, additionally, oscillates around three major referents of race, gender, and class.

Michaela Weiss's article is a reminder that the concepts of liminality and hybridity are not tied exclusively to ethnic or postcolonial literatures but are, in fact, universal notions, and can be traced in the writing of acclaimed mainstream American writers. Accordingly, in her analysis of Elizabeth Bishop's poetry she focuses predominantly on the poetess's strategies of creating poetic landscapes which are geographical as well as psychological and spiritual, and which reflect Bishop's own life-long liminal negotiations between an outsider and a local.

Diane Zeeuw, in her analysis of Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*, investigates the function of the brown body as a "thirdspace," a category defined by Edward Soja. She enquires into a cultural and material nature of the racialized brown body. The connotation of whiteness with superiority and contradictory associations of blackness with compliance and violence engender the continued, as Zeeuw exposes, inter-racial and intra-racial violence.