

TRANSCULTURALITY AND BEYOND: THE CASE OF “LITTLE BLUE AND LITTLE YELLOW”

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s, transculturality was introduced as *the* concept best suited to understanding the changing conditions for culture formation in a globalized modernity. In the light of growing global interdependencies transculturality was defined as forms of cultural hybridization capable of transforming separatist and antagonistic socio-cultural practices into inclusive and peace-promoting constellations. The concept soon found its way into language education debates where it was hailed as the new paradigm for culture-and-language learning. Meanwhile, more than thirty years have passed since transculturality's beginnings, and some stocktaking is in place to re-assess the claims made by early transculturalists and their followers.

In this article, transculturality will be given due credit for drawing attention to changing conditions for culture formation in a globalized modernity. However, a less optimistic picture will be drawn by highlighting the shortcomings of early positions and by suggesting alternative concepts going beyond the confines of this approach. As regards alternative positions, references will be made to cosmopolitan, global citizenship-related, posthumanist and ecocritical perspectives. Moreover, the question will be raised whether transculturality as suggested in the 1990s still is a timely model for cultural learning in the current decade.

In conceptual debates ideas often remain abstract and divorced from concrete realities. Therefore, the following reflections will be linked to Leo Lionni's *Little Blue and Little Yellow*, a book for very young children, first published in 1959. The book vividly shows how a certain notion of transculturality works, and it can illustrate in simple terms a highly abstract concept. Of course, the book only gives limited insight into transcultural concerns, transculturality being a broad church inclusive of highly diverging approaches. However, it can provide a useful starting point for re-engagement with central transcultural issues. In addition, it can serve as a reference point when discussing alternative cultural-learning concepts.

2. “LITTLE BLUE AND LITTLE YELLOW”

Little Blue and Little Yellow is a book for very young children written and illustrated by Leo Lionni. If transculturality is defined as transcendence of fixed borders, single locales and monolithic life-approaches, Leo Lionni's biography shows considerable overlap with such a concept. Born in Amsterdam, he lived long periods of his life in the United States and in Italy. Being polyglot, he already spoke five different languages at the age of 14, and as a painter he is a proponent of modernist art with its cosmopolitan agenda. In his

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professional life, he worked in advertising, as a graphic design teacher (in the US, Europe and Asia) and as an artist, illustrator and author of children's books. Besides his interest in the arts Lionni also earned a doctorate in economics. In his professional life, he could combine his expertise in art and commerce when he worked as art director for the global business magazine *Fortune* in New York City².

Little Blue and Little Yellow is the story of two children represented as two disc-shaped patches of colour, one being blue and the other yellow. They go to school and play together and being close friends they at one point hug until their original colours change to green. Obviously, they do not care about their transformation and carry on regardless until they finally get back to their parents' places. The parents, drawn as larger and menhir-shaped patches of blue and yellow, however, no longer recognize their children. As a result, the children, being distraught, disintegrate into blue (*little blue*) and yellow (*little yellow*) tears, and when they resolidify their original shape and colour is restored. Then the children go to see *little blue's* parents, who, overjoyed to have the children back in their original colours, hug them both, and in their contact with *little yellow* a part of them also turns green. Now, the parents of both children can understand why their kids underwent transformation, and welcoming such change the adults also begin to hug each other until a part of their physical shape changes colour. The final scene shows the wider community with its children at play, all represented in different colours. Compared to an earlier picture the proxemics have changed significantly. Most of the children have moved closer, some of them touching each other and others undergoing transformation according to the laws of colour theory.

How does *Little Blue and Little Yellow* compare to concepts of transculturality? A key influence in transcultural debates has been the perspective suggested by the German philosopher Wolfgang Welsch (1997; 1999; 2017). For him, transculturality stands for moving beyond cultural homogenization and clear cultural borders, which, to his mind, are tell-tale signs of monolithic systems, nationalism being a prime example. For Welsch, the age of the nation state is coming to an end in a globalized modernity. He argues that because of wide-reaching socio-cultural, political and economic interdependencies cultural borders have become porous leading to cultural interpenetration and diversification. The new mixes emerging from such development make clear-cut distinctions between *self* and *other*, or *own* and *foreign* obsolete, and following Antor (2006: 29) the new constellations can no longer be reduced to former identities. For transculturalists, the preposition that can best capture such development is *through*, since it best characterizes the mutual permeation and transformation of the entities involved (Baker, 2022: 4). Moreover, this notion of transculturality views such transformation as an entirely positive development towards a more peaceful and inclusive world society, since the erstwhile other now also exists in the self. Thus, it no longer needs to be fought as a threat to monolithic ideologies.

There is significant overlap between *Little Blue and Little Yellow* and this notion of transculturality. The two children undergo transformation to an extent to which their former identities can no longer be recognized by their parents. The ensuing crisis forces the children to go back to their original colours, yet such return is presented as a temporary backward move followed by a general increase in proximity, contact and mutual transformation. Such development corresponds with Welsch's understanding of transculturality as an ongoing, incremental, unfinished and ultimately unstoppable process of hybridization. Moreover, in *Little Blue and Little Yellow* closer proximity and mutual permeation result from friendship and love. Again, such a perspective overlaps with Welsch's belief in transculturality as a force improving personal and social relationships.

² All biographical information is taken from *Between Worlds: The Autobiography of Leo Lionni* (1997).

Finally, the crucial turning point happens when the parents become aware of what had led to their children's transformation. Following Will Baker (2022: 42-45), such awareness is key to promoting transcultural development.

The world portrayed in *Little Blue and Little Yellow* is one of peaceful conviviality, mutual respect and cordial togetherness. By and large, the story shows interaction between equal partners in a social milieu constituted by order, harmony, freedom and a lack of existential problems. All children from the same age bracket are similarly shaped and equally sized. At school they sit in neat rows, while at play they can roam freely outside their homes. Despite being bigger, the parents are also equal in shape and size. In terms of social hierarchies, the parents have the power to accept and reject their children, but the latter only happens because of ignorance, which is readily overcome by heightened awareness and new insight. Indeed, in the world portrayed children can rely on parental care, a liberal social order, education and sufficient space for relaxation.

In real life contexts, such a perfect world is the exception rather than the rule. In *Little Blue and Little Yellow*, Lionni portrays a world absent of social divisions, marginalization, exploitation and antagonism. Moreover, peace and harmony are not threatened by social polarization, imperial ambition, war or a climate out of kilter. As will be discussed further below, transculturality does not end with Welsch and his followers. For example, postcolonial scholars have highlighted radically different contexts and conditions for culture mixing in a globalized modernity. For them, hybridization practices must not be discussed without reference to power divisions, continuing exploitation and unresolved conflict. A good example is Marwan Kraidy (2005: 152), who makes a case for a "critical transculturalism", by calling attention to the hegemonic and (neo-)colonial interests informing certain pro-hybridization ideologies.

As stated above, Leo Lionni's text presents an ideal version of transcultural transformation in a world without domination and unjust power divisions. There is a note of warning written into the text by showing that such transformation, if handled too radically, may throw even well-meaning caregivers off balance. In that respect the book suggests an evolutionary rather than revolutionary transcultural perspective. As an idealist representation, I would argue that the text can offer readers of different ages and backgrounds a powerful image of a world shaped by equality, harmony, friendship and love. The flipside of such idealism is that references to less perfect socio-cultural contexts are bracketed out. In its formal dimension the abstract visual style can appeal to readers of different ages and backgrounds. The patches of colour used go beyond gender-, class- or race-related specifications, thus inviting identification beyond such borders and boundaries. The multiple colours used show a diverse world with equal opportunities for further development. Indeed, Lionni should be credited for finding a visual language in line with an idealistic notion of human growth and togetherness informed by diversity, equality, increasing proximity and mutual transformation.

3. TRANSCULTURALITY

In language education, Wolfgang Welsch's notion of transculturality has been a key influence. Welsch (1999) argues that in the light of globe-spanning communication networks, global socio-economic interdependencies and migration on an unprecedented scale cultures can no longer be conceived as separate and separable entities. For him, cultural borders have become fluid leading to widespread culture mixing and peaceful conviviality. As regards theories of culture formation, Welsch and his followers have placed transculturality in opposition to inter- and multiculturalism, which they have criticized as concepts still bound to the notion of cultures as distinct and uniform entities.

However, I have repeatedly pointed out that this distinction between trans-, inter- and multiculturalism does not do justice to the diversity of approaches within inter- and multicultural debates and the complex relationships between the three schools (for further discussion, see: Delanoy, 2023; 2024).

There is no denying that Welsch's notion of transculturality has enriched theories of language-and-culture learning by shifting their focus to global interrelationships and cultural hybridization processes. Welsch's concept, however, also poses severe limitations. As regards the early Welsch, his approach is too general and one-sided in approach. As stated above, globalization is welcomed as a basically benign force promoting cultural intertwinement and peaceful togetherness. There is no reference to unequal power divisions, problematic aspects of culture mixing, winners and losers, or diverse contextual conditions for, and manifestations of, cultural hybridization. Moreover, transculturality is presented as an irreversible trajectory for culture formation shaping the lives of people all over the globe in the near and distant future (Welsch, 2009). Such socio-cultural determinism coupled with Welsch's belief in transculturality as the road to salvation can be a dangerous combination. However, such a notion can give people free licence to pursue problematic hybridization practices, since they can always be justified as progressive and as (ultimately) serving a good purpose. Finally, for Welsch, his notion is *the* right concept to be followed. While he is highly critical of other positions, his approach does not include a self-critical perspective³.

For a critical transculturalist like Kraidy (2005: 65), corporate capitalism is the main beneficiary of problematic hybridization practices. For him, culture mixing is a key strategy used by corporations to market products globally with a local flair, while simultaneously diminishing and destroying the power of local competitors. In addition, the maxim of short-term profit is coupled with exploitation of human and material resources in the developing countries, thus perpetuating and creating gross power imbalances. For postcolonial scholars like Kraidy (2005) and Enrique Dussel (2013), such development is steeped in a west-and-the-rest ideology, which needs to be countered by protective measures to promote *southern* and *eastern* initiatives. As regards theory-building in culture studies, therefore, they have argued in favour of (temporarily) sidelining western and European debates in the interest of "East-to-East" and "South-to-South" interactions (Kraidy, 2005: 155; Dussel, 2013: 166). In addition, Kraidy (*ibid.*: 161) is critical of the celebratory rhetoric used by scholars like Welsch in their assessment of transculturality. From a discourse-critical perspective, such language use is hegemonic in approach. A specific version of culture mixing which can help increase the power of certain agents is presented as *the* way forward and as beyond critical questioning.

In his discussion of problematic hybridization ideologies, Kraidy (2005) also addresses the specific conditions for culture mixing in postcolonial contexts. One of his examples is the practice of *mestizaje*, dating back to postcolonial nation-building in Latin American countries. Historically, this practice pre-dates a globalized modernity and the notion of transculturality, yet underlying intentions still inform certain culture-mixing practices. For Kraidy (2005: 51) *mestizaje* was "an attempt to mitigate tensions between the indigenous populations and the descendants of Spanish colonists by positing the new nations as hybrids of both worlds". Such an ideology was used by the ruling group to stifle indigenous claims to independence by arguing that the two cultures were nested in each other. The actual mix, however, strongly discriminated against indigenous groups, since only such indigenous practices were included in *mestizaje* culture that would not pose a

³ Here I might add that, in comparison, my own work is grounded in a (self-)critical critical hermeneutics as suggested by Hans-Herbert Kögler (1992). Key characteristics of such a perspective are the rejection of absolute truth, plus the belief in the contextual embeddedness and provisional character of all human understanding (Delanoy, 2023).

threat to the dominant ideology, while imposing on indigenous populations the "Spanish or Portuguese language, the Catholic faith, and colonial political and social organization" (*ibid.*: 54).

As a critical response to *mestizaje*, Gloria Anzaldúa (2007) developed the perspective of the *new mestiza* with its combination of culture and language mixing, solidarity for the oppressed and a revitalization of indigenous mythology (Delanoy, 2017)⁴. Like Welsch, Anzaldúa also views border transgression and wide-reaching culture mixing as the way forward. However, she argues from a multiple outsider perspective embedded in a specific historical context, namely the U.S.-Mexican borderlands at the turn of the millennium with its divisions of race, gender, class and ethnicity. In her view, transcultural transformation can give people energy, new insight and hope for a more inclusive world. However, it also leads to conflict, causes pain, disorientation and harsh resistance from its detractors. To some extent, Lionni's *Little Blue and Little Yellow* also shows how radical transformation can lead to rejection and intense pain. Yet, the society portrayed in *Little Blue and Little Yellow* differs significantly from that in Anzaldúa's writings. The two children are not multiple outsiders, and the world they live in is not subject to poverty and unjust socio-cultural divisions.

In transcultural debates, social milieu and class have repeatedly been discussed as factors both conducive and averse to culture mixing. For example, Jonathan Friedman (1997: 83) refers to ethnographic studies showing that some social groups (e.g. academics, artists) strongly advocate a transcultural life-approach, while others express a preference for clear borders (e.g. the urban poor). More recently, Andreas Reckwitz (2021) has called attention to different social milieus and their attitudes to culture mixing in western European contexts. He argues that a new middle-class, making up about one third of the population, strongly embraces the notion of cultural hybridization. According to Reckwitz (2021: 108), this group opts for a "Hyperkultur" (hyper-culture), a "Kulturkosmopolitanismus" (cultural cosmopolitanism) open to combining "potentially everything" globally available to construct their identities. For this group, appearing unique and attracting attention have become important values to gain recognition from others. At the same time, less privileged groups, Reckwitz (*ibid.*: 279) speaks of a "new underclass" making up another third of the population, pursue a different agenda. Their focus is on meeting basic needs, and they prefer the continued existence of what they perceive as traditional values (*ibid.*: 277-284).

In Lionni's text the group portrayed is a different middle class. While in Reckwitz' world the wish to be singular motivates people to mix different elements, the mixing in *Little Blue and Little Yellow* results from deep relationships. Reckwitz' new middle-class lives in a postmodern world where surface appearance, self-marketing and self-aggrandizement have become key to promoting self-worth. On the other hand, Lionni's characters are rooted in an environment pre-dating postmodern superficiality, where depth of relationship trumps other values.

In my own writings, I have made a case for a broad definition of transculturality inclusive of the 'good, the bad and the ugly' of culture mixing in a globalized modernity (Delanoy, 2006; 2024). Such a definition includes deep-going transformation in the interest of peaceful conviviality and a democratic world order. It also includes practices where mixing is regimented to serve hegemonic interests and to stifle opposition, or where it may exhaust itself in postmodern narcissism. Moreover, this definition rests on dialogic and democratic principles (Delanoy, 2024). Such a notion aims for initiating, establishing and maintaining deep-going relationships based on equality, mutual respect,

⁴ Anzaldúa (2007: 68-73) points out that border transgression and the radical fusion of opposites are key characteristics of Toltec mythology, the goddess Coatlicue being a case in point.

mutual responsibilities, (self-)critical questioning, openness to new challenges and the freedom to pursue different interests as long as those of others are duly respected.

4. BEYOND TRANSCULTURALITY

When transculturality was introduced as a new concept the Cold War between the USA and the Soviet Union had just come to an end, hope for a peaceful future shone bright, neo-liberalism was hailed as a bringer of freedom and democracy, digitalization was still in its infancy and environmental catastrophe was less of an issue. Thirty years later "humanity is in the midst of a polycrisis" (Siepmann *et. al.*, 2023: 1). Corporate capitalism has spread globally without bringing peace, freedom and democracy. The fragility of capitalism has become palpable, as in the banking crisis of 2007/2008. There is a new constellation of superpowers, all of them striving for transnational dominance. New fundamentalisms have taken root, local wars may spread like wildfire and democracies have come under attack in western European countries and beyond. Digital communication networks span the globe with algorithms serving partisan interests, artificial intelligence may spin out of control, and damage to the biosphere has reached and perhaps crossed a tipping point. This does not mean that we have moved from Shangri-La to Doomsday. There was harsh criticism of what was happening in the 1990s (e.g., Beck, 1997; Eagleton, 1996). Similarly, initiatives for a just world society (e.g., Sobré-Denton & Bardhan, 2013), human-compatible AI-use (e.g., Russell, 2019) or eco-friendly alternatives (e.g., Bridle, 2022) still abound. Yet, a perfect-world discourse has become more difficult to maintain in the light of multiple crises.

With the benefit of hindsight, Welsch's one-sided appraisal of transculturality can be seen as a historical example of 1990s euphoria, which does not address the underbelly of culture mixing, its complicity in problematic ideologies and the complexities shaping current life worlds. This does not mean that transculturality has become obsolete as a concept. Culture mixing as an ideal objective and when subject to critical questioning can still foster dialogue, mutual understanding, friendship and peaceful conviviality. Transculturality, however, poses some major limitations.

One of the limitations of transcultural approaches is their primary focus on culture mixing. Hybridization only marks one trajectory for culture formation. It includes the dissolution of boundaries, mutual permeation, the creation of hybrid constellations and their further transformation through continuing cultural interpenetration. A different trajectory is that of cultural separation, comprising border creation, insistence on difference, solidification and exclusion. I entirely agree with transculturalists that this separatist trajectory can be highly dangerous. However, while culture mixing can serve problematic ends, cultural separation can also promote a dialogic agenda.

When Dussel (2013) and Kraidy (2005) suggest temporary exclusion of western influences they do so to empower marginalized positions to reduce western dominance. For them, this does not rule out future interactions with western perspectives. Yet, they want to give eastern and southern voices sufficient space for growth and independence, thus increasing their force in scholarly debates. Another example is Kwame A. Appiah's notion of a rooted cosmopolitanism. Appiah (2007: 132) makes a case for "connection despite difference" in the interest of a democratic and egalitarian world. Appiah fully acknowledges people's right to difference and their pride in cultural roots, yet he also strongly advocates bridge-building initiatives. In a world riven by conflict and socio-cultural polarization *connection despite difference* has become of paramount importance. Finally, the transcultural trajectory is one of fluidity requiring continuous border crossing. Such a life approach can place excessive demands on the psychological stability of

humans, and to avoid breakdown and backlash allowances must be made for periods of relaxation and solidification in- and outside educational contexts.

Culture-mixing can provide one approach to creating connections despite difference. However, going beyond Will Baker's transcultural approach, it requires more than awareness of how cultural hybridization works to establish and maintain connections between parties implicated in problematic histories. For Black Studies specialist Kehinde Andrews (2022: 207-208), systems of oppression must be abandoned to pave the way for different relationships. Andrews considers the total collapse of white imperial supremacy as the (only) way out, and if necessary, this aim should be pursued with violent means. A less drastic perspective is suggested by proponents of global citizenship education. William Gaudelli (2016; 2023) and Vanessa Andreotti (2014) also argue that gross power imbalances and continuing (neo)colonial exploitation necessitate critical engagement with, and transformation of, existing systems of power. For Gaudelli (2023: 38), global citizenship education, in addition to raising awareness of global interconnectedness, also requires taking concrete action. Such action, however, is conducted within a democratic framework by following human rights principles or the UNs' Sustainable Development Goals. Building on this approach, language education can become a learner-centred workshop with students developing initiatives for creating human rights based and eco-friendly environments on personal, local and translocal levels (Römhild, Siepmann & Bruns, 2023: 216).

In language-and-culture education, engagement with cosmopolitanism and global citizenship education postdates the transcultural turn. Like transculturality, these other two approaches offer a wide spectrum of different concepts rooted in western-European and postcolonial perspectives (Delanoy, 2023). Like transculturality, they also focus on global interconnectedness and argue in favour of socio-cultural development leading "from isolated to integrated, disconnected to interconnected and separate to inseparable" (Gaudelli, 2016: 163). Contrary to transcultural concepts, (temporary) separation and border creation have received stronger attention, as is the case in Appiah's rooted cosmopolitanism. Moreover, recent work in global citizenship education also embraces eco-critical perspectives (Andreotti, 2024; Gaudelli, 2016: 167).

Transculturality is human-centred. Ecological and AI-related issues have only played a minor role so far. The same can be said of global citizenship education, which until recently has called little attention to environmental concerns. In the light of looming ecological catastrophe and self-governing AI systems, ecological and technological challenges need to be given stronger weight in language-education debates. In my own research, I have turned to trans- and posthumanist perspectives to engage with AI-related concerns (Delanoy, 2021; 2023). Here, attention is called to what can be done to prevent such technologies from spinning out of human control (Russel, 2019) and from cementing the values of totalitarian regimes (Hughes, 2004; Macaskill, 2023). Such a program still makes humans the fulcrum of agency. By contrast, posthumanism also offers perspectives that de-centre humans and make them a tiny element in a giant system of interdependencies going far beyond human control (Braidotti, 2013). Such de-centring is also key to ecocritical scholars with their twin focus on ecological challenges and unjust power divisions (Clark, 2019: 3).

For ecocriticism, global interconnectedness is located in a biosphere going far beyond human-shaped interconnections and human understanding. In cultural-learning debates the choice of an adequate prefix has played an important role for bringing the field up-to-date with pressing issues. *Trans*, for example, has been suggested as the adequate prefix to help overcome inter- and multicultural perspectives. For eco-critics like Timothy Clark (2019), a different prefix can better capture humanity's embeddedness in a giant system of interrelationships. Building on the terminology suggested by the quantum physicist

Karen Barad, Clark (*ibid.*: 111-112) speaks of *intra-* rather than *interaction*. *Intra* implies that humans are located within a wide-ranging ecological system of interrelationships they cannot transcend. For Clark (*ibid.*: 111), therefore, "relations precede/constitute the things that might, at first, seem prior". In other words, such a perspective invites systemic thinking, where the study of relations and relationships is given priority over that of isolated actants, aspects and entities.

Coming back to *Little Blue and Little Yellow*, such a focus would first draw attention to the relationships between the various characters involved and the system in which they make their moves. In the light of ecocritical perspectives, however, this system is entirely shaped by humans. There is no denying that the changing colours can serve as a powerful image to show how dialogic transcultural transformation may work. But, ecological interconnectedness requires an additional image to help visualize connections between human and non-human actants. In a talk recently given at the University of Klagenfurt, Vanessa Andreotti (2024) stated that "we have an umbilical cord with the Earth".⁵ The image of the umbilical cord can highlight humans' dependence on the biosphere. It can show that such dependence precedes specific human life-approaches, and it can remind humans of their responsibility to take good care of the hand that feeds them. In her talk, Andreotti presented an Earth-centred educational approach combining decolonial and ecocritical concerns. Being a key proponent of global citizenship education, her recent work demonstrates how certain approaches have moved on by taking on board ideas and concepts from different fields and schools. As regards Lionni's text, such a move could prompt a sequel that shows the characters, perhaps in different colours, with umbilical cords connected to the biosphere.

5. OUTLOOK

Following Andreotti, let me also suggest a dynamic notion of theory building based on integrating knowledge from different fields and schools to engage with current socio-cultural, economic, technological and ecological issues. (Critical) transcultural concepts are one element in this ensemble, which, in this article, also includes contributions from cosmopolitan debates, global citizenship education, AI-related research, posthumanist and ecocritical perspectives. Let me add that this ensemble is open to further modification, redefinition and expansion. Such theory building is informed by a *trans-*approach because of its continuous border crossing and knowledge-mixing. In addition, it is *intra* in orientation, thus calling attention to its location in a highly complex web of interrelationships going beyond human agency and control. Finally, it is dialogic in principle, thus aiming for egalitarian relationships in the interest of democratic, eco-friendly and peaceful conviviality. Such a perspective implies continuous (self-)criticality resulting from the limited powers of human understanding.

This may all seem so far detached from the language classroom. Yet, what if language teachers and learners worked with Lionni's text using pictures and their language capabilities to express ideas and feelings? What if the students then created follow-up texts by placing the characters in less harmonious contexts, or by writing an eco-friendly sequel? In my opinion, important concepts may come alive in the learners' minds, and language learning could be linked to topical issues. In this view, engagement with a world

⁵ Andreotti (2024) made this comment in the discussion after her talk *Education for the Depth vs. Education for mastery as an Earth-Centered Approach*, given at the University of Klagenfurt, Austria, on 13 June 2024. Being in the audience, the author of this article noted the comment down.

in need of being (re)shaped by a new generation would become the communicative purpose of language education.

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