

## IDENTITY REVISITED

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### ABSTRACT

The issue of identity is one of the most debated nowadays in the field of literary theory, especially after the gradual disintegration, during the 20th century, of the 19th century colonial period. Dichotomies such as Occident vs. Orient, self vs. Other, centre vs. periphery, are analysed in this essay, together with the diachronic views of colonization starting with the emblematic moment of the discovery of America by Columbus. The semiotic space, or semiosphere, in which this problematic dialogue takes place, is revised from the perspective of the colonizer and the colonized, trying to decipher the stereotypes and impositions that a subaltern structure of power imposes upon preconceived images of the Other. The construction of hybrid identities in the postcolonial context is also discussed to cement dislocations and unequal contacts with plurality and miscegenation.

KEY WORDS: Identity studies, revision, semiosphere, hybridity, miscegenation.

### RESUMEN

El tema de la identidad está en estos momentos en la palestra de los estudios de teoría literaria, especialmente tras el desmembramiento progresivo del periodo de colonización decimonónica durante el siglo veinte. Se analizan, así, las principales dicotomías empleadas, occidente *versus* oriente, el “yo” *versus* el “otro,” el centro *versus* la periferia, junto con una panorámica diacrónica de la colonización que comienza con el momento culminante de la conquista de América por Colón. Se revisa, también, el espacio semiótico, o semiosfera, en el que este diálogo problemático tiene lugar, desde la perspectiva del colonizador y el colonizado, en un intento de descifrar los estereotipos e imposiciones que una estructura subalterna de poder impone sobre las imágenes preconcebidas del otro. Finalmente, se indaga en la construcción de la identidad híbrida en un contexto postcolonial para poner los pilares de la pluralidad y el mestizaje sobre los endebles modelos de la desigualdad y la dislocación.

PALABRAS CLAVE: estudios sobre la identidad, revisión, semiosfera, hibridización, mestizaje.



In her chapter titled “Late Landings. Reflections on Belatedness in Australian and Canadian Literatures,” which appears in Jonathan White’s *Recasting the World. Writing after Colonialism* (1993), Carolyn Masel gives an important clue of the plurality of dialogues that function in the political agenda of the colonized countries, when talking about the Canadian and Australian panorama:

Furthermore, in both countries the cultural anxiety about one’s relation to the land is heightened by the presence, or else the hauntings, of precolonial populations, whose closer daily contact with the landscape they inhabited has meant that they have been inscribed by their postcolonial successors as more authentic dwellers in the landscape. While the Noble Savage conception that informed earlier generations’ views of aboriginal populations has largely disappeared, the anxiety it induced has not; indeed, it has been much exacerbated both by ecological concerns and by recent land claims and/or constitutional demands made by the First Peoples in Canada and the Koori (Aboriginals) in Australia, in the course of which very different conception of ownership of and relationship to the land enter the public arena. The problem for postcolonial writers is that the landscape has, in effect, been hierarchized, and that, collective postcolonial guilt aside, the place or places of authenticity are perceived to be debarred from postcolonials of nonaboriginal extraction. (162-163)

Voices that should not be extinct and inaudible to our postcolonial ears work as instruments of deconstruction of the problematized identity. Indeed, colonization as a political process tends to overshadow the importance of the encounters with other cultures. Also, confrontation prevents from engaging into dialogue and creates preconceived models of judgment. All kind of semiotic disturbances act as noise within the cultural dialogue and make this unequal communication impossible. Stereotypes and prejudices tend to fabricate another identity for the victims of that subjective power relationship.

In *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (1982) Tzvetan Todorov claims that “it is in fact the conquest of America that heralds and establishes our present identity” (15). In the context of the first encounter between Europeans and Americans -the so-called “conquest” which he significantly defines as “the greatest genocide in human history” (14), Todorov develops a comprehensive study of the relations between self and Other, and of the process of construction of identities, a process that, far from being exclusive of the sixteenth century, has persisted—as he suggests—until today. In the attitudes of Christopher Columbus and Hernán Cortés towards the natives that they encounter (“Indians” and Aztecs) we discover—embedded as they are in the transition between the medieval and the modern periods and in the clash between the spiritual and the material—the contradictions that inform this transition, contradictions that will bear consequences for future periods (Todorov 20-137). More interestingly, in these attitudes we can find the blueprints for the construction of, at least two, alternative models for self-Other relations: these models are based on what has been perceived as the dynamics of socio-cultural exchanges from the ranks of cultural semiotics and they can be applied to various kinds of contemporary colonial relations.



The encounter with America meant for Europe an ultimate experience of Otherness, because whereas there were well known facts about other “discoveries” (Asia or Africa had been part of the common European *episteme* for a long time), nothing was known about America with some degree of certainty. It was at that particular moment that the identity of Europe begins to be shaped in some recognizable form,<sup>1</sup> and it seems clear that the project of a white, Christian Europe is the result of various encounters and confrontations with several Others: Muslims (North-Africans or Turks), Jews, Gipsies, Blacks (sub-Saharan Africans, known as pagans), Catholics or Protestants, and “Indians. For Columbus, “Indians” are a complex notion to deal with: they appear to be both different and the same. This means that he, simultaneously, refuses to address the “Indians” he encounters from October 12 1492 onwards as individuals with their own specificity (“they are us”), and it also means that he finds it impossible to communicate with “savages” who at times seem to him to be closer to animals than to humans in appearance, costumes and beliefs. This initially biased and strongly prejudiced attitude towards the native peoples of America and the Caribbean is more complex than it may seem, and it eventually constructs a paradoxical identity for “Indians”: they are both bestial but intelligent, cowardly but bellicose, generous but unwilling to share their gold, good but cruel. Indeed, Columbus’ contradictory perception of the reality that surrounds him inevitably limits, at best, his capacity to communicate with the Others he confronts, but more frequently, as we suggested above, it makes that communication impossible. This can be best perceived in his overall approach to natives and to the languages they speak, as contrasted with Cortés’ attitude.

In Columbus’s hermeneutics natives have not a place of their own: they are merely described or named, inasmuch as they are part of the landscape. To be sure, as many medieval scholars Columbus was a nominalist, and he strongly believed in the biblical suggestion that to name means to possess, and that names are naturally (as opposed to conventionally) linked to their meaning. As Todorov points, Columbus is “Colón,” the colonizer (in fact, he always signed with the Spanish version of his name), and what he does is to eventually impose his view of the world on the people and lands he meets by means of the act of naming them; in other words, by fashioning a new identity (Christianized, “civilized”) for them. It is hardly surprising that he is not interested in languages and communication: to communicate implies to assume an Other, and Columbus only establishes unidirectional relations with all those Others he encounters. Cortés, and that was one of the keys of his plan, proceeded in a very different manner: in order to succeed he tried to make himself intelligible to the Aztecs, constantly insinuated himself into their

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<sup>1</sup> A relatively elaborated notion of Europe as a community appears in England in the early seventeenth century. Samuel Purchas employed “Europe” to define a community of colour in 1613, excluding from “Europeanness” all non-whites in his project of a racialized Europe (Neill 369). Also, the first apparition of the term “European” with the meaning “belonging to Europe” is contained in a text dealing precisely with (one of) Europe’s Other(s): Richard Knolles’ *History of the Turkes* (1603).



systems of belief (in Stephen Greenblatt's terms), and allowed to be translated into their culture. As a consequence, he was able to enter into some form of dialogue with them, to address them in their own terms, and to acknowledge their specific identity: with Cortés we are, in many respects, in a later stage of the transition towards the modern period.

The cultural semiotician Juri Lotman has developed the notion of the semiosphere as "the semiotic space necessary for the existence and functioning of languages" (123) (it must be noted that for Lotman "languages" are closer to some form of cultural and social practices than to the merely linguistic artefacts that the name suggests). The semiosphere is, thus, the space where all semiosis (i.e., the production and exchange of symbols and meanings) takes place and outside of which no semiotic process is possible, and as such it is directly involved in the definition of cultures and their relevance for the construction of identity/ies (Lotman 123-31). The semiosphere is physically delimited by a boundary that, like similar structures in all living organisms, filters, separates, and interacts with the outside world, which in social and psychological terms becomes the Other. From our own semiosphere we define these other semiospheres and, in order to make them intelligible, we "translate" them into our recognizable "languages" or semiotics. The limits of our semiosphere are constantly being (re)shaped by means of the interaction with unknown (other) semiotic spaces, and this inevitably characterizes our own identity. The boundary separates (and in a sense links) what is "ours," "human," "rational," "intelligible," "civilized," etc., from that space we *identify* as "theirs," "animal," "irrational," "unintelligible," "uncivilized," etc., (Lotman 131-43). To simplify, alien semiospheres mark off two types of cultures that we inevitably perceive as Other: non-culture and extra-culture, and they do this both synchronically and diachronically. In this context, (our) culture is the centre and the realm of the subject, whereas extra-culture is the space of the non-subject and non-culture the space of the non-person. In short, culture may talk *with* extra-culture (consequently some form of communication is possible), but may only —at the most— talk *about* (i.e., describe, catalogue, etc.) non-culture. We are persuaded that this is at the heart of all kinds of colonial relations.

For Göran Sonesson, who assumes Lotman's concept of the semiosphere and its role in the shaping of identities, dialogism is based on a notion of the Other as the one about whom we talk but who cannot (or is not expected to) talk back. This can be perceived in the different attitudes towards America and the Americans manifested by Columbus and Cortés, and which not only reveal Medieval and Early Modern Spanish and European notions of the external Other (i.e., "Indians"), but also of internal aliens ("enemies within") and of European identities themselves. Actually, when the Spaniards reified the native inhabitants of the newly "discovered" lands they were simply developing the strategies of dissolution of the identity of the Other that they were already putting into practice with Muslims and Jewish, both expelled from the kingdom of Castile and Aragon in that same year of 1492, a movement soon to be followed by other European countries, notably England. Besides, by listing all those features that signalled "Indians" as savages, pagans, and only half human, the Spaniards were making strong statements about their pre-



tended uniform identity *qua* Spaniards and Europeans. Also, both Columbus and Cortés inadvertently applied a process of cultural exclusion and inclusion that implied some very revealing approaches to culture and cultural models. For Columbus, what he encountered was non-culture, and consequently he refused to communicate or enter into any form of meaningful exchange, and he simply, as we noted, listed and described what he saw: he in practice wrote a catalogue of plants, animals, and natives, the latter being merely part of the landscape. For Cortés, on the contrary, Americans belonged not to a non-culture but to an extra-culture, and this convinced him of the necessity to —as we said— make himself intelligible, communicate, and translate and be translated into the culture of the Other.

As the examples of Columbus and Cortés and the overall conquest of America show, we can only know extra-culture, which we perceive from the outside as a finished object, or (our) culture, that *is* us, and which we know by empathy,<sup>2</sup> but we can never know non-culture, which is outside the cultural, i.e., the realm of the human. In general terms, culture, considered as the product of social interaction, is “the means by which we make meaning, and with which we make the world meaningful to ourselves” (Cohen 196), and it may lead to the construction of an identity, which is “the way(s) in which a person is, or wishes to be, known by certain others” (Cohen 195). Politicized cultural identity becomes ethnicity, which simultaneously works in contrastive terms (“I am what you are not,” tactic identity in Cohen’s terms, 198) and (in a more productive manner) by stressing self-consciousness and the function of symbols and specific cultural formations.

But we would like to suggest that identity can, either at group level or located within the individual, reduce the diversity that may be found in all individuals (or even groups), as Jef Verschueren has convincingly argued (147-158). Indeed, even as the project we now know as Europe started to emerge (as we have suggested above), European identity formation developed and progressed around a core of “homogeneity” that is today as present as ever and which can be described as consisting of

a clearly persistent view of the ideal society as being as homogeneous as possible, reflected in a tendency to abnormalize the foreigner, to normalize negative reactions (xenophobia and racism) in the face of abnormal deviance from the norm of homogeneity, and pleas for a form of re-homogenization to be achieved by means of a demonstrably discriminatory and repressive notion of integration. (Verschueren 147)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Yet it must be noted that for some authors it is precisely our own culture the one we can never apprehend, simply because being immersed in it we cannot have a global, objective, perception of it, just like we cannot see our own body (only a part of it) but we do see the whole body of the Other. Significantly Bakhtin appears to be contradictory when he deals with the possibility of the Other to answer our discourse, or is presented as an object of the gaze of the self (Sonesson; Bakhtin).

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion on identity in the twenty-first century it certainly remains to be analyzed in some depth the real nature of “integration” (not only in opposition to “segregation”) and its role in identity formation processes. Amin Asadollahi has also reflected on the uncomfortable relations between identity and diversity in “Truth and Identity: The Collapse of Diversity in Contemporary Reality.”



Consequently and as we have seen, all these reflections somehow pose very meaningful questions to be dealt with: identity, ethnicity and culture; the relations between *our* culture and Other (extra-, non-) cultures; identity and diversity; the conflicts between individual and group-imposed identities; the contradictions arising from diverse identities within one individual; multiple-group identity adscription; and how all this is (re)produced by literary works or creative writing at large. Broadly speaking this means that the stages of origin and formation, those that eventually produce identity, can be predicated upon the belief that human subjectivity is fragmented, and that origins themselves are not necessarily unitary, or uniculturally insular, but multiculturally diverse (Osagie 394-95). It becomes necessary to predicate fluidity as a central feature of identity, and this has to do with the multiplicity of expressions that emerge as the products of migrations; exiles; diverse cultural, social and ethnic attachments; the dynamics centre-periphery; or hybridity and miscegenation. Fluidity is best perceived when dealing with boundaries: cultures, in Anthony Cohen's terms, "put down their own lines of demarcation," which he calls "symbolic boundaries" (201). This constitutes a version of Lotman's semiospheric boundaries (which unlike Cohen's are not symbolic but very real, although abstract), which, as we have maintained, should constitute the backbone of any discussion on identity.<sup>4</sup> To the extent that we realize that diversity eventually informs identity, and we consider how fluid the frontiers of that identity are, how difficult it is to deconstruct the myths of origins, and how the culture that lies behind this is a product of people's agency, we will approach, in a clearer way, the meaning that identity has now for us.

The process of identification is an essential aspect. As Madan Sarup points out in *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World* (1996), when we are born we do not possess any identity. This identity forms itself little by little through the identification with others, that is, inside society (30). The following two statements also express that "identity is always related to what one is not—the Other" (47) and that "all identities, whether based on class, ethnicity, religion or nation, are social constructions" (48). Moreover, whenever we ask someone about their identity, a story appears. They tell stories to others and they also tell stories to themselves. In constructing their stories they are constructing their identity, because everybody can arrange the elements of this story in many different ways. So, the way in which they do this tells us a lot about what they are like, how they feel. In the telling of these stories they try to reconcile their inner bewildered selves with the outer ones: "it is in the construction of a narrative, the making and telling of a story, that we

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<sup>4</sup> We would like to stress that a culturalist perspective—that is, one focusing, like here, on the importance of culture, symbols and meaning in the construction of identity—cannot mean ignoring or neglecting a concern with issues of gender and class; with the basically political dimension of ethnicity; with the perception (especially by the economically marginal) of what the dominant culture signals as "other"; with the real significance of Orientalism, both for the nineteenth and the twenty-first centuries; or with how all these categories relate to early modern geo-political conflict.

produce the self. The past does not exist except in the sense that we have to interpret past events and, in so doing, create history, identity and ourselves” (46). Quite often, these stories are about their pasts, and sometimes there are gaps in them, not because of a lack of remembrance, but because of inner resistances. Sarup realizes that “when a person is telling us their story, we should be listening for its disparities and discrepancies, gaps and silences, anomalies and ambiguities, its restrictions and paradoxes,” that is what the teller is doing with and through the story” (39).

Arun P. Mukherjee, in *Oppositional Aesthetics: Readings from a Hyphenated Space* (1994) states that “writing is not just a matter of putting one’s thoughts on paper. Writing is also about social power. How I write depends a lot on who I write for” (xiii). Roshan G. Shahani proclaims in this sense that it is precisely this double vision which propels migrant writers into the act of writing (87). This writing process alleviates, then, the migrants’ homesickness. They write about the past, but a past that has long ceased to exist. There is, then, a recreation of the past. They tell what they remember, usually about their childhood during the colonial period. In so doing, they become myth-makers and folk-historians and, what is more important, they act as “preservers of the collective history of their peoples” (88). These paradoxes, these dichotomies stand at the core of the writing process as two forces working in dynamic opposition, in and out, central and marginal, centripetal and centrifugal, giving coherence and unity to their construction of a problematic identity. Both, artistic reconstruction of reality and imposed exile locate at the epicentre of migrant literature in the postcolonial theory of displacement, touching concepts such as peripheral studies, subalternity, dislocation, alterity, identity, self-representation and cultural adjustment, and dealing with authors like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Homi K. Bhabha, Edward Said, or Gayatri C. Spivak. The “dehoming” and “rehomeing” process in exiled writers runs parallel to the Russian Formalist Victor Shklovsky’s theory of “defamiliarization”<sup>5</sup> and to the paradoxical status of imitation experienced by the *émigrés* when facing the adoptive country. Benzi Zhang, thus, explains diasporans as “threatened their sense of home as a fixed, pure and closed structure” because “diaspora hence refers not only to a movement from one place to another, but also to the transition that implicates a paradoxical, multilayered dehoming and rehomeing process... Diasporans have to establish a new sense of home at the crossroads of diverse dwellings” (105).

Obviously, all these imitations are deliberate. In an interview to Canadian novelist Jack Hodgins by critic Geoffrey Hancock, he allegedly opposes the “invented” world to the “created,” saying that “I oppose Reality with a capital “R” to this imitation that we are too often contended with. The created rather than the invented world. I didn’t call my novel *The Invention of the World* because it is an

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<sup>5</sup> Roughly, Shklovsky states that the everyday look of the familiar objects makes them invisible to our eyes. It is necessary, then, to change their position to see them anew. This theory can also be implemented in postcolonial contexts, when talking about confessional writings of exile. Creative detachment becomes an important consequence of this notion.



interesting title. It is a story about counterfeits” (47).<sup>6</sup> Therefore, Hodgins’ purpose in using these opposite elements is that of stressing the distinction between trickery and reality, invention and creation in a postcolonial context. Hodgins recreates the process of colonization and how this has reverberated through the historical consciousness of postcolonial English Canadians. In this process, the re-vision of history is inevitable. The imaginative reconstruction of history tries to recuperate the gaps, the lost voices that imperialism has left behind. And both Hodgins and also the Canadian poet and novelist Robert Kroetsch have contributed to such process: “[They] share an interest in thematically decentring images of fixity while at the same time foregrounding the gaps and absences those fixed and monumental structures produce” (45). As always, History omits from the entire official records what it does not want to hear. And frequently these omissions end in oblivion.

The writers of identity, then, decide to adopt a very postcolonial position *avant la lettre*, in terms of ironic detachment and carnivalesque criticism. They start conceiving the world as a dystopia, one that comes from a disengaged perspective and an ultimate devotion for their own experience of their country in past times. Thus, a desire is shown to decolonize the miserable condition of a place that has suffered from an inferiority complex, due to its subaltern condition as colonized, deprived and devoured by indigence and lack of pride. Paradoxically enough, this is also an aristocratic position, because it comes from the conscience of art as a personal choice that moves away from vulgarity, that separates the trivial from the transcendental, the everyday from the extraordinary and that transforms these confessional writers into special beings capable of manifesting contradictory ideas to gain the ultimate essence of their polysemic identities in their complex and plural settings. These writers occupy a so-called “hyphenated” no-man’s land that does not belong to any of both identities, so strikingly different between them. In this sense, the late Palestinian critic Edward Said proclaims in *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) that “no one today is purely *one* thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are no more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind. Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or black, or Western, or Oriental” (407-408). Concepts such as transnationalism and transnational writing come immediately to our minds.

The semiosphere that is being analysed here is a complex one that works with those cultural, sociological and spiritual links that exist between two countries through the *medium* of the *émigré* writer: the country of birth and the adoptive

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<sup>6</sup> Jack Hodgins is named here to illustrate the process of bicultural dialogue between the old and the new world, that is, how the real and the imaginary appear intertwined in the encounters between natives and colonizers. Many times this paradoxical encounter leads to magic realism and myth making because of the legendary condition of the contacts and the spatial temporal distance between them and our contemporary vision.



country. The bonds created are individual, original, unique and subtle, because they come from personal experience. The construction of identity is manifold and has to do with some existential paradoxes created by the *coniunctio oppositorum* in the personality of these so-called hyphenated writers: talking in social terms, the situation of the newcomer is paradoxical because it presupposes a new position in the class system which can be more or less temporary and depends on hazard and personal hits; talking in environmental terms, the newcomer has to face the curious and distant (or even insolent at times) look of the Other, who is stereotyping him with ambivalent feelings; talking finally in psychological terms, the result is a quest for the affirmation of the self, which may be dissociated some times due to complexes, traumas and cultural phobias that are the product of mental colonization. Self-representation, moreover, acquires a primordial importance to reconstruct the splitting personality of the alienated being, and autobiographical confessional writing proves the elementary tool. It is a quest for a new identity, after losing the cultural and inbred models. There are, therefore, several things we should take into account in any study of identity: the importance of the past and everyone's particular interpretation of it; the idea that identity is a construction, a process. But there are also many other factors which cannot be overlooked: for instance, the fact that identity cannot be studied in an abstract context, but in a given space and time, and obviously some items such as class, nation, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, history, and so on, which are directly connected with what we feel we are and how we are seen in society.

Also, multicultural coexistence is a difficult matter because it is based on the dominant roles of one culture upon another in a mixed society. Graham Huggan speaks of the "multicultural fallacy":

...the "rainbow" visions of multiculturalism become a smokescreen that hides the continuing privilege of the dominant (white anglophone) culture. Multiculturalism, some argue further, works toward diffusing ethnic tensions by deflecting them on to an "aesthetics of diversity" with exchange-value on the market. At best, it might be said, this aestheticisation of ethnic difference glides over politics; at worst, it turns multiculturalism into a form of "boutique xenophobia." (92)<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the tensions established between the two cultural poles (the inbred and the received) undermine the scope of the hybrid personality of the writers in a specific and seemingly hostile context. Another paradox appears here, as Arnold H. Itwaru states in *The Invention of Canada: Literary Text and the Immigrant Imaginary* (1990), when saying that

Cultural integrity implicit in ethnic identity includes and transcends distinctive food, dress, music, ceremonies and festivities. It is a way of life emanating from an

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<sup>7</sup> Graham Huggan explains how multiculturalism can become a mere polite alibi to perpetuate imperial inequality and power distortion.

entire history which permeates the consciousness of its members. The claim, therefore, that a group can retain its ethnic identity and still participate to the full in national life, is a spurious one. Not only is it vague—full participation and ethnic identity are not defined—it is also a false statement. Its articulators have either misunderstood the complexities in integration and assimilation, or misunderstood the importance of cultural tradition- its inner meaning in the lives of its members. Ethnic identity cannot exist in severance from the ways of thinking concomitant with its members' history, their social memory, their fundamental historical consciousness. (16)

In 1578 the Portuguese army of King Dom Sebastian was totally defeated in Northern Africa by the Moroccan King Abd-al-Malik at the Battle of Alcazarquivir (August 4), in which thousands of Portuguese soldiers, noblemen and conscripts died in one day. A contemporary account of the battle gives this visual description of the outcome:

The dead [were] on top of the living and the living on top of the dead, all cut to pieces, Christians and Moors locked in each other's arms, crying and dying, some on top of the artillery, others dragging limbs and entrails, caught under horses or mangled on top of them... (Spence 50)

Lost the identities they were fighting to impose on the Other, disembodied and disembowelled Christians and Moors become a formless continuum in which, for the contemporary observer as much as for us, there seems to be no longer Christian or Muslim, living or dead, human or animal. War and death have appropriately become the signposts of a boundary where opposites meet and identities dissolve; the ultimate frontier of a semiosphere that still allows for some form of translation, albeit tragic, between "self" and "Other."

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