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**Shaping Identity in
a Globalised World**
A Theoretical and Literary Approach

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SHAPING IDENTITY IN A GLOBALISED
CONTEXT:
A THEORETICAL AND LITEARARY APPROACH

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Foreword</i>	1
Introduction	2
FIRST PART	
I. The globalization phenomenon	8
1. Defining globalization	
2. Cultural consequences of globalization: the Westernization and the hybridization paradigms	
3. Globalization and literature: Glissant and creolization theory	
II. The consequences of a globalised society on the self: towards an understanding of existential displacement	27
1. From pre-modern to modern society: a change in identity formation	
2. From modernity to globalisation: the contemporary displaced self	
III. A negative response to the contemporary sense of displacement: the dynamics of nationalism within a globalised environment	37
1. National affiliations: the retreat into primary identities	
2. The binary logic of nationalism	

SECOND PART

IV.	A positive response from literature: the creation of a trans-national, hybrid identity in Verdecchia's <i>Fronteras Americanas</i>	47
	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Considering the author context: the Canadian multicultural society2. <i>Fronteras Americanas</i>: a brief introduction3. Wideload and the issue of stereotyping: the risks of producing fixed identities4. The autobiographical experience performed: Verdecchia's fight against displacement5. A constructive answer to displacement: the potentialities of a hybrid, trans-national identity	
V.	Problematic aspects of hybridization and trans-nationality: the case of V.S. Naipaul's <i>Half a Life</i> and <i>Magic Seeds</i>	69
	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. A brief introduction to the novels2. Willie's identity and existential displacement3. The myth of the one-root identity: the case of Willie's sister Sarojini4. Naipaul's scepticism: the impossibility of overcoming displacement	
	Conclusion	98
	Bibliography	105

Foreword

The present discussion aims at reflecting about the formation of individual identity within a globalised world. Globalising processes have created an environment in which building a stable sense of self has become increasingly difficult, thus often leading the person to experience a sense of displacement. The attempt has been made to see what responses might be developed in order to overcome such an identity crisis.

In the First, theoretical, Part, the phenomenon of globalization and the condition of the individual have been analysed mainly through anthropological, sociological and cultural perspectives, by relying on the studies of Arjun Appadurai, Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Anthony Giddens, Kenneth Gergen and Édouard Glissant. Subsequently, by employing Zygmunt Bauman's theorizations, the attachment to the ideal of national identity has been taken into consideration as a case in point to show how the reinforcement of national affiliations might be a possible, if detrimental, response to the insecurity of the contemporary individual.

The Second Part continues the discussion from the perspective of post-colonial literature. Guillermo Verdecchia's play *Fronteras Americanas* and V. S. Naipaul's novels *Half a Life* and *Magic Seeds* have served the purpose to further illustrate how subjects, in this case diasporic ones, deal with identity formation processes within a globalised context. Ultimately, it is argued that the solution to overcome displacement and reaching a stable sense of self might lie in the ability to change the modes in which identity itself is defined and conceptualised.

Introduction

Our sense of identity regulates our relations with reality and with other individuals. It determines our position in the world and is the filter through which our understanding of ourselves and of external reality is established. The very concept of identity is as complex as the mechanisms of its formation.

On a general level, the notion of identity can be considered as formed out of the “interaction between the individual and society”¹. Human beings do not live in isolation but are always placed in social contexts which inevitably affect the way the individual develops. Thus, identity can be conceptualised as both “a psychological and social process”². Such deep connection between the individual and the social dimension suggests that, according to the kind of cultural discourses³ produced within a society, the sense of self and the way reality is understood vary accordingly. Furthermore, society is not static but always evolving, along with, and also through, its cultural discourses.

¹ Philip Gleason, “Identifying Identity: A Semantic History”, *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 69, No. 4, (March 1983), pp. 910-931, p. 918.

² Peter Mandler, “What is National Identity? Definitions and Applications in Modern British Historiography”, *Modern Intellectual History*, Vol. 3, No. 2, (2006), pp. 271-297, p. 278.

³ According to Foucault’s theory, a discourse ‘is a set of statements that creates an object which does not exist prior to the discourse itself but is defined and identified by it’ “e’ un insieme di enunciati che costruisce un oggetto che non é preesistente al discorso stesso ma viene da esso delimitato e identificato” (*Gli Studi Postcoloniali, Un’Introduzione*, ed.s Bassi S. and Sirotti A., Firenze, Le Lettere, 2010, p. 16). ‘The dimension of the discourse is a practice in which both the objects and the subjects are formed’, “La dimensione del discorso (...) é una pratica nella quale vengono a formarsi sia gli “oggetti” di cui esso parla, sia i “soggetti” che in esso parlano” (Stefano Catucci, *Introduzione a Foucault*, Bari, Laterza&Figli, 2001, p. 73). Therefore, a discourse can be intended as a “system of statements within which the world can be known” (Bill Ashcroft et al., *Key Concepts in Post-colonial Studies*, London-New York, Routledge, 1999, p. 14). Basically, it is through discourses that knowledge is produced and therefore, it is through them that individuals can come to an understanding “about themselves, their relationships with each other and their place in the world” (Ashcroft et al. *Key Concepts*, p. 15).

The importance of the concept of discourse is that it makes evident that every epistemological system is the product of a cultural practice within a certain socio-cultural context. Such theoretical perspective makes clear how, according to the kind of representations we rely on to interact with the external world, the world itself and ourselves with it acquire different meanings. Moreover, it highlights how, since every discourse is located within a specific context, they cannot hold a universal or eternal value but on the contrary, they are liable to change.

What makes identity formation even more complex is that cultural transitions do not necessarily occur smoothly, without any friction; often, the development of new discursive formations can challenge the assumptions of other discourses, no matter how deep-rooted they are. This means that if on one hand, individuals can experience a stable sense of identity, thanks to the solidity and reliability of certain socio-cultural frames of reference, at other times, especially when society is undergoing significant structural changes, such stability might be challenged.

In the contemporary world, globalization represents one of those significant and dramatic phenomena which function as a destabilizing and challenging force against the sense of stability of the individual. Although the term has been used to convey a wide range of meanings and cannot be linked to a single definition, it can be loosely defined as a number of processes, economic, technological and cultural-ideological, which have caused significant changes on a worldwide basis.

For instance, on an economic level, globalization has favoured the creation and growth of a global economy in which an increasing number of economic and financial transactions are trans-national in character. Economic activities have thus evolved into a more complex system of interactions and interrelations that spawn on a global scale.

Such evolution in the economic sphere has carried also political implications, like the fact that nation-states are “increasingly involved in international arrangements”⁴: the boundaries between international and domestic politics are blurring so that states are undergoing significant changes in their organization and inner politics. Due to these mechanisms, Ohmae argues that the nation-state is no longer able to operate as an active subject in the economic global field to the point that its own organisational structure no longer fits the reality it is confronted with⁵. Globalization is seen as that context that will trigger the “onset of a borderless world”⁶ and the consequent end of the nation-state, destined to become only ‘a nostalgic fantasy’

⁴ Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *Globalization & Culture, Global Melange*, Lanham, ROWMAN&LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS INC., 2009, p. 11.

⁵ See Kenichi Ohmae, *La fine dello Stato-nazione: l’Emergere delle Economie Regionali*, trad. E. Angelini, Milano, Baldini&Castoldi, 1996.

⁶ Pieterse, *Globalization & Culture*, p. 10.

“una fantasticheria di sapore nostalgico”⁷. Such an extreme view makes evident how globalization tends to cut across the nation-state borders and system economically, socially and also culturally.

These examples suggest that globalising dynamics, that are occurring at multiple levels, tend to alter the very perception of the world which today is often conceived as one interconnected reality, in which people, products and cultural discourses can move more easily and at a speed never experienced before. If on one side, such interconnection and closeness might be considered as a sign of progress, on the other, this unprecedented flow of material, people, images and ideological contents, together with the alteration of the role of consolidated structures (like the nation-state), is seen as an almost destructive force to which the individual is exposed.

The flux of new cultural discourses that enters the society is perceived by many as a threatening phenomenon, since the pluralisation of potential available identity benchmarks leads to the dismantling of the individual’s previous ideological security, placing him/her in a condition of existential displacement. Thus, the radical and rapid changes promoted by globalization within society have often contributed to leaving the individual lost and unable to firmly locate himself in the world.

At this point, the question arises as to how and in what ways the individual may tackle such a situation. What kind of strategies does the subject develop in order to overcome such a feeling of displacement? In what ways is the stability of self-identity protected? To answer such questions, the interconnection between the subject and the ideological system in which he is placed cannot be ignored; in other words, we need to ask ourselves: what role can supposedly well-established ideologies play within these circumstances?

Among such established ideologies, the nationalistic discourse is a primary one. National belonging nowadays represents a sort of basic, fundamental identity location. Today, despite the challenges it is facing, the nation-state system is still the dominant cultural-political arrangement around the world; our “every-day life (...) is lived (...) in the world of nation-states,

⁷ Ohmae, *La fine dello Stato-nazione*, p. 11.

so that nationhood is near the surface much of the time”⁸. Being a member of a nation and expressing a specific national identity is often perceived as an inevitable, ‘natural’ condition. Within our collective imagination, such conceptual categories of nation and nationhood have been shaping people’s approach towards themselves, others, and the external world for centuries. The modern era and our contemporary age have been marked by the logic of the nation-state which has thus become one of the most significant epistemological frames of reference in the world at large.

Therefore, it is particularly important to try and understand what role nationalistic discourses assume within a globalised context in relation to identity construction processes. The question being: is nationalism inescapably destined to be superseded as main frame of reference for identity formation, or, despite the processes of globalization, will nationalistic discourses still offer remedies to insecurity and displacement in the formation of individual and collective identities?

If attention towards nationalistic discourses gives us the chance to focus on the dynamics between the identity dimension of the individual and a consolidated ideology within a globalised context, on the other hand, it might be also worth considering whether differing discourses have been developed in order to deal with existential displacement and insecurity created by globalization. In this way, by examining a series of different responses, it would be also possible to establish whether we can identify discourses which might prove to be more suitable and effective than those provided by discourses constructed around the idea of the nation. Our ultimate aim should be understanding whether, despite the destabilizing effects favoured by a globalised context, it is still possible to overcome the feeling of displacement and maintain a constructive sense of identity: an identity that would allow the individual to feel protected and able to face the challenges of the globalised world.

To answer these questions, this dissertation has been divided into two main parts. The First discusses identity formation in the age of globalization

⁸ Mandler, “What is National Identity?”, cit., p. 280.

as dealt with by major scholars in the field. The discussion will be initially dedicated to the analysis and development of a working definition of globalization, paying particular attention to its socio-cultural implications. This will allow me to determine in some depth how certain globalization-related phenomena have affected the way individuals conceptualise both the world and their individual identity. In this way, it will be also possible to better define and understand the causes and characteristics of contemporary existential displacement. However, it should be clarified that the 'ideal target' of the discussion is represented by the 'stable, native individual', by those subjects who are not immigrants and whose life is therefore linked to a specific geographical location.

Secondly, the focus will be shifted on the nationalistic discourse in the attempt of elucidating its dynamics and discerning what sort of mentality develops from such ideological frame of reference. The intent is that of understanding what connotations the nationalistic discourse expresses when employed as a means to counteract displacement.

In the Second Part, the discussion will continue and broaden by considering the dimension of postcolonial literature through an analysis of Verdecchia's play, *Fronteras Americanas* and Naipaul's novels, *Half a Life* and *Magic Seeds*. Due to the different typology of these works, (a short, very synthetic play on one side and two novels on the other), the section dedicated to the analysis of Naipaul's novels will be necessarily more extended.

In a broad sense, these works can be considered as two examples of diasporic literature. The term 'diasporic' is here employed to stress the fact that the protagonists (Verdecchia himself as protagonist and the character of Willie Chandran) are both immigrants, physically displaced subjects who consequently do not always enjoy the status of 'natives'. Thus, in this case, the diasporic experience of the protagonists will function as the dimension, the point of reference, through which I will discuss and reflect about the condition of displacement of subjects (the stable, native individuals) who on the contrary, are not diasporic. Since the authors hold divergent views, Naipaul's novels will be employed to show the problematic outcomes for the individual who is living within a globalised society, while Verdecchia is considered as an example of an author who has managed to produce a con-

structive and alternative answer against the sense of displacement by developing a discourse that goes beyond the nationalistic frame of reference.

Therefore, while in the First Part nationalism is taken into consideration in order to see how a deep-rooted ideology responds to the challenges set by globalising processes, in the Second Part, through the exposition of Verdecchia's constructive approach and Naipaul's more sceptical view, other two, different responses to displacement will be presented.

FIRST PART

I. THE GLOBALIZATION PHENOMENON

1.1 Defining Globalization

As stated in the introduction, contemporary society is undergoing rapid and foundational changes which are often ascribed to the phenomenon of globalization. However, the concept itself is a problematic and contested one. Firstly, globalization is not something easily located or defined; it can be used to express a wide range of different relations and processes. Secondly, and consequently, a single, universally accepted definition does not exist. The term itself does not have clear boundaries; it is not possible to use it in order to identify a specific event within a specific historical context. Globalization is not “a single concept that can be defined and encompassed within a set time frame, nor is it a process that can be defined clearly with a beginning and an end”¹. Moreover, the concept is so broad that it can be used to refer at once both to the causes and consequences of certain processes². At the same time, the scope of such a wide term can be even misleading since one should remember that it is not “applicable to all people (...) in all situations”³.

Since the primary focus of the dissertation is to reflect about the sense of displacement experienced by the individual in our contemporary era, one must first clarify what processes and relations are referred to by the term globalization. A delimitation of the concept will allow me to outline the context in which such problematic condition develops. Accordingly, the aim of this chapter will be to elaborate a working definition of the concept, giving particular attention to its cultural dimension and consequences.

¹ Nayef R.F. Al-Rodhan and Gerard Stoudmann, “Definitions of Globalisation: a Comprehensive Overview and a Proposed Definition”, *GCSP Occasional Paper*, (June 2006), pp. 1-21, p. 3. (<http://www.sustainablehistory.com/articles/definitions-of-globalization.pdf> Accessed: 20/02/2012).

² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Globalization is primarily thought of as an economic process in which the interrelations among the various subjects involved are progressively growing and strengthening. As a consequence, money, technology and goods in general, tend to move transnationally. In other words, from an economic perspective, globalization can be conceived as a phenomenon characterised by “an increasing economic interdependence of (...) national economies across the world through a rapid increase in cross-border movement of goods, service, technology and capital”⁴.

But even if globalization is often conceived of essentially as an economic event, the term can be used also to refer to cultural and socio-political phenomena. Ritzer, in a wider sense, defines globalization as “a transplanetary *process* or set of *processes* involving increasing *liquidity* and the growing multidirectional *flows* of people, objects, places, and information as well as the *structures* they encounter and create that are *barriers* to, or *expedite*, those flows”⁵ (original emphasis). The author conceptualizes globalization in terms of flows whose fluidity and mobility constitute their main property. At the same time, the term is used to comprise both the formation and the limitation of such flows. What in the past appeared to be stable, now is manifesting new features. Capital, technology, people, information and culture, all have acquired a high level of mobility enabling them to flow much more freely and quickly through the pre-existent nation-state boundaries. Such speed of movement inevitably affects the way both large-scale and small-scale interactions take place. It could be argued that worldwide interactions have always existed, but the concept of globalization stresses the “new order and intensity”⁶ within which such interactions now occur.

One of the main causes for such a significant increase in the interconnectedness of people and societies is technological improvement fundamentally altering two spheres of the human condition: movement/mobility and communication. Improvements in the speed and efficiency in transportation means that currently there exists a constant, highly heterogeneous flux of

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economic_globalization Accessed 10/01/2012.

⁵ George Ritzer, *Globalisation: a Basic Text*, Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, p. 2.

⁶ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation*, Minneapolis-London, University of Minnesota Press, 1996, p. 27.

individuals that moves across large portions of the globe. Such flux of people has become a fundamental trait of our contemporary reality and it inevitably triggers not only social but also political consequences primarily on a national level. Nations have to face a reality in which the movements of people are expressing a new character which affects “the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree”⁷.

Just as people can generally move with less restraints, so can communication. Throughout human history, slowness and expense have been “the greatest impediments to communication”⁸. With the advent of what Gergen defines as the ‘high-tech phase’⁹, new technologies such as air transportation and, above all, electronic forms of communication, have drastically expanded the perimeters limiting communication while also enabling individuals, business, and communities to exchange information instantaneously and at a reduced cost. As the use of these technologies spread across the globe, communication and social connection increase. As a consequence, space has been overcome by time: for instance, now a piece of information can literally cross the globe within seconds. The same could be said for financial transactions: such activities have become completely freed of their previous material constraints.

As far as movement and communication are concerned, the fundamental parameter is represented by the category of time, since space has lost considerably its ability to affect such activities. If in the past space and time were conceived of as two overlapping dimensions, now such conception has been dismantled since time is incredibly less linked to space. Therefore, one of the main features of our time is ‘the changing relationship between space and time’ since within modernity space and time are theorized as two separated categories while ‘before they were so intertwined to be barely distinguishable’¹⁰. Furthermore, increased communication possibilities and movement of individuals imply a consequent flow of cultures since each person becomes a cultural carrier across the geographical space. Cultures,

⁷ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, p. 33.

⁸ Kenneth J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*, New York, Basic Books, 1991, p. 58.

⁹ Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, p. 49.

¹⁰ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge-Oxford-Malden, Polity Press, 2000, p. 6.

images and ideologies are no longer necessarily bound to a specific locality. Such technologies have changed the way millions of people interact.

Nevertheless, globalization is not homogeneous or equally developed and does not affect people and territories in the same way. For Appadurai the flows of globalization “are not coeval, isomorphic or spatially consistent”¹¹. What Appadurai attempts to do is to synthesize the complexity of the globalization phenomena by describing it essentially as a system constituted by five main cultural flows: ethnoscaples, technoscaples, finanscaples, mediascaples and ideoscaples, which interact and intersect with each other. The use of the suffix –scape allows him to stress the nature of these different fluxes: first of all, similarly to Ritzer’s definition, their fluidity and mobility, and secondly their irregularity.

Moreover, these conceptual landscapes are “perspectival constructs inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors”¹². It means that all the phenomena that can be connected to globalising processes are not evenly perceived: each subject (be it a nation-state, a community, a multinational etc.) filters and interprets such realities through their specific point of view. In this context, the smallest unity involved in the globalization process is “the individual actor”¹³. All the different landscapes together contribute to the formation of an imaginative dimension through which many individuals create their subjective image and perception of the world. Referring to Benedict Anderson’s well-known theory¹⁴, Appadurai asserts that “these landscapes are the building blocks of what (...) I would like to call “imagined worlds”, that is the multiple worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe”¹⁵.

Appadurai’s ideas are certainly useful in elaborating specific issues concerning globalization, for instance noting that globalization is not some abstract process but rather one that operates with and through individuals and

¹¹ *Globalization*, ed. Arjun Appadurai, Durham-London, Duke University Press, 2001, p. 5.

¹² Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, p. 33.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London-New York, Verso, 1991.

¹⁵ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, p. 33.

groups. Moreover, it seems useful to think of globalization through the perspective of those who are being affected by it, even though conceptualising it as constituted by distinct “scapes” may lead to a simplification of the interrelations and interactions between actors and processes. Therefore, it is to a discussion of these processes and interactions (especially on a cultural level) that the attention will be turned next.

Globalization can be considered as the condition that characterizes many aspects of our contemporary age. In this context, it has been conceived as a complex system of interrelations that develops transnationally, but at the same time, irregularly and unevenly on different cultural, economic and socio-political levels. The spread of the global flows have determined a significant series of changes (such as increased mobility and new forms of interconnectedness) whose cultural consequences ultimately affect the dimension of the individual and his/her own way of conceptualizing the world.

Nevertheless, in the same way, there is neither a univocal definition of globalization itself, nor there is a univocal interpretation of the cultural consequences that are triggered by a globalised context. Therefore, in the next section, the attention will be shifted to the cultural dimension of globalization. By taking into consideration different analysis about the cultural dynamics favoured by globalization, I will attempt to understand in which way culture and cultural processes are affected by globalising processes.

1.2 *Cultural consequences of globalization: the Westernization and the hybridization paradigms*

As noted before, one of the aspects that is generally highlighted is the presence, on a global scale, of a growing level of interconnectedness. The very idea of a “global society” expresses this sense of macroscopic connection and interdependence suggesting that “various modes of global integration and forms of organization are well under way”¹⁶.

However, in terms of technological and economic development, globalization is primarily linked to Western capitalistic economies that promote forms of global consumption. This means that “certain retailing forms of business, techniques, sites, and modes of marketing have rapidly proliferated around the world”¹⁷. These new conditions have had some cultural consequences. By taking into consideration the incredible success and spread of fast-food franchises, Ritzer talks of McDonaldization¹⁸ in order to portray the dominance of Western capitalistic forms of production and consumption. The economically and politically strongest countries (in this specific case the US) are those who can exert a heavier cultural influence on the others as represented, for instance, by the spread of fast-food culture.

If the concept of McDonaldization can be too specific and restrictive since it refers to a particular form of cultural and economic dominance, other wider terminologies such as Americanization or Westernization express the hegemonic influence of the United States and Europe on a global level. These perspectives see globalization as a phenomenon which will lead to a progressive global cultural homogenization alongside the standards of American/Western culture. As a consequence, the other marginal and less strong entities are destined to be assimilated by Western culture, firstly by absorbing economic arrangements connected with, for instance, “American mass consumer culture”¹⁹. The result would be a “progressive standardiza-

¹⁶ Mike Featherstone, *Undoing Culture: Globalization, Postmodernity and Identity*, London-Thousand Oaks-New Delhi, Sage Publications 1995, p. 7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁸ George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society: an Investigation into the Changing Character of Contemporary Social Life*, Thousand Oaks, Pine Forge, 1993.

¹⁹ Featherstone, *Undoing Culture*, p. 8.

tion”²⁰ furthered by a dominant cultural-political-economic influence from the centre towards the margins. According to such interpretation, the difference among marginal cultures and their institutions is destined to be superseded by the homogenization force of the predominant one. Cultural heterogeneity is bound to dissolve into a homogeneous, standardized Western culture. In this case, globalization is understood as “an inundating wave of uniformity that threatens to wash away all cultural difference, undermining the foundation of distinct social and political institutions”²¹.

Nevertheless, even if cultural interactions are conditioned by power-relations, this does not necessarily imply that the margins are completely powerless. Interpreting globalization as a phenomenon in which the West plays an unchallenged hegemonic role runs the risk of simplifying the mechanisms of cultural flows by conceptualizing them as unidirectional movements. If on one hand terms like Americanization or Westernization make evident the presence of uneven power-relations around the world, on the other, they tend to promote the image of a total dominance over the cultural marginal entities involved in the process, with an active subject on one side and a completely passive marginal actor on the other.

At the same time, other theories, sharing the same assumption of the cultural dominance from the West and the risks of homogenization, foresee a world in which globalization is mainly related to phenomena of fragmentation and particularism²². In this case, the supposed outcome is not a standardized world: globalization is seen as a context that is bound to give rise to counter-cultural movements whose aim will be to protect and re-affirm the cultural autonomy of the communities threatened by Western cultural dominance. The tendency towards homogenization is not negated, what is different from the previous theories is the general consequence. Instead of having a series of passive, malleable subjects, these very subjects will react against the homogenizing flows by reinforcing their cultural particularities. Therefore, even if initially globalization promotes cultural homogenization, it will ultimately provoke the opposite effect.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 8.

²¹ Douglas W. Blum, *National Identity and Globalization: Youth, State and Society in Post-Soviet Eurasia*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 12.

²² Ibid., p. 13-14.

One perspective on globalization believes in a process of long-term cultural convergence and homogenization driven from above, whereas the other perspective draws attention towards local reactions against forms of cultural imposition and homogenization and their ability to inter-/counteract with trans-local global flows. In the first case, the global dimension eventually will swallow the local one. In the second case, globalization will instead favour a process of fragmentation in which individuals and communities, refusing cultural homogenization, will not assimilate but rather isolate to protect their perceived traditional and original culture.

Other approaches, instead of focusing mainly on the effects of globalization either on the global or on the local level, bring attention to the contact between these two dimensions. Globalization then is seen as an extremely complex phenomenon whose systems of flows develop and thrive thanks to an entangled network of interrelations taking place simultaneously both on a global and on a local level. From this perspective, the analytical separation of the global and the local dimensions is a problematic one, as what occurs is an interaction between forces located on the two levels. The two dimensions do not have clearly shaped boundaries. Robertson synthesizes this aspect by suggesting the use of the term Glocalization to “symbolize a simultaneous expansion in both global and local directions, the universalization of particularisms and the particularization of universals”²³. Through this lens then, it is possible to explain the cultural consequences of globalization not exclusively in terms of homogenization or fragmentation but rather in terms of hybridization²⁴.

Hybridization can be defined as a form of “cultural blending, (...) a specific mode of cultural mixing [that] involves a process of localizing the products transmitted through globalization”²⁵. The idea suggested by this approach is that as soon as localities are hit by global flows, these flows become localized or indigenized²⁶ and are absorbed through the local cultural

²³ *Readings in Globalization: Key Concepts and Major Debates*, ed.s Ritzer G. and Z. Atalay, Chichester-Malden-Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, p. 160.

²⁴ Blum, *National Identity and Globalization*, p. 15.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

²⁶ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, p. 32.

frame of reference and consequently altered and re-elaborated. Nevertheless, the term hybridization does not refer exclusively to those dimensions which undergo a process of cultural influence by a dominating subject. The local is certainly affected by the global but since the two dimensions are linked, also the global is affected by 'flows' from the local. The process of globalization cannot be considered exclusively as a movement towards cultural uniformity but rather as a process that makes us aware of "different levels of diversity"²⁷. This also depends on the very condition of hybridity.

Postcolonial critics have made explicit the characteristics of this condition within the colonial context. The coloniser and the colonized are in a situation of mutual interrelation to the point that the colonizer, even if dominant, could not exist without the colonized. In terms of identity constructions both the colonizer and the colonized are involved in a process of mutual influence. Even if there is a dominant subject and a dominated one, ultimately they will both influence each other. Hybridity is the condition that characterizes both subjects since it is within this hybrid space of contact that both cultural identities develop²⁸. Therefore, hybridity is not only a consequence but also the very context within which any form of cultural interrelation takes place.

Consequently, it could be argued that concepts like Americanization are flawed because cultural dominance does not coincide with cultural impermeability and with a mono-directional movement of cultural influence. What the concept of hybridization stresses is that different cultures cannot be conceived as objects, as homogeneous separate blocks, but rather as the product of an infinite series of interactions even when such interactions occur within a context of dominance. Hybridity undermines the idea of a dual opposition between two defined, cultural entities. The potential of hybridity lies in the fact that it "breaks down the symmetry and duality of self-other, inside/outside"²⁹.

²⁷ Featherstone, *Undoing Culture*, p. 14.

²⁸ On the concept of hybridity see Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London-New York, Routledge, 1994; Homi Bhabha, "The Third Space. Interview with Homi Bhabha", in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Rutherford J. R., London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1990, pp. 207-221.

²⁹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 116.

Therefore, conceiving globalization purely as a phenomenon of Americanization/Westernization can be problematic exactly because the risk is to reproduce such dual opposition in which cultures are conceived as organic and perfectly separate cultural entities. The inside, or centre represented by the US or more broadly, by the West, simply absorbs the outside, the rest of the world. Hybridization puts into question such assumption by negating the possibility of conceiving globalization as a phenomenon in which one prevailing culture simply absorbs the others remaining at the same time unaltered. Notwithstanding the fact that globalization allows for the possibility of cultural dominance, this dominance remains subject to, and in fact operates through processes of hybridization.

Another problem with concepts like Americanization or Westernization is that not only do they tend to dismiss the relevance of hybridization by conceiving cultures as holistic entities, but they also tend to reproduce a Western-centre-periphery logic. In this case, postcolonial theorizations might prove particularly useful again. First of all, because postcolonial theory tries to dismantle such logic. To think in terms of centre-periphery dynamics means to conceive the West as the active centre and the rest as the passive other. For postcolonial critics, marginality is no longer defined as a powerless location but is itself a locus of active cultural production. Marginality is not only a place of submission but can be a place of resistance as well³⁰.

However, the problem of thinking according to a centre-margins logic is not only related to power issues; it is the very idea of such binary logic which is problematic. Stuart Hall, in relation to colonization, argues that it is necessary to “re-read the very binary form in which the colonial encounter has for so long itself been represented”³¹. The implied idea is that is no longer possible to study or conceive of the relation between the colonizer and the colonized in terms of a simple binary opposition, since the actual re-

³⁰ Bell Hooks, “Marginality as a site of Resistance” in *Out There: Marginalization and contemporary Cultures*, ed.s Ferguson R. et al., Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1990.

³¹ Stuart Hall, “When was the Postcolonial? Thinking at the Limit” in *The Postcolonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, ed.s Chambers I. and L. Curti, London-New York, Routledge, 1996, p. 247.

lation between the two subjects is inherently more complex and articulated and it responds to a logic which cannot be a binary one. This means that the relations that before were conceived of as binary forms of interactions, now must be interpreted as “forms of transculturation, of cultural translation, destined to trouble the here/there cultural binaries for ever”³². In this case, what is affirmed is the “refusal of thinking in terms of oppositions”³³. By rehabilitating the margins and negating the superiority of the West, post-colonial theory dismantles the inherent hierarchy of the centre-margin logic.

Consequently, just as postcolonial critics put into question the validity of the centre-periphery logic within colonization discourse, the same argument may be applied to globalization discourse. Thus, to equate the idea of globalization exclusively with Americanization or Westernization risks reiterating the centre-margins logic by describing globalization only as a phenomenon of unidirectional cultural dominance. The situation, therefore, seems to require greater articulation and consequently “it is no longer possible to conceive global processes in terms of the dominance of a single centre over the peripheries. Rather, there are a number of competing centres”³⁴. Post-colonial studies have certainly contributed to expand this “sense of multipolarity and emergence of competing centres”³⁵. In relation to issues of cultural dominance, postcolonial theory has created the awareness that cultural relations are extremely complex and that for this reason, even when they seem to, they do not respond to a binary centre-margins logic.

However, it is fundamental to stress that the disruption of the centre-margins logic does not imply “a condition of equality between participants”³⁶. Nevertheless, within the globalization context, subjects that in the past could have been considered as completely non influential are beginning to acquire a stronger voice: “more players are admitted to the game who are demanding access to means of communication and the right to be heard”³⁷.

³² Hall, “*When was the Postcolonial?*”, cit., p. 247.

³³ Maria Cimitile, “Attraversamenti: il Linguaggio della Teoria Postcoloniale”, in *Gli Studi Postcoloniali: un’Introduzione*, ed.s Bassi S. and A. Sirotti, Firenze, Le Lettere, 2010, p. 38.

³⁴ Featherstone, *Undoing Culture*, p. 12.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 9.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 13.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 13.

In any case, considering hybridization as a fundamental cultural mechanism and affirming the invalidity of a centre-margins structure does not mean to deny completely the value of the other cultural consequences that have been taken into consideration so far. The problem that has been highlighted above points to the risk of conceptualizing the phenomenon of globalization through only one of its cultural consequences. Rather than being mutually exclusive phenomena, Americanization, Westernization, fragmentation and hybridity are all interrelated and encompassed within globalization. Therefore, the cultural dynamics of globalization seem to be extremely intricate and variegated so that dominating and dominated subjects are all culturally intertwined in a complicated system of interactions.

1.3 *Globalization and literature: Glissant and creolization theory*

The phenomenon of globalization and its consequences, which so far have been described mainly through sociological and anthropological theories, can be also analysed through literary studies. Édouard Glissant's essays and specifically those collected in *Introduction à une Poétique du Divers* examines the contemporary globalised world by using a literary approach and a likewise poetic language. By retracing the history of the populations of the American and Caribbean context, from which he comes, and focusing on history of slavery, Glissant introduces the term 'creolization' which represents the pivotal concept of his discourse.

As opposed to European migrants, African slaves were severed from their native culture to such an extent they would ultimately lose their languages. Firstly the slave ship and then the plantations were the places where this dramatic loss gradually occurred since people speaking the same language were separated on purpose and with time got mixed with the European languages and cultures of the colonizers. In such context of violence and deprivation, the growth of any form of culture followed certain particular mechanisms: the slaves had to construct a culture of their own by using fragments and the language modalities which were available to them. They were left with the task of gradually re-shaping a new identity through the

sublimation of various heterogeneous elements; what occurred was that a series of elaborations and interactions between highly different cultural elements ultimately generated a new culture. One of the most evident products of such process is represented by the development of new languages called creoles. A creole is a language which is born from the encounter of heterogeneous elements. For instance, the francophone languages spoken in the Caribbean are the result of the fusion of the lexicon of Norman and Breton languages with the syntax and grammar of sub-Saharan African languages. The result is an original culture and a language whose various components remain visible.

Therefore, as the example of the creole language shows, what characterises these colonial cultures is the fact that they are the result of the interrelation and the mixing of heterogeneous cultural elements spawning from different contexts but that ultimately merge together giving birth to a new, hybrid culture. Such process represents what for Glissant is the phenomenon of creolization which, in the case of the Caribbean and American contexts, appears to be particularly evident.

For Glissant, implied in the term creolization is the idea of interrelation: whenever cultural contacts occur, such cultures are destined to relate to each other and to evolve through a process of mutual influence and elaboration. Another fundamental aspect that Glissant stresses is the unpredictability of creolization processes: it is not possible to foresee the outcomes of the contact among different cultural discourses since their dynamics are too fluid, complex and not subject to a specific evolutionary rule. Furthermore, the creolization phenomenon requires 'the equality of the various cultural elements', "gli elementi culturali messi a confronto devono essere necessariamente "di valore equivalente" perché avvenga un vero processo di creolizzazione"³⁸. Therefore, within the process of creolization there is not any aprioristic hierarchy between the elements involved: every cultural element can contribute to the shaping of the cultural discourses as it occurred in the South American and Caribbean colonies. It is for this reason that the final result is not foreseeable because it is impossible to establish in advance the

³⁸ Édouard Glissant, *Poetica del Diverso*, trad. Francesca Neri, Roma, Meltemi, 1998, p. 15.

importance of particular heterogeneous cultural elements and, correspondingly, what dynamic processes will be triggered.

To summarize, Glissant's concept of creolization is intended as 'an unexpected realization from the encounter of heterogeneous elements', "realizzazione imprevista a partire da elementi eterogenei"³⁹.

The analysis of Caribbean colonial history mainly serves the purpose of introducing and explaining the very origin and nature of creolization but it also functions as a key historical phenomenon that Glissant uses to build his main argument according to which the entire world is nowadays undergoing a process of creolization at large. 'These cultural and linguistic microclimates, created in the Americas by creolization, are extremely significant since they are the signs of what is happening in the world', "questi microclimi culturali e linguistici creati nelle Americhe dalla creolizzazione sono decisivi, perche' sono i segni di cio' che sta accadendo nel mondo"⁴⁰. The colonial experience of creolization then constitutes an example on a smaller (and much more violent) scale of what is occurring on a global level. The world has become one single 'totality' in which 'distant and heterogeneous cultural elements, in certain circumstances, can come into contact. With unforeseeable results', "gli elementi culturali piu' lontani ed eterogenei possono, in alcune circostanze, essere messi in relazione. Con risultati imprevedibili"⁴¹. Therefore, the creolization mechanisms that Glissant discusses are not an exclusive phenomenon of the American colonial context, rather the colonial experience represents a cultural location in which such phenomenon has been more easily identifiable since the encounter of different cultural discourses and their further elaboration has occurred in a relatively short (and recent) time, thus resulting more evident.

Nevertheless, the fact that the colonial and contemporary contexts are those which are taken into consideration does not imply that creolization processes are supposed to take place only in these specific circumstances. Cultural contacts have always occurred worldwide throughout all human

³⁹ Ibid. p. 25.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 17.

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 20.

history and therefore they are not a prerogative either of the colonial context or the globalised world. This means that creolization is defined as a ‘universal’ phenomenon; it is the basic, characterising condition of the formation and evolution of any form of culture⁴². Cultural interrelations existed ‘but they used to occur within such an extended period of time that it was impossible to be aware of it’, “ma accadevano in lassi temporali talmente dilatati che era impossibile averne coscienza”⁴³: in the past, the slowness of the process did not allow the individual or the society to realize what was really happening. Instead nowadays, due to the vast improvements in communication technologies, contact between highly different realities takes place in front of our eyes; it occurs in the present and not only in a long period of time. Therefore, the contemporary situation is distinguished from the past by the awareness that such cultural interactions are now occurring. For this reason contemporary creolization is said to show a ‘simultaneous and conscious character’⁴⁴.

According to Glissant, the concept of creolization is the most suitable one to describe the contemporary globalised context since the globalised world is an environment in which cultures, mutually influencing each other, are in constant motion and evolution. The various cultures then are no longer conceived as monolithic entities but as realities which exist and develop by relating to each other. In this sense, Glissant’s concept of creolization is close to the one of hybridization mentioned above. In both cases, culture is not conceived of as a solid object but rather as a porous entity, always able to absorb and elaborate new elements. Similarly to hybridization, also creolization refuses the idea that cultural influence might occur in a unidirectional (and therefore predictable) way like the concepts of Americanization and Westernization would suggest. Consequently, the concept of creolization is to a certain extent comparable to the one of Glocalization

⁴² Creolization then occurs in the formation of every culture; nevertheless, certain cultures show more clearly this aspect. For this reason Glissant distinguishes between composite cultures and atavistic cultures. To the first category belong for instance the colonial cultures since the heterogeneity of their components is still identifiable. The atavistic cultures instead are those cultures in which it is more difficult to discern the various elements that shaped them since the process of creolization took place in the past and therefore the culture has somehow ‘forgot’ that it is itself the result of a creolization process.

⁴³ Ibid. p. 23.

⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 23.

since both terms evoke a reality in which the local and the global dimension are intertwined and connected to each other, with no clear boundaries between the two.

The globalised world, according to Glissant, is a complex dimension which is created and shaped by constant interrelation and mixing of multiple cultural discourses. As a consequence, the possibility, which often turns into a myth, of creating pure cultures is completely excluded, since the very dynamics of culture do not allow for the creation of cultural purity. The 'real essence' of human cultures then is their creole nature: the boundaries of the concept of creole are thus enlarged in order to encompass and describe the dynamics of all human cultural discourses.

Although following his own literary path which differs from traditional academic discourses, Glissant provides a valid description of the contemporary globalised reality. His own autobiographical experience serves as the starting point of his discourse which develops by following a logic that puts into question certain assumptions starting from that which considers the colonial experience as a unique context whose dynamics are completely different and alien from those of typical Western cultures. On the contrary, the boundaries between the colonized realities and the rest of the world are erased. By dismantling those perspectives, which tend to conceive the colonial context as a separate reality with its own exclusive dynamics, Glissant manages to produce an original and effective analysis of the contemporary globalised world by offering deep insights into its most fundamental aspects.

Furthermore, Glissant's theory of creolization goes beyond a mere descriptive account, since it is bound to promote a new approach not only for how cultures and their processes are understood, but also, for reconceiving the very idea of identity. If hybridity represents the foundational condition for the evolution of any form of culture, the ideal of 'pure and self-referential culture', which for Glissant is typical of the Western thought, is destined to collapse. And since culture is the location where discourses about identity and identity itself are developed, the very idea of identity is destined to change.

For Glissant, when a culture conceives of itself as organically related to its own nation and to one single history, language and tradition characterising it, by excluding the multiplicity of cultures and languages that may be part of its own history of tradition, it can be defined as a 'one-root culture'. The one-root identity is assumed to spawn from a specific, exclusive source. It is an identity whose construction is perceived to be dependant only on a single specific culture. The range of cultural discourses that can shape the one-root identity becomes strongly limited. Those discourses which are perceived to be extraneous are systematically excluded since the very idea of heterogeneity is seen as a form of corruption of the 'pure identity' which needs to be well-defined, monolithic, absolute. This form of identity belongs also to the one produced by the nationalistic logic which revolves around the myth of the exclusivity and purity of its own culture. One of the main concerns of nationalism is that of constantly re-affirming the distinctiveness of national identity in order to totally absorb the individual's one which is expected to be shaped by its very relation and attachment to the unique source.

To the purity and exclusiveness of the one-root identity, Glissant opposes the rhizomic identity, an image elaborated by Deleuze and Guattari⁴⁵. Contrary to the one-root identity, the rhizomic one overcomes the myth of the one-rootedness and welcomes the idea of having multiple identities sources, exactly like the rhizome is constituted by multiple roots. The rhizome identity dismisses the ideal of purity in favour of the recognition of contact and plurality. Such an identity develops day by day through a constant process of relation with the wide range of cultural elements and actors that the individual might come in contact with. Therefore, identity is redefined as a form of relation and not as a monolithic entity; similarly, heterogeneity is no longer considered to be a menace but rather a resource. In this respect, Glissant is aware of potential negative consequences: the rhizomic identity might face the risk of 'being watered down'⁴⁶ since in front of a total openness towards any cultural element, there is the possibility of losing the self in a sea of potential identity benchmarks; thus, instead of building a richer

⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 47.

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 20.

form of identity, the opposite paradoxical result would be obtained: the erasure of identity itself.

Nevertheless, despite such possibility, the value of the rhizomic identity should not be underestimated for two fundamental reasons. The first one is to be seen in the fact that the construction of a rhizomic identity requires a certain degree of awareness: the individual is supposed to be conscious of his conditions and consequently he is also believed to have the ability of mediating among the enormous quantity of cultural discourses that he might encounter. Such awareness cannot be taken for granted but, as noted above, on a general level, contemporary societies nowadays have a certain degree of awareness about the pluralisation of cultural discourses and their continuous interrelations.

The second reason as to why the possibility of evolving rhizomic identities should not be dismissed is to be found in the very substance of contemporary societies: if hybridization represents the basic trait of any cultural formation and creolization is the reality of contemporary cultural processes and experiences, the rhizomic identity should prove to be more functional than the one-root identity. Instead of conceiving of hybridity as a negative condition that needs to be erased, a rhizomic identity accepts and grows through and within it. This means that rhizomic identities do not spawn from a rejection of the phenomenon of creolization but rather from the desire to consider it as the very cultural ground for the construction of self and culture. For this reason, the rhizomic identity is conceived to be the outcome of a cultural frame of mind that manages to deal with hybrid, transcultural realities in a constructive way. While sticking to the ideal of the one-root identity generates conflicts that are justified by the will of defending and protecting one's supposed original tradition and culture, the rhizomic ideal is based on the awareness that mediation among a plurality of discourses is needed and it therefore tends to promote tolerance rather than conflict.

For all these reasons then, it is necessary 'to leave the one-root identity and enter the truth of the creolization of the world': "uscire dall'identita' a

radice unica ed entrare nella verita' della creolizzazione del mondo"⁴⁷. Therefore, the acceptance of the phenomenon of creolization as the actual condition of our reality does not represent a surrendering to a state of chaos and meaninglessness in which identities are erased; on the contrary, it represents the unfolding of new positive possibilities for human societies. This shift in mentality (from the ideal of the one root to that of the rhizome) is needed in order to become able to live constructively in a globalised world making the most of its dynamics.

Therefore, Glissant does not simply offer a descriptive analysis of the contemporary globalised world but also, and especially, the elaboration of a new mentality. This new mentality, from a reconceptualization of culture through the idea of creolization, offers the possibility to reconceptualise identity itself. It might be argued that Glissant's confidence in the possibility of such a profound evolution in human thought is to a certain extent utopian. However, in my opinion, the idea of developing (and accepting) an idea of cultural identity which is consciously creole is not completely unrealistic, since such solution is elaborated in the light of an analysis of the complex dynamics which regulate the contemporary world.

In this section the attempt has been made to produce a definition of globalization in order to better outline its dynamics, especially from a cultural perspective. As noted previously, the "individual actor"⁴⁸ is the ultimate subject affected by globalization. Therefore, in the next section, the focus will be on the individual in order to describe what consequences he undergoes within a globalised context.

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 21.

⁴⁸ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, p.33.

II. THE CONSEQUENCES OF A GLOBALISED SOCIETY ON THE SELF: TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF EXISTENTIAL DISPLACEMENT

By taking into consideration some of the fundamental social and cultural changes determined by modernity and globalization, the aim of this section is to describe how and in what ways the existential dimension of the individual has been affected by such changes. In this way, it will be possible to reach a better understanding of the condition of displacement.

1.1 From pre-modern to modern society: a change in identity formation

By 'modernity' we refer to a period of time in Western human history which is radically different from pre-modern times. What makes this distinction possible is, in part, the types of material conditions and social relations that constitute the communities and societies of these periods. In this context, the term modernity mainly refers to the conditions promoted by industrialization and capitalism. On one hand, industrialization refers to the social and economic relations determined by the spread of new systems of production based on the use and development of new technologies. On the other, capitalism is meant as an economic system in which commodity production is based on wage labour and takes place within competitive markets. Therefore, the period of time defined as modern ranges approximately from the changes promoted within society by the so-called Industrial Revolution¹ to the 19th and 20th centuries in which such changes turned into being the very structural traits of society.

While on a general level the term pre-modern refers to enclosed societies, usually regulated by a rigid social system, in modern times, the small community has been replaced by a system of larger, impersonal and more com-

¹ The term 'Industrial Revolution' is generally associated with the fundamental and drastic changes (especially technological) that occurred approximately between 1750 and 1850. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Industrial_Revolution Accessed 10/05/20120).

plex organisations and social relations. Between the 18th and the 19th centuries, modern institutions underwent a fundamental change: instead of developing within local dimensions, they slowly became extremely articulated organisations relying on the coordination of many individuals which contributed to their functionality being at the same time “physically absent from one another”². Thanks to communication and transportation improvement, people and institutions had the possibility to interact even if they were spatially separated, distant from each other which indicates that also social relations no longer developed exclusively through a local context.

The creation of this new environment is connected also with the advent of specialisation: due to the higher articulation and complexity of society, the range of possible different works and activities grew considerably and the diversification of activities favoured the development of different forms of knowledge. Every individual is asked to acquire a series of very precise skills in order to be able to fulfil a specific activity. As a consequence, individual mobility, both within and across communities, increased significantly: the need for specialised workers meant that many individuals found it economically beneficial or necessary to leave their local community to find more opportunities elsewhere. Furthermore, the specialised individual can be easily relocated in relation to the specific needs of the moment since he/she can exert the same activity in different places. This is due also to the fact that the industrialized system was based on wage labour which removed the ties of the labourer to the means of production, allowing greater mobility³.

The articulated structure of modern society implies that the social arrangement changed as well. Modernity tended to slowly dismantle the so-called pre-modern ‘dense-sociability’⁴. According to Bauman, pre-modern communities perceived themselves as organic entities in which it was possible to interpret reality by following a simple binary logic: you were either a

² Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity, Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1991, p. 17.

³ On the social and economic arrangement of the modern society see: Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity*; Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*; Featherstone, *Undoing Culture, Globalization, Postmodernism and Identity*.

⁴ Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, pp. 61-62.

member of the community or not. The world of the small pre-modern community “was tightly and almost completely filled with friends and enemies – and friends and enemies only”⁵. This is a fundamental aspect which constitutes a profound difference from modern societies. People who initially did not belong to either category, namely the strangers, were promptly reclassified as either friends or enemies. In this way, the community was able to defend and protect its dense-sociability. The relation with other communities and realities was generally quite clear, there was little space for ambiguity since every new individual or issue was interpreted through the friend-enemy logic. The pre-modern community could quite easily enjoy its own distinctiveness: it was not problematic to distinguish between members and outsiders. Living in a pre-modern community meant to stay in a homogeneous context within “even-textured social surroundings”⁶. The reality of the small community was characterised by social, cultural and economic dynamics which were not really prone to sudden modifications and consequently, also the opportunities for each individual were perceived to be somehow ‘pre-determined’. Within such context, “words, faces, gestures, and possibilities were relatively consistent, coherent, and slow to change”⁷. This is due to the fact that the small community was a stratified and more rigid society which not only determined the location of the individual in the world, its role and his/her identity, but was also the guarantee for spending a life within a circle of safe and generally constant relations.

By contrast, within the modern condition such guarantees are missing. If pre-modern communities were an example of a society in which the social position of every member was ‘pre-determined’ and not really liable to change, modern society is a “functionally differentiated one”⁸: it is a society in which divisions and differences do not occur exclusively between different classes or social layers but also “across the social locations of the single individuals”⁹. Specialisation and social mobility prevent the individual from the possibility of firmly locating himself: to define his own position and

⁵ Ibid. pp. 61-62.

⁶ Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, p. 61.

⁷ Ibid., p. 61.

⁸ Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, p. 200.

⁹ Ibid. p. 201.

identity becomes more and more difficult since the individual finds himself in a system of increasingly complex and differentiated relations and networks. As a consequence of this new complexity, the individual is left without a clear and stable system of references. Even inside the same society, different cultural frames of reference happen to coexist thus favouring a condition of ambivalence: a community is no longer self-enclosed, it is no longer the bearer of one homogeneous culture. In a modern context, the clearly shaped boundaries of pre-modern societies are compromised and give space to a more heterogeneous condition in which different cultural references happen to coexist. The homogeneity of pre-modern community is replaced by the ambivalence and ambiguity of the modern one.

Therefore, with the dismantlement of dense-sociability, the condition of being a 'stranger' enters the community: individuals who technically belong to the same community become not only strangers to each other but to themselves as well. This is due to the fact that society no longer tells the individual who he/she is and what his/her place is. It does not tell the subject which path to undertake: it is the single person who at this point has to decide about himself. The individual is no longer placed within the framework of a small traditional community in which through a shared system of values his/her very identity is determined by the community itself.

Modern societies, due to their structure, are inherently more dynamic and ambiguous than the previous ones: in terms of identity formation processes, this new condition represents a fundamental change since now the individual finds himself in front of a series of possibilities which he/she has to consider autonomously. As a consequence, the question of self-determination begins to acquire more and more relevance. The dimension of lifestyle is now perceived as a fundamental personal issue. Lifestyle is intended as the series of activities and behaviours that contribute to shape both the life quality and the very identity of the individual; it is the "more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfil utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity"¹⁰. Depending on the kind of choices a person

¹⁰ Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity*, p. 81.

makes, identity changes accordingly. This means that now identity develops through (to a certain extent) a self-aware identity-construction process.

Contrary to pre-modern societies, within modernity the individual has to build his own self: “the self becomes a reflexive project”¹¹. In other words, the passage from pre-modern to modern societies promoted the so-called phenomenon of individualization¹²: the subject is expected to decide about his/her own life and identity. “Modernity replaces the heteronomic determination of social standing with compulsive and obligatory self-determination”¹³. Therefore, on a general level, it could be stated that an increased level of mobility, the dismantlement of dense-sociability and the condition of individualization constitute some of the fundamental social and cultural changes ascribable to the advent of modernity.

1.2 From modernity to globalization: the contemporary displaced self

Previously, globalization has been defined as a complex system of processes and interrelations that result in a general significant increase in social, economic and cultural mobility. The idea forwarded here is that the phenomena described so far regarding modernity have been deeply radicalized by globalization thus further affecting the self in specific ways.

Today, thanks to the great achievements of communication and transportation technologies, together with the consequent flow of people, images and ideological contents “more persons in more parts of the world consider a wider set of possible lives than they ever did before”¹⁴. The feeling that the range of possible available choices has sharply increased is not only due to the fact that it is less difficult to change location, but also to the influence felt through the mediated experiences of every-day life: the media play a key role in this sense since it is through them that this very plurality of life possibilities is made visible to a constantly increasing number of viewers. Therefore, contrary to the situation of a pre-modern setting, now the indi-

¹¹ Ibid. p. 32.

¹² On the concept of individualization see Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*.

¹³ Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, p. 32.

¹⁴ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, p. 53.

vidual assists to the so-called “pluralisation of life-worlds”¹⁵: the differentiation of possible ‘lives’ has reached an extremely high degree thus putting the individual in front of a wide series of potential choices to be made. Furthermore, it is important to stress that, even if this sense of self-determination is illusory or somehow limited by specific circumstances, such feeling still permeates the person’s imaginary and for this reason the subject is not prevented from conceptualizing reality as a realm of infinite possibilities in which the individual is demanded to create his/her own path.

The increasing amount of immigration is of crucial importance as well. The phenomenon of deterritorialization¹⁶ represents one of the most important traits of globalised society: if mobility grew during the modern era, in our contemporary time the degree of such phenomenon has reached a peak never reached before. More and more people nowadays leave their native place to relocate themselves elsewhere. By doing so, immigrants do not necessarily abandon their culture but rather bring it with them in the new location. One effect of deterritorialization has been to further dismantle the dense sociability of the pre-modern period, and has consequently expanded the condition of ambivalence: “groups are no longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded or culturally homogeneous”¹⁷. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the phenomenon of deterritorialization, in which we assist “the loosening of the holds between people (...) and territories”, must also alter “the basis of cultural reproduction”¹⁸.

Dense sociability and its perceived organic nature are substituted with a hybrid and ambivalent reality in which different groups and individuals interact and live next to each other. Within a globalised context, thanks to the multiplication of possible social and cultural interrelations “we become increasingly populated with the character of others”¹⁹. The homogeneous and relatively limited range of interactions typical of the pre-modern community has been replaced by a highly heterogeneous system of interactions. The richness and complexity of this reality means that people are confronted

¹⁵ Peter Berger et al., *The Homeless Mind*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1974.

¹⁶ On the concept of deterritorialization see Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹⁹ Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, p. 71.

with multiple cultural frames of reference which are not necessarily displayed through a universally shared hierarchy or order: different cultural systems and values are often next to each other and equally available to the individual. Moreover, within the contemporary globalised context, the coexistence of different cultural frames can also promote the very fragmentation of certain “cultural landscapes”²⁰ which are no longer able to function as solid and unchallenged benchmarks: this means that cultural categories that previously “gave [people] firm locations as social individuals” now, in front of the multiplicity and variety of “cultural systems”, are put into question²¹.

As a consequence, “modern individuals have to define themselves and their own identities while coping with widely discrepant meaning systems”²²; people have to face a reality in which they have to select and interpret the heterogeneity of its meanings by themselves. In a globalised context, self-determination becomes extremely problematic due to the complexity of reality itself. Therefore, if the question of self-determination developed within modernity, in contemporary society it is not only still present, but has become even more significant.

Another aspect of the modern condition that has increased in significance in the contemporary era is the individual’s need/capacity to be able to shift among a variety of specific roles and identities. Contrary to the pre-modern situation, in which the subject enjoyed a limited series of social roles, usually well-defined and consistent through time, now the individual is involved on an everyday basis in a wide range of commitments that can be also temporary and precarious. Thus, through the “diversifying of contexts of interaction”²³ the so-called modular man is born, a product of modernity, who is ‘a being endowed with changing, disposable and exchangeable qualities. The modular man has multiple aspects that can preserve for a

²⁰ Stuart. Hall, “The Future of Identity” in *Identity and Belonging: Rethinking Race and Ethnicity in Canadian Society*, ed.s Hier S. P. and B. S. Bolaria, Toronto, Canadian Scholars Press Inc., 2006, p. 249. The expression “cultural landscape” refers to those concepts and discourses, such as class, gender, ethnicity, race, nationality (etc.) that can play a key role in moulding both individual and collective identities.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 249.

²¹ Ibid., p. 249.

²² Paul T. Kennedy et al., *Globalization and National Identity Crisis or Opportunity?*, Hampshire-New York, PALGRAVE, 2001. p. 11.

²³ Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity*, p. 190.

certain period, exhibit or conceal according to his needs', "una creatura dotata di qualità mutevoli, monouso e scambiabili. L'uomo modulare ha molteplici aspetti che può mantenere per un po', esibire o dissimulare a seconda del bisogno"²⁴. The modular man is the person who has fully developed the ability to switch among a variety of roles and commitments according to the needs of the moment.

As a result, the risk for the self is to undergo a process of fragmentation in which what occurs is "the splitting of the individual into a multiplicity of self-investments"²⁵. The fact that we live in a "sea of social connection"²⁶ sharpens such phenomenon which Gergen defines as *multiphrenia*²⁷. The high degree of social interactions, also termed as *social saturation*²⁸, is ideal for promoting this kind of psychological condition in which the self tends to become more and more fragmented. The problem is that on one hand, modernity promotes the differentiation of roles while on the other it confronts the individual with an ever-changing world in which no value system officially prevails, thus leaving the subject alone in front of such an unsettling situation.

Within such modern/contemporary context, characterised by the dismantlement of dense sociability, the consequent fragmentation and pluralisation of cultural references and the increase of individualization processes, which often favour a *multiphrenic* existence, one of the potential consequences for the individual is to "experience a condition of homelessness"²⁹. The modular beings no longer have the comfort gained from the perception of being located in a precise and consistent cultural frame to which one totally belongs. What is missing is the feeling of being an integrated subject within an integrated community. Instead, such feeling has been replaced by the anxiety of self-determination in a highly ambiguous world. 'All of us are, always and everywhere, partially dislocated. We never fully belong to any of

²⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *La Solitudine del Cittadino Globale*, trad. Giovanna Battini, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2000, p. 116.

²⁵ Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, pp. 73-74.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.xiv.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 73-74.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 48.

²⁹ Kennedy et al., *Globalization and National Identity*, p. 11.

the groups we are part of: some of our modular parts protrude and cannot be absorbed or integrated by any group; rather, such parts are connected and interrelate with other modules', "Noi tutti siamo, ovunque e sempre, parzialmente dislocati. Non apparteniamo mai pienamente ad alcuno dei gruppi nei quali siamo inseriti: certe parti delle nostre persone modulari sporgono e non possono essere assorbite ne' accolte da alcun gruppo, ma si connettono e interagiscono con altri moduli"³⁰.

The fragmented/modular individual is trapped within a system of complex and unclear interrelations which do not necessarily produce a strong sense of identity and belonging. Thus, the concept of homelessness which is also termed as dislocation or displacement³¹ highlights the fact that individuals are fundamentally going through a crisis of identity since they feel they are strangers everywhere: "there is no single place in society in which they are truly at home and which can bestow upon them a natural identity"³². Individuals can experience a constant condition of existential displacement living in a situation of "unsicherheit"³³, of uncertainty, since their stability of belonging, which was once generally guaranteed within pre-modern communities, has been deeply undermined.

Experiencing a sense of belonging is usually perceived as a positive condition, since it is through such feeling that the individual elaborates the idea of having a place in the social and cultural world. It helps the individual to see himself as an integrated subject, to perceive his identity as well-defined and organic, the opposite of a multiphrenic identity. As society no longer functions as a provider of firm locations, identity, together with the sense of belonging, weakens. Consequently, the identity crisis of the modern man can in part be equated with the absence of a stable sense of belonging. Belonging and identity are closely related to each other as two mutually reinforcing dimensions. Paradoxically, as soon as they have been both compromised, they have acquired great importance. The modern claim for self-

³⁰ Bauman, *La solitudine del Cittadino Globale*, p. 162.

³¹ On such concepts see Bauman, *La Solitudine del Cittadino Globale*; Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*; Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*; Kennedy et al., *Globalization and National Identity*.

³² Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, p. 201.

³³ Bauman, *La Solitudine del Cittadino Globale*, p. 162.

determination has made identity become the primary dimension through which the individual can define himself; it is the dominant location through which the subject can relate with the external world. It is the dimension in which the individual's hope of rebuilding a stable sense of belonging relies. But because the subjective dimension itself is always changing or evolving in relation to the constantly shifting range of available life-worlds, solving displacement becomes a difficult task.

To summarize, the modern context first and the contemporary globalised reality now tend to favour a condition of displacement and anxiety which basically leads to an identity crisis linked with the loss of a stable sense of belonging. In front of such situation, there can be different reactions. The idea which will be furthered next is that, on a general level, it is possible to refer to two main fundamental reactions in relation to such condition of crisis. One is basically a problematic attitude insofar as it tends to trigger negative rather than positive and beneficial mechanisms, while the other represents a more satisfying response in which the sense of displacement and the identity crisis are somehow resolved through a constructive process.

III. A NEGATIVE RESPONSE TO CONTEMPORARY SENSE OF DISPLACEMENT: THE DYNAMICS OF NATIONALISM WITHIN A GLOBALISED ENVIRONMENT

As noted above, one of the main problems determined by the modern and the globalised context is that various cultural frames of reference, which previously played a key role in defining both individual and collective identities, are themselves undergoing a process of crisis. By colliding and commingling with each other at an unprecedented rate, their previous stability has been often compromised thus leaving the individual with new and fragile cultural references which may prove insufficient to fulfil the individual's need for identity benchmarks. Furthermore, as previously argued, the sense of uncertainty and anxiety, typical of the modern and contemporary condition, is strongly linked with a correspondent attention towards the dimension of belonging: the more such dimension is challenged, the more it becomes fundamental.

As a reaction against this sense of displacement experienced on an everyday basis, people can try to overcome it by reinforcing their attachment to certain specific cultural references thus reducing the world to a bearable dimension: "when the world becomes too large to be controlled, social actors aim at shrinking it back to their size and reach"¹. Such reaction represents an aspiration to simplification²: living in a world which is becoming increasingly complex, articulated, mixed and ambiguous, triggers the desire for an opposite condition of simplicity and clearness, a condition in which decoding reality, and consequently defining self-identity, requires little effort. Among the "cultural landscapes"³ to which people tend to attach, there are

¹ Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity*, quoted in Kennedy et al., *Globalization and National Identity, Crisis or Opportunity?*, p. 14.

² Bauman, *La Solitudine del Cittadino Globale*, p. 162.

³ Hall, "The Future of Identity", cit., p. 249.

forms of primary identities which often derive from cultural categories like those of religion, ethnicity, and nationality⁴.

Therefore, in order to tackle a sense of displacement, one possible response is represented by the tendency to reinforce already-existent forms of individual and collective identities which appear both to satisfy the need for belonging and to be the guarantee for (re-)building an organic self. Such response represents an act of reaction (and refusal) against the perceived unsettling complexity of the contemporary world. In relation to this phenomenon, as just stated above, the category of national identity is among those primary identities which seem to be particularly suitable for satisfying such need for simplification and belonging. The reason of its apparent suitability lies in the very dynamics inherent in the nationalistic discourse.

1.1 National affiliations: the retreat into primary identities

The appeal and strength of national belonging depend on the fact that, even within a modern or globalised reality, it seems to reproduce a context similar to that of dense sociability which was typical of the small scale pre-modern community.

First of all, one of its main aspects is that within the nation-state, individuals who are considered members of the national community are redefined as natives. Being a native means that the subject has not chosen this status: nationality is inescapable⁵, it is a matter of destiny and not the outcome of an independent and self-aware personal decision. The native belongs to the national community “by assignment”⁶ and not by choice. Consequently, the feeling potentially triggered by such condition is that the person perceives to be somehow naturally tied to that specific territorial and cultural reality. The native is the one who is able to participate in and enjoy a system of shared values which all natives know and reproduce. Also, the political and economic arrangement of the nation-state, in order to function

⁴ Kennedy et al., *Globalisation and National Identity*, p. 15.

⁵ See Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

⁶ Jeff Spinner-Harlev and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, “National Identity and Self-Esteem”, *Perspective on Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 2003, p. 519.

properly, needs to promote a certain level of cultural homogeneity through the creation of historical memories, foundational myths and shared attitudes and values⁷ which contribute to form that very sense of national identity perceived both as unique and exclusive: only natives can fully understand (and therefore participate in) the national culture.

In this way, national belonging seems to satisfy two opposing needs: the need of inclusion on one side and the need of distinctiveness on the other⁸. By being a member of a nation, people are part of a “large social collective”⁹ but at the same time, the fact of being included within a group with an exclusive culture, allows the natives to distinguish themselves from others. The nationalistic logic is always quite concerned in creating clear boundaries between ‘us and them’ since in doing so it tries to forge the very identity of the national collective subject through a process of opposition: by enhancing its own distinctiveness and by stressing diversity, the difference between the native culture and the stranger ones, national identity is affirmed and automatically reinforced. The components of the national community think of themselves as part of a specific group in which mutual understanding is taken for granted, it occurs without problems. They have not only the same cultural background but, as members of a nation, they share a common destiny, they are part of a history to which they have always belonged. National identity thus attempts to form a strong social bond between its members: since they are all ‘members by destiny’ they can be but friends with each other; mutual solidarity comes as an obvious consequence¹⁰.

In any case, it is important to stress that the possibility of reaching such extended comradeship depends on the fact that in order to work, the nationalistic logic has to be able to fundamentally encourage the formation of a collective imagination through which various individuals conceive of themselves as part of the same group/nation. For this reason Anderson defines

⁷ On the connection between the growth of the modern state and the development of national/nationalistic culture see: Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity*, London, Penguin Books, 1991; Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1983.

⁸ Spinner-Harlev, “National Identity and Self Esteem”, cit., p. 519.

⁹ Ibid. p. 519.

¹⁰ It is due exactly to these kinds of dynamics that Bauman defines nationalism as a “religion of friendship,” in *Modernity and Ambivalence*, p. 64.

the nation as an imagined community¹¹: it is imagined because its members have to conceptualize themselves as part of such community, even if they do not know each other and have no mutual closeness. The very cohesion of the community relies on the power and effectiveness of such act of imagination which shapes the nation itself. It is no accident then that Emerson defines the nation as “a body of people who *feel* that they are a nation”¹² (emphasis mine). From this perspective it is possible to understand how the existence of a nation is not exclusively guaranteed by the presence of an enclosed territory with clear boundaries: the nation should not be considered simply as a specific geographical and political entity but also as a cultural and emotional act produced collectively.

Due to all these kinds of mechanisms national belonging seems to reproduce pre-modern dense-sociability: the nation perceives itself as an integrated community since the entire society is fundamentally sustained by one homogeneous culture. In the pre-modern context, one predominant cultural reference constituted the common horizon for the members of the community; a similar condition takes place within the nation in which its members, notwithstanding all the differences (economic, social, etc.), are anyway held together by the perception of having a shared cultural background and by the feeling of ‘naturally’ belonging to a specific community.

As for identity formation processes, national belonging not only builds and defines identity on a collective level but shapes the individual one as well through the influence exerted by collective identity and membership: born by destiny within a certain community which itself is the very expression of a specific national culture, the individual occupies a precise position and can experience the feeling of having a clear sense of self. “A sense of national identity provides a powerful means of defining and locating individual selves in the world, through the prism of the collective personality and its distinctive culture”¹³.

¹¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

¹² Rupert Emerson, *From Empire to Nation: the Rise to Self-Assertion of Asian and African Peoples*, quoted in Jeff Spinner-Harlev and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, “National Identity and Self-Esteem”, p. 519.

¹³ Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity*, p. 17.

Therefore, forging a stable personal identity does not seem to be problematic since it is the very fact of belonging to a national community which tells the person who he/she is. What national belonging appears to guarantee is the “union between the self and the world”¹⁴: each individual knows his precise location in the world since he/she has (and shares with the other fellow countrymen) a *Weltanschauung* which appears to be firm and reliable and functions as the perspective through which interpret the world and define self-identity.

As a result, the feeling which is potentially triggered is that of having reached a high level of security and assurance since a strong sense of belonging and solidarity, a well-defined (both personal and collective) identity and a clear interpretation of reality seem all to be guaranteed. This gives an explanation as to why, against the unsettling complexity of contemporary reality, people can react by reinforcing these types of identities. National identity looks like an effective means to tackle the sense of displacement: by attaching to the feeling of belonging to a specific national community, the ambiguity that is dipping into reality and the internal dimension of the self seems to be erasable.

1.2 The binary logic of nationalism

Nevertheless, trying to overcome displacement by clinging to this form of primary identity can be problematic: this is due mainly to the kind of logic underpinning the nationalistic discourse which seems to favour a mentality that, aiming at removing ambiguities and hybridity, ultimately promotes a potentially conflicting approach towards reality and the self as well.

For instance, as far the idea of belonging is regarded, an individual can be either a member of the community or not: the opposition between inside and outside is clear¹⁵. The inside is reassuring, it is composed by familiar individuals; by contrast the outside is filled with the unknown which is

¹⁴ Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, p. 75.

¹⁵ The discourse developed here about the conceptualization of space from the nationalistic perspective and the problematic category of the stranger is based on Bauman’s discussion as developed in *Modernity and Ambivalence*.

anyway located far away, somewhere else. This vision then revolves around a binary logic which tends to produce clear-cut separations: inside and outside are conceived as two separated spaces that are not supposed to merge. The outside is that space which is basically filled only with strangers or potential enemies, whereas the inside is a space exclusively filled with friends. One condition excludes the other. The criteria to define membership are thus related to this specific conceptualization of the space: being from the inside means that you are a member of the national community whereas if one's origins are located outside, such membership is missing, it cannot be taken for granted. In this way, ambivalence and ambiguity seem to be actually absent since every time each subject can be promptly classified.

The category of the 'stranger' rises against such opposition between inside and outside and puts into question the infallibility of this logic. The stranger is the one who can actually settle within the national boundaries without being a national member being thus both an outsider and an insider. The problem of the stranger is that he is at the same time physically close but culturally distant. Furthermore, even if the stranger can try to assimilate, he will never reach the same status of a native since he will always bring with him the memory of his coming into the community: the stranger's extraneousness is never completely erasable, it will be always visible. At the same time, remaining a stranger, an alien entity, he will inevitably constitute a menace for the integrity of the national culture which conceptualizes itself in terms of purity and homogeneity. Strangers slowly dismantle the unity and the homogeneity of the supposed national community since they introduce themselves into it without sharing the same cultural background thus challenging the fundamental opposition/distinction between inside and outside.

But the problematic location of the stranger does not depend on the stranger itself but on the nationalistic discourse which defines that subject as stranger and does not accept its hybrid condition. It is the oppositional approach regulating the nationalistic view which not only produce the problematic category of the stranger but also locates it in a position which is unresolvable from the nationalistic perspective. Through their condition, strangers question those oppositions created by the nationalistic logic. The

stranger forcibly brings the outside into the inside, blurring the boundaries and thus “unmasking the (...) artificiality of [the] division”¹⁶ between inside and outside. The category of the stranger constitutes a menace because it refuses to occupy a conciliatory position: he cannot be truly assimilated since some of its parts will always protrude beyond the national identity. What characterizes the stranger is its inherent condition of hybridity: he is not as close as a native since he does not share the same origins of the natives but he is not as dangerous or extraneous as an enemy since he is not necessarily hostile to the national community. Nevertheless, he is inside the national boundaries and therefore, the stranger’s extraneousness, which according to the nationalistic ideal should be located only outside the national territory, is now placed within the national boundaries. The question of the position of the stranger cannot be solved by the nationalistic logic since it is not able either to redefine it as a native or to put it outside the national territory where cultural extraneousness is admitted. From the nationalistic perspective then strangers are unclassifiable, they are “true hybrids, they are ineradicably ambivalent”¹⁷.

What emerges is that, notwithstanding all the attempts of the nationalistic approach to interpret the world according to a binary, oppositional logic in order to eliminate ambiguity, such attempts are destined to ultimately fail: this depends on the fact that the more opposition you create in order to eliminate ambiguity, the more ambivalence you will have. In other words, the greater the restriction created through definitions and classifications, the greater the probability that elements will not clearly fit within such oppositional/classificatory scheme. As Bauman states: “the opposition, born of the horror of ambiguity, becomes the main source of ambivalence. The enforcement of any classification inevitably means the production of anomalies”¹⁸. The chances of running up against ‘unfit elements’ are then paradoxically augmented by the very attempts to put everything into clear-cut categories. In this specific context, the challenging element which reveals the weakness of such oppositional logic is represented by the stranger. The

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 59.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 61.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 61.

collective national identity will be always challenged (and feel threatened) by the strangers and, considering the high level of mobility of the contemporary globalised world, such challenge is destined to become increasingly stronger. The problematic location of the stranger shows how the use of an oppositional approach can actually promote a difficult if not unsolvable conflict rather than an unchallenged view of the world.

But the problematic outcomes which can derive from this binary and exclusionary approach do not regard exclusively processes occurring on a collective level; negative outcomes, triggered by such binary conceptualization, can involve the dimension of the individual subjectivity as well.

As stated before, the contemporary individual has been defined as a modular displaced subject: the complexity of society forces him to be in contact with an extremely heterogeneous set of values and cultural discourses. Furthermore, the diversification of roles and activities has further fragmented the individual subjectivity which now tends to develop through a wide range of “self-investments”¹⁹. As described in the previous chapter, living in a globalised world means that the range of cultural elements which people encounter has considerably increased giving rise to what has been termed as hybridization: individuals can absorb knowledges, attitudes, behaviours etc., which originate from the most different locations. In a globalised context, hybridization has become more evident and explicit since processes of contact have been intensified and occur at a higher speed than before. The multiplicity of self-investments of the individual then derives also from the fact that the subject assimilates cultural elements which do not necessarily spawn from his/her own national environment.

This means that the more diffuse cultural influences there are, the more likely it is that some traits which constitute the individual’s self-identity will be extraneous to the image of national identity. Simply put, the subject may have characteristics and traits which are increasingly identifiable as transnational or hybrid, rather than national. But the ideal of national cultural homogeneity refuses hybridity and consequently, the hybridization of the

¹⁹ Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, p. 74.

individual constitutes again a challenge for the nationalistic logic. In the same way the stranger (as bearer of non-national cultural elements within the national territory) is an inherently problematic subject for the nationalistic logic on a collective level, a similar situation can occur in relation to the individual's dimension.

The consequent problem of relying exclusively on a nationalistic discourse to define one's own identity emerges out of the fact that the person who defines himself through such binary approach is exposed to the risk of compressing or simplifying his identity in order to make it consistent with the national identity model. In this way, those elements which have entered the individual's self-dimension but do not fit into the national definition will occupy a critical, irresolvable position. As stated before, the desire to erase ambiguity through a binary, oppositional logic which conceives reality through dichotomies, actually produces just more ambivalence: this implies that by allowing national identity to become the totalizing and exclusive dimension through which to define both the external world and self-identity risks promoting conflict rather than conciliation thus leaving the individual still exposed to a condition of uncertainty. If, on first sight, reinforcing these forms of identities seems to put order against the ambiguity of the world, eventually no such result is achieved.

It follows that, the very sense of displacement, which these forms of logics seemed to solve, is not solved at all. Therefore, the main problem lies in the will to overcome displacement through reinforcing binary logics of which the nationalistic discourse represents an example. If on one side, the idea of having a pure, organic and totalizing identity might seem appealing, on the other, it does not seem to be a real solution for the individual living in a globalised context. This explains why the idea of clinging to forms of primary identities is not considered as a positive, constructive response against the sense of displacement of the contemporary individual.

Throughout this section, the attempt has been made to highlight the problematic outcomes which can derive from a reinforcement of certain primary identities in order to overcome the individual's identity crisis. The attention has been shifted in particular towards nationalistic discourses. In this case,

the most negative aspect lies in the binary, oppositional logic underpinning nationalistic cultures: reality is potentially reduced to a system of monolithic categories which are expected to encompass every single element. It has been observed how such an approach, instead of producing an unchallenged epistemology, gives rise to further ambivalence thus failing to solve the original problem of the individual's sense of displacement.

At this point then the question arises whether it is actually possible to find a solution to such issue. As affirmed before, there is not only a negative response to the condition of displacement but also a positive one which in this specific case can be found within literature. Therefore, if so far the discourse about contemporary displacement and the role of national identity has been developed mainly through social and anthropological theories, in the Second Part the issue will be analysed from the perspective of literature

SECOND PART

IV. A POSITIVE RESPONSE FORM LITERATURE: THE CREATION OF A TRANS-NATIONAL, HYBRID IDENTITY IN VERDECCHIA'S *FRONTERAS AMERICANAS*

As described in the First Part of the dissertation, the social, economic and cultural dynamics of the contemporary globalised society leave the individual exposed to an enormous flux of divergent (and often contradictory) discourses which challenge the supposed previous stability of many cultural frames of reference. The modern individual has been also defined as a modular being, a subject involved simultaneously in a variety of commitments which can produce a self which is not perceived as organic but rather as multiphrenic, a self that ends up being scattered among its different parts that no longer compose an integrated identity. As a consequence, displacement can become a common psychological state.

In the previous chapter the attempt has been made to show how, in order to overcome such problematic condition and recuperate a defined sense of belonging, people can strengthen their attachment to certain forms of identities, like the national one. The nationalistic discourse tends to develop an imaginary dimension through which individuals perceive themselves to be clearly located in the world, within a specific community: in this way, individual identity, being constructed through the attachment to a precise and unique identity source (like the one-root identity described by Glissant), looks strongly defined and stable. National identity can therefore become the prism through which the individual conceptualises both himself and the external world; it becomes a primary category which regulates the individual's relation with reality.

Nevertheless, it has been argued that attempting to eradicate the source of displacement through this form of reaction can be problematic: the question does not lie in the fact of having a national identity per se but in the logic behind it, since the nationalistic logic is an exclusionary and a categorical

one. The binarism of such logic spawns from the will of erasing ambivalence but, as it has been argued, the result will be only its reproduction, as there will always be some elements which refuse to be neatly defined.

Due to the expansion of hybridization processes, in part promoted by globalization, the problem for the individual is also that of coming to terms with hybrid characteristics or aspects of his/her personality which do not sit easily within a 'true, pure' national identity thus destabilizing the supposed ability of national identity to encompass the individual's self-dimension. The main problem then occurs when the individual thinks according to a dualistic logic of which the nationalistic discourse is a manifestation; if such mental approach becomes the predominant one, the individual will be constantly challenged by aspects which will look as unclassifiable and therefore threatening. The risk then is to develop a conflictual approach, both in the way we perceive the external world, but also towards the internal dimension of oneself, thus reproducing displacement.

While the previous chapter focused on these negative outcomes, the following section is an attempt to show that it is possible to develop a mental approach which is not binary and oppositional, and that may prove to be of greater value. As the title of this section suggests, a valuable answer may come from literature, and specifically from a play called *Fronteras Americanas* written by Guillermo Verdecchia which I will be discussing as a case study.

1.1 Considering the author context: the Canadian multicultural society

Guillermo Verdecchia was born in 1962 in Buenos Aires, Argentina but at the age of two moved to Kitchener, Ontario where he was raised. He did his undergraduate studies at the Ryerson polytechnic in Toronto where he received a degree in theatre and completed his postgraduate studies at the University of Guelph, Ontario with a master degree in English and Theatre Studies. Currently, he is completing a Ph.D. at the Graduate Centre for Theatre Studies at the University of Toronto, while teaching at University College.

An eclectic person, Verdecchia is an actor, director, author and a translator. He has written and interpreted various theatrical works among which there is *Fronteras Americanas*, the work which is taken into consideration here, which premiered at the Tarragon Theatre's Extra Space in 1993 and was awarded both a Chalmers Award and a Governor General's Award. Other theatrical works are *I.d.* (1989) which won a Chalmers Award, *The Noam Chomsky Lectures* (1990), *A line in the Sand* (1995), *Insomnia* (1999), *bloom* (2006), *Ali & Ali and the Axes of Evil* (2004) a political satire co-written with Marcus Youssef and Camyar Chai and the sequel *Ali & Ali: Hey Brother (Or Sister) Can You Spare Some Hope & Change* (2010). From 1998 to 2003 Verdecchia was Artistic Director of Toronto's Cahoots Theatre Projects. In 1998 he published a collection of short stories entitled *Citizen Suarez*¹.

On a general level, Verdecchia's production represents an example of committed theatre and literature: through his works the author aims at dismantling the 'culture of banality' intended as that culture that relies on certain practices and assumptions, like racial stereotyping, that ultimately favour social tensions thus facilitating the development of a problematic society. The power of his theatre relies on its ability to create a dialogue with the public in order to question such culture and promote the creation of a different mentality. In this sense then, his production can be considered as an example of a political theatre since it goes beyond mere entertainment and actively contributes to the shaping of its community.

To better understand Verdecchia's work, the Canadian context must be taken into consideration. Due to its history, Canada represents the multi-ethnic country par excellence.

Since the arrival of the first colonizers in the late 15th century, contacts between highly different cultural subjects have never ceased. Initially, the great part of the settlers, who came in contact with the aboriginal populations, were French or British but between the late 19th and early 20th century

¹ Source for the data regarding Verdecchia's biography and career: <http://www.canadiantheatre.com/dict.pl?term=Verdecchia%2C%20Guillermo>. Accessed: 5/06/2012.

other ethnic groups, coming not only from European regions but also from other areas begun to move to Canada: they were Ukrainian, Scandinavian, Hungarian, German, Polish and Asian, mainly Chinese. This marked the beginning of the end for the 'English-French two-step'. In certain periods, the number of immigrants reached a considerable peak. After the Second World War, 1.7 million newcomers arrived, often as political or economic refugees, people who, due to their condition, were labelled 'DPs', displaced persons.

As a consequence, since the 19th century, this territory has experienced continuous mass migration almost from all over the world, to the point that by the early 21st century people from outside British and French heritage composed the majority of the population². As a result of this influx of people, Canadian society has had to face a complex environment in which different identities, needs and social situations coexist within the same territory. For this reason, Canada has been often defined as a polity which is "not (...) well-integrated and unified", a country lacking a clear sense of national identity since "there is no common meeting ground, no agreement of what constitutes a Canadian"³.

In order to solve such question the notion of multiculturalism entered the debate: introduced in 1971 as a government policy intended as a "strategy for incorporating immigrants", it has become part of the constitution in 1982 in section 27 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms⁴. One of its basic and key concepts is that multiculturalism "should assist and encourage the integration (but not the assimilation) of all immigrants"⁵. Since "official multiculturalism is designed to combat exclusion in the name of cultural

² Sources: <http://www.canadahistory.com/>;
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Canada;
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethnic_origins_of_people_in_Canada#Smaller_ethnic_origins. Accessed 5/06/2012.

³ John C. Harles, "Integration Before Assimilation: Immigration, Multiculturalism and the Canadian Polity", *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Dec., 1997), pp. 711-736, p. 712.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 713.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 713.

pluralism”⁶, its final purpose is not that of functioning as an homogenizing force but rather as a policy able to protect ethnic diversity. Multiculturalism aims to turn diversity into the very source to create a new, composite Canadian sense of identity. Opposed to the American concept of melting-pot⁷, multiculturalism encompasses the idea of creating an equal society in which all the different ethnic identities could coexist peacefully on the basis of the principle of mutual respect and freedom to express and nurture one’s own distinctive culture in order to achieve what is officially defined as “unity in diversity”. Thus, it could be argued that “multiculturalist practices seem to be explicitly designed to bring about a symbolic inclusion of the marginalized Other without homogenizing the latter”⁸: every subject should enjoy the possibility of nurturing his own specific identity but also of contributing to the very formation of a Canadian national identity.

What the ideology of multiculturalism does is to “explicitly encourage the symbolization of the nation as hybrid and tolerant with respect to diversity”⁹. As a consequence, the sort of identity which is promoted is a form of “cumulative identity”¹⁰ in which the immigrant subject does not have to renounce its ‘original identity’ and is allowed to identify with more than just one ethnic group: in this way, the immigrant should be able to preserve the ties with his specific ethnical culture while at the same time acquiring new identity traits. The practice/ideology of multiculturalism is considered by

⁶ Amaryll Chanady, “From Difference to Exclusion: Multiculturalism and Postcolonialism”, *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, Vol. 8, No. 3, (1995), pp. 419-437, p. 428.

⁷ Whilst the term ‘melting pot’ refers to the process by which different cultures, once in contact, tend to merge giving birth to a ‘new’ culture, the concept of ‘multiculturalism’ instead bears a different meaning. Created by Jhon Murray Gibbon in 1938, the term evokes the idea of having a society in which different ethnic groups should be able to preserve their distinctiveness. For this reason the metaphor employed to visualize such concept is that of the Canadian mosaic: a society which is the result of the union of many distinct cultures and traditions. Sources: Antonia Smith, “Cement for the Canadian Mosaic: Performing Canadian Citizenship in the Work of John Murray Gibbon” in *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts*, Indiana University Press, , Vol.1, No. 1, (2007) pp.37-60; Lance W. Roberts and Rodney A. Clifton “Exploring the Ideology of Canadian Multiculturalism” in *Canadian Public Policy/Analyse de Politiques*, University of Toronto Press, , Vol. 8, No. 1, (1982) pp. 88-94.

⁸ Chanady, “From Difference to Exclusion”, cit., p. 419.

⁹ Ibid. p. 421.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 421.

many as “the only policy that Canada can in fact pursue”¹¹. It is the only one “applicable to a postcolonial hybrid society made up of numerous ethnic groups, in which totalization and homogenization are seen as deleterious to social harmony as well as inadequate for the constitution of a genuinely inclusive national consciousness. Intra-national ethnic differences are thus valorized as important contributions to the cultural diversity (and thus richness) of the nation”¹².

Not only may multiculturalism be the only possibility for Canada for building a better society, but ultimately, the practice of multiculturalism is considered by some to be destined to become the very identity of the Canadian national community: “Multiculturalism is the quintessential Canadian value. (...) As the corner-stone of Canadian nation-building process, multiculturalism shapes our identity, unites us in a distinct society with a national vision, and invigorates us as a people with a destiny”¹³.

Nevertheless, such concept is not free from criticism: for instance, Jhon Porter and David Bell point to the gap that there is between the ideal discourse of multiculturalism and the actual real situation. It is not the concept of multiculturalism in itself to be criticised but the negative, dissatisfying results that have been achieved so far.

Jhon Porter argues that social inequality not only persists but often there seems to be a “correspondence between [economic stratification] and ethnic boundaries”¹⁴; what he means to say is that the possibility for an individual to improve his social and economic position within society is linked to his/her ethnic affiliation thus suggesting that a good degree of inequality is still present within the country. On the other side, David Bell asserts that the will of accepting and nurturing diversity does not necessarily include all ethnic groups and consequently, this means that there is a disparity in the way the various ethnical identities are considered and treated¹⁵.

¹¹ Harles, “Integration Before Assimilation”, cit., p. 734.

¹² Chanady, “From Difference to Exclusion”, cit., p. 422.

¹³ Augie Fleras and Jean Leonard Elliot, *Multiculturalism on Canada: The Challenge of Diversity*, Scarbrough: Nelson Canada, 1992, p. 125.

¹⁴ Chanady, “From Difference to Exclusion”, cit., p. 423.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 423.

Arnold Harrichand Itwaru is even more radical, sustaining that, despite the official multicultural ideology, the state willingly perpetuates situations of inequality, thus blaming the multicultural discourse for being a fundamentally hypocritical one¹⁶. The old power relations are not overcome and those who are in a marginalised position are not allowed to change their situation.

This idea is forwarded also by those who think that multiculturalism has been actualized only at a superficial level so that cultural integration never really occurs; an exemplary target of such criticism is represented by the phenomenon of multicultural festivals. Through the organization of these events, the discourse of ethnicity (and cultural diversity) is always addressed superficially, since the festivals serve mainly a recreational purpose thus triggering a commodification process in which the idea of ethnicity is turned into a stereotyped and fixed image. In this way, instead of promoting integration, such practices tend to maintain the existent social condition. This form of multiculturalism has been also defined as “boutique multiculturalism”¹⁷ to stress its consumerist nature and the fact that by highlighting only superficial ethnical traits, the real serious questions, are repeatedly dismissed. Thus, the final result is exactly the opposite of multiculturalism’s supposed purpose: instead of promoting a process of inclusion it actually favours a progressive marginalization and ghettoization of the marginalised subjects that, being defined as ‘other’ and reduced to an exotic image to exhibit at festivals, are automatically disempowered and therefore destined to remain excluded. As a result, “the laudable inclusionary politics of multiculturalism” prove to be “in fact exclusionary”¹⁸.

For other critics, multiculturalism is fundamentally a misconceived policy¹⁹ since it deals with the social and cultural situation of Canada in the wrong way. The ideal of the Canadian mosaic is unattainable because it assumes the existence of coherent ethnic groups which, they argue, no longer

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 424.

¹⁷ See: Stanley Fish, “Boutique Multiculturalism, or Why Liberals Are Incapable of Thinking about Hate Speech”, *Critical Inquiry*, The University of Chicago Press, , Vol. 23, No. 2, (1997) pp. 378-395.

¹⁸ Chanady, “From Difference to Exclusion”, cit., p. 425.

¹⁹ See: Lance W. Roberts, Rodney A. Clifton, “Exploring the Ideology of Canadian Multiculturalism”, *Canadian Public Policy*, Vol.8, No.1, (Winter, 1982), pp. 88-94.

exist in Canada. This happens because ethnic groups no longer have their specific social structure and therefore they are somehow emptied of their true cultural value. Consequently, the mistake of the multicultural discourse is “assuming that a variety of cultures can exist without separate social structures”²⁰. What is argued is that in order to have authentic ethnic groups, they should basically be isolated and they should not come in contact with “alternative norms, values and behaviours”²¹ that is what exactly happens within the Canadian context. What multiculturalism can actually offer, is not the perpetuation and peaceful coexistence of different ethnicities and cultures but what has been termed as “symbolic ethnicity”. Symbolic ethnicity has been defined as a “nostalgic allegiance to the culture of the immigrant generation, (...) a love for and pride in a tradition that can be felt without having to be incorporated in everyday behaviour”²². In this case, what is argued is that the idea of the Canadian mosaic is not credible because in Canada “ethnic groups (...) cannot perpetuate coherent cultural traditions because they lack the relevant social structures”²³. The multicultural practice gives only the possibility for the immigrant to identify superficially with an ethnic identity that can be chosen or dismissed “at will”. Therefore, what remains as the result of a multicultural policy is again just a series of “ethnic conferences, presses and festivals”²⁴.

This critique brings us one step forward, considering those who, like Bannerji, are sceptical towards the very concept of multiculturalism. According to this perspective, multiculturalism proves to be a very problematic and insidious concept since, although an apparently inclusive one, it is actually exclusive. This is due to the fact that focusing on the idea of difference and ‘other’ does anything but reinforcing the condition of these subjects as different, thus perpetuating their exclusion: “paradoxically, the very insistence on the particular situation of these groups – in other words of their difference- is frequently considered as contributing to exclusion by symboli-

²⁰ Ibid. p. 89.

²¹ Ibid. p. 89.

²² Ibid. p. 90.

²³ Ibid. p. 91.

²⁴ Ibid. p. 91.

cally ghettoizing them”²⁵. It is the very act of labelling certain groups by the dominant ones that keeps on reproducing exclusionary mechanisms. For this reason, the policy of multiculturalism is not considered as the proper means to really dismantle the old cultural hierarchies, on the contrary, according to Karim, “the dominant and popular discourses and practices in society constantly reconstruct the old symbolic order of dominance and exclusion; multicultural thus frequently becomes a euphemism for non-White or for ethnic, which was already a euphemism for an undesirable foreigner”²⁶. In this case then, the very notion of multiculturalism is completely rejected as a discourse that subtly reinforces racist practices.

As this brief survey demonstrates, the notion of multiculturalism is judged in very different ways, which gives us an idea of the difficulties the country has to overcome in order to find a satisfactory answer in relation to the issues regarding the Canadian reality. In any case, it could be said that the policy of multiculturalism represents the institutional attempt aimed at dealing with such complex reality. On the other hand, it is worth considering that single individuals who have had to face the challenge of multicultural Canada, have sometimes come up with precious observations and solutions.

For one, as a Canadian of Latin origins, Verdecchia belongs to that very category of people who are the target of multicultural discourse. Like other ‘displaced people’, he needs to mediate between his Canadian experience and his non-Canadian cultural heritage. Consequently, through the topics developed in his works, ultimately the author discusses and tries to solve those problems that are not only his own but also of the entire country. Just as multicultural ideology addresses issues of integration and identity, so does Verdecchia who, particularly in *Fronteras Americanas*, manages to elaborate his personal answer as to how build an identity within a hybrid/multi-ethnic context. In this way, his narrations, which are sometimes grounded in autobiographical experiences, become the starting point for a reflection on and a critique of society. By speaking through the artistic di-

²⁵ Chanady, “From Difference to Exclusion”, cit., p. 426.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 428.

mension of theatre and literature, Verdecchia belongs to that varied group of committed writers and artists that are enriching the contemporary Canadian cultural debate

1.2 *Fronteras Americanas: a brief introduction*

Fronteras Americanas is constructed as a solo performance. Although Verdecchia is the only actor on stage, the play does not develop as a simple monologue but rather as a sort of oblique dialogue between Verdecchia's two stage personae: the first one is the author playing himself, whereas the other persona is represented by the character of Wideload (a.k.a. Facundo Moreales Segundo).

The two performances, although quite different in terms of style and content, are not two parallel detached sections but rather, they express a sort of complementary nature so that they ultimately merge together to form a coherent work which, as a whole, can be considered as a reflection about displacement and the consequent attempt to solve it through the development of a new mentality.

As a Latin immigrant who moved to Canada when he was still a child, the author's analysis and reflection about displacement spawns first of all from his personal experience which is willingly exposed throughout the show. At the same time, the alternation of the two personae on stage allows the work to develop through different stages, performing a gradual dismantlement of certain conceptual categories. This conceptual deconstruction is followed by Verdecchia's increasingly explicit personal elaboration of his condition of displacement.

I will analyse the two characters' performances separately thus making it possible on the one hand to focus on the specific contents and issues they address, and on the other to better understand how they interact between each other.

1.3 Wideload and the issue of stereotyping: the risks of producing fixed identities

The character of Wideload can be described as a sort of intentionally equivocal figure since he is presented as a two-dimensional, stereotypical subject. Yet at the same time as performing this stereotype, the actor actually manages to reverse such image during the play.

Wideload enters the stage accompanied by the sound of gunshots: he is Mexican, dressed like a bandito, dirty and loud and he speaks English with an extremely strong accent. At first sight, even after he has taken off the bandito outfit, Wideload appears to be a living stereotype of the Mexican working-class man. Nothing in his demeanour seems to deny that. Nevertheless, the role of the character is not limited to that of a simple, unthreatening stereotypical portrait. Throughout the play, he creates a discussion with the audience telling episodes from his life and sharing his personal thoughts. By doing so, the fourth wall is automatically pulled down thus changing the relation between the stage and the stalls: the audience is engaged in a more complex and challenging dialogue and it is not limited just to the role of passive, external viewers.

Soon, he proves to be a witty commentator who is able to force the public into new perspectives in order to make them reflect about the meanings and consequences of stereotyping processes. In one case for instance, he recurs to his biography and talks about the period when, as a teenager, he was given hospitality by the Smiths, an American family living in the US. It was a positive experience for him, he felt welcomed and enjoyed his time there although that new environment, he says, “at times was a bit exotic for me”²⁷. Such statement is particularly significant since through it, the character makes the audience (primarily Anglo-Saxon) see its own environment from a different point of view. The simplicity of the statement (Wideload does not try to build any argument in relation to such an idea), makes it even more effective since the public is listening to an expression that every one of

²⁷ Guillermo Verdecchia, *Fronteras Americanas American Borders*, Vancouver, Talonbooks, 2011, p. 34.

them would have used in certain circumstances, with the only exception that this time, the expression is referred to them.

In this case therefore, the exoticism does not belong to Wideload's Mexican culture but to the world of the average white Anglo-Saxon American family. What occurs is a perspective reversal: the audience is reminded that all cultures can look exotic when observed by an external viewer. Within few words, Wideload's affirmation encompasses the implicit description of complex cultural dynamics. A society judges another one as exotic because it considers its own habits and practices as a given, as something normal (and normative) and as soon as it encounters practices which are different, they inevitably are perceived as unusual, strange, exotic indeed. But the problem is not the fact of being exotic per se but the fact that a society can consider itself as non-exotic, forgetting that the behaviours regulating a society are the result of cultural practices which as such have developed in specific locations and do not bear any universal validity. By attributing the condition of exoticism to the audience's culture, Wideload challenges their potential culture-centric perspective. In a subtle way therefore, the character has started a process of relativization.

Subsequently, as the dialogue goes on, stereotyping is addressed more explicitly by employing a specific procedure: while talking, Wideload shows real material to the audience such as pictures, songs, movies coming from the mainstream culture. By doing so, his discourse is developed through authentic examples drawn from the society in which we live; his monologue then is not just a theoretical reasoning but a discourse spawning from the observation of elements which everybody encounters in everyday life.

At some point he lingers over the image of the Latin Lover: while a slide behind him shows a picture of Antonio Banderas, Wideload starts reading articles from the *Elle* magazine which celebrate the actor as "the latest incarnation of the Latin Lover"²⁸. Banderas is described as a "Latin lover god" "an archetype of masculinity built for pleasure"²⁹. The Latin Lover is defined as the dark haired man, with dark penetrating eyes, who sometimes

²⁸ Ibid. p. 43.

²⁹ Ibid. p. 45.

might be a little bit rough and loud but burns with passion and romanticism. Even if he wipes his mouth on the tablecloth, the Latin Lover's appeal is not diminished. At this point Wideload asks: "don't you just want to fuck him? I do. I wonder though if it would be quite so disarming or charming if it was Fidel Castro wiping his mouth on the tablecloth?"³⁰. As soon as he has made the audience visualize this alluring image, an opposite one, that of Fidel Castro, is set against it. Castro is Latino as much as Banderas but is not generally recognised as an example of a Latin Lover by the mainstream culture. In this way, an idealized, mythical image is put next to another one which did not undergo the same process, which makes the mechanisms of stereotyping more explicit: although Banderas is a real person, in the magazine, the actor is not described and judged as a person but rather as a symbol. The picture on *Elle* magazine does not show an individual, with all its complexity and indeterminacy, but an image used to evoke a myth, a simplified version of the person, whose traits are clearly identifiable.

By putting these two discrepant figures next to each other, what is being stressed is how stereotyping is the result of a process of simplification which tends to ignore the specificity of each subject creating, instead, a superficial and generic image equally applied to a wide and various set of individuals. The stereotype always expresses a collective nature since it refers to a plurality of subjects which are forcibly located into the same category. Stereotypes then appear as an homogenizing force that blurs distinctions and particularities in order to create flat and uncomplicated objects. Wideload's exposure of cultural products which exhibit stereotypes then makes evident to the audience the extent to which the stereotyping approach regulates and affects the relation people might have with foreign realities.

The effectiveness of such a discourse depends also on the fact that it takes place within the specific location of the theatrical stage: through an explicit and decontextualized exposition, the material, taken out from an every-day environment and analysed within the new, unusual frame of the theatrical stage, is put in a new context thus creating a sort perspectival dis-

³⁰ Ibid. p. 45.

tancing which makes more evident the dynamics of which the analysed material is the final result.

Furthermore, it is important to stress that Wideload's approach towards the audience increases the incisiveness of his performance: as stated above, the public is directly involved in the discussion. In a certain sense, audience and actor switch their roles and their relation of authority: it is not the audience that observe and judge the character on stage but, on the contrary, it is Wideload who from the stage becomes observer and the judge of the audience exposing them to his comments. The audience allows Wideload to occupy an empowered position as judge, and his privileged position as speaker, the one on stage, enables him to turn the spectators from something more passive, into an active part of the play. Wideload's simultaneous position as authority gives his speech more force, enabling him to better reveal contradictions and flaws, and more importantly to prompt debate.

This is clearly visible in the next case when Wideload addresses the audience by saying: "I do like you Saxons"³¹. With this utterance, the discussion is brought to another level. While with the Latin Lover discourse the audience was made to reflect about stereotypes regarding external cultures, in this case, the audience itself is turned into a collective stereotype. As in the previous cases, the audience is not taught about the problematic nature and the negativity of stereotyping through an explicit discourse but rather, it is forced to experience it. They are told that they are a really nice category of people, friendly and cheerful but completely lacking any sense of rhythm. Again, Wideload makes evident how the fixing of the stereotyped image promotes a forced simplification and homogenization: when the public is defined as Saxon, a series of assumptions (the lack of rhythm etc.) are forcibly applied to everybody, without taking into account the actual characteristics of that specific public. In this way, the spectators are willingly exposed to the consequences of stereotyping processes and their inherent violence since they are made aware of the fact that stereotypes produce judgements which are applied a priori and not derived, or slowly constructed through communication.

³¹ *Ibid.* p. 39.

Therefore, throughout Wideload's performance, the audience assist at a sort of dismantlement of the stereotyping logic which occurs on two levels: the first is represented by the actual discussion that Wideload builds with the public. The second level in which such dismantlement takes place is through the actual character.

On one side, Wideload is conceived in such a way as to look like a perfect stereotype; at the same time, he proves to be a much more complex character thus putting into question his own status as stereotype. What the author manages to do is to trick the audience into underestimating the character and dismissing him as an unthreatening and flat stereotypical representation. On the contrary, he will turn out to be a destabilizing figure whose aim is to make the audience's assumptions waver. What Wideload attempts to achieve, both through his discourses but also through his own image and role, is to deflate stereotypes by reinforcing them. In this way, the audience has the possibility to realise that often the individual judges others and reality according to received notions which favour processes of simplification rather than processes of mutual understanding.

If on one side, the act of stereotyping can give a sense of security since it makes the world look simple, a world in which all differences are clear-cut and easily identifiable, on the other Wideload demonstrates that a stereotype is a reduction of a complex reality into a simple, flat and fixed one. Therefore, those who rely on this kind of approach will only increase the distance between themselves and other realities. As a form of simplification, stereotypes tend to reproduce an oppositional consciousness which as such ultimately favours conflict and misunderstanding as proved by the stereotyped judgment the audience is tricked into making when they meet the Mexican working-class man. Wideload's monologue reminds us of the fact that relying on this kind of approach won't prove to be functional especially within a multicultural society in which highly diverse cultures live next to each other.

At the same time, it emerges how, in order to develop a different mentality which does not tend to produce stereotypes, a constant dialogue is necessary among different subjects but also within each individual. The solution then lies in the ability of developing a new practice in which the aim is no

longer that of producing final fixed judgments but rather that of relating with the other refusing any form of simplification and accepting that any form of knowledge of the other should be the result of a constant open-ended dialogue.

1.4 The autobiographical experience performed: Verdecchia's fight against displacement

While Wideload's deconstruction of stereotypes is useful to understand the simplifying processes that nationalism produces, Verdecchia's part is perhaps even more significant to the issue of the individual's condition of displacement and the consequent need to solve it. Like Wideload, also this character turns to the audience encouraging them to reach a higher level of engagement. While Wideload's target was primarily the stereotyping question, Verdecchia's discourse focuses on the very aspect of displacement and on the solutions that he has managed to elaborate as the result of his difficult existential path.

Verdecchia draws from his personal experience telling (and sharing) crucial episodes of his life. He talks of how he felt like an alien when, once he started attending school in Canada after having moved from Argentina, the teacher was unable to pronounce correctly his name thus automatically revealing his strangeness. "Gwillyou-ree-moo...Verdeek-cheea? I put my hand up. I am a minuscule boy with ungovernable black hair, antennae and gills where everyone else has a mouth"³². In this case, language represents the medium through which cultural identity is expressed and acknowledged within the community and for this reason the young kid tries to conceal his alien condition by anglicising his name saying: "you can call me Willy". As a result of the linguistic adaptation "the antennae and gills disappear"³³. In that occasion then, Verdecchia's strategy has been that of mimicking in order to remove his strangeness. This episode symbolizes how often integration is tried to be achieved through a process of assimilation: the external

³² Ibid. p. 33.

³³ Ibid. p. 33.

subject, in order to be truly accepted, needs to lose his 'stranger' cultural attributes and acquire those of the hosting society.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding his attempts, such assimilation process seems to fail, since the feeling of being alien continues to affect his life. Through Verdecchia's speech the audience learns that as a man who first of all is an immigrant, who has left his native place to relocate himself in a new, extraneous reality, physical displacement made him aware of the importance of belonging, of how belonging and identity are closely related. In his case, it was Argentina that remained the true home for years, the place which forged and from which spawned his identity. During these years, he conceives of Argentina as the primary and exclusive location in the formation of his own identity. Therefore, the author perceives a cultural reality set within a specific geographical place as the source for defining himself. The author's wish is of being able to link his own identity to one originary homeland, meaning that there is only one root from which he derives and in which, consequently, his entire self is encompassed.

Driven by such a strong belief, eventually he returns only to discover that Argentina is no longer his home. Instead of his expected homeland, it is unfamiliar, a land in which he is more of a stranger than a fully integrated component. Argentina could not quell the feeling of detachment that had accompanied his existence in Canada. Instead, the supposed homeland turns out to be a myth constructed through the years, a protective and reassuring image created by himself in order to preserve a sense of rootedness in which identity is inextricably tied in with place.

This experience, where the foundations of Verdecchia's identity are swept away from underneath him, marks a critical point in his development. He is left in a condition of despair: where can he locate himself properly? Where does his identity lie? Is he an Argentinian, Latin or Canadian? Which of such categories defines him? His identity is not fully encompassed by any of them, his self is fringed, not organic, it is divided between categories which are mutually-excluding. Is he more Latin or more Canadian? Can he be truly Argentinian, or truly Canadian? Canada is not perceived as home, as the place that can tell him who he is, but Argentina proved to fail such purpose as well. Verdecchia appears to be truly homeless, a person who

does not belong to either of the two national identities, as he says: “All sides of the border have claimed and rejected me”³⁴. None of the countries recognise him as a proper member of their culture, despite his efforts and attempts to reach that status.

As a consequence, the author declares: “I feel different. I feel wrong, out of place. I feel nowhere, not neither.”³⁵ Leaving one land, Argentina, for another one, Canada, seems to have irredeemably compromised his chances to build an organic identity: the geographical dislocation has been the starting point for his existential dislocation which seems to have become his only possible existential reality. Apparently, Verdecchia is without any possibility of reconciliation: the moving to Canada and his experience there have torn the essential connection with Argentina which, as his birth place, offered the best opportunity to belong and could have been the only location for constructing his own identity. For him, who is a hyphenated subject, displacement looks like an intrinsic, inalienable and irresolvable condition.

1.5 A constructive answer to displacement: the potentialities of a hybrid, trans-national identity

In such a context, the strength and value of Verdecchia’s response lies in the fact that he manages to elaborate a constructive answer, thus opening a new perspective into the problematic condition of displacement. The despair into which Verdecchia has fallen marks his lowest point, but it is through this experience, this lack of acceptable identity and thus belonging, that he begins to formulate the thought that will allow him to overcome his crisis.

The turning point is to be found in the fact that he accepts his existential condition thus implying that he basically stops trying to solve his displacement by adhering to an oppositional logic which will never let him reach any reconciliation.

As long as he thinks in oppositional terms, in order to define himself as Canadian or Argentinian, his identity will always be hyphenated, always scat-

³⁴ Ibid. p. 51.

³⁵ Ibid. p. 51.

tered among different irreconcilable categories. By declaring that he is “building a house on the border”³⁶ the author overcomes the limits inherent in that oppositional logic. He is not on one side or the other, he is on both sides and none of them at the same time. His displacement becomes his core-identity: the acceptance of this existential condition automatically dismantles the strength of the oppositional consciousness and logic which so far had regulated his approach towards himself and the world.

The ambivalence of his existence, instead of being rejected, is welcomed and redefined as a foundational condition. As soon as such approach is embraced, the clash between different contradictory elements vanishes. The author is neither Canadian or Argentinian or Latin, he is partly all of them at the same time. As he states in the very last part of the play, which is significantly entitled “Going Forward”: “I am an hyphenated person but I am not falling apart, I am putting together”³⁷. His status as an hyphenated subject becomes his strength when he accepts it as the foundation of his identity, as his identity-making location. The fact of being an hyphenated person is a problem when such condition is interpreted through a categorical opposition: in that case, the hyphen becomes the signal of defectiveness, of an intrinsic incompleteness.

However, Verdecchia demonstrates that according to the categories or the discourses used to define reality, this latter (and our relation with ourselves) changes consequently. Looking at the same condition with a different perspective produces a different perception of the condition itself. And this is exactly what happens in *Fronteras Americanas*: declaring that his house is now the border does not mean accepting passively an unsettling situation, but being able to think according to new categories which respond to a mentality that goes beyond a binary logic.

For Verdecchia, thinking through new categories means going beyond the concept of nationality to construct his own identity. In this way, primary identities are not reinforced since he does not try to solve his displacement by clinging to a specific identity source. This does not imply that the author

³⁶ Ibid. p. 78.

³⁷ Ibid. p. 78.

abandons the possibility of experiencing a sense of belonging; rather, belonging is constructed in a different way, by starting from a reconceptualization of identity itself.

Any form of totalizing identity is refused in favour of a way of being which is built through a constant dialogue between the internal dimension of the author and the external world. It is no longer the fact of having a bond to a specific place that defines identity but the every-day experience that slowly builds an always-evolving self. This idea is confirmed by a slide which appears during the monologue showing a quote from the artist Guillermo Gomez-Peña: “(...) The old binary models have been replaced by a border dialectic of ongoing flux. We now inhabit a social universe in constant motion, a moving cartography with a floating culture and a fluctuating sense of self”³⁸. The fixity of an identity created through the attachment to one single source is replaced by the fluidity of a constantly evolving identity moulded time by time through experience. Thus, Verdecchia’s condition as a diasporic subject eventually proves to have preserved him “from the illusion of a fixed identity and a prefabricated cultural role”³⁹.

What Verdecchia achieves is to produce, in Glissant’s words: ‘an identity as rhizome, an identity which no longer is formed by a unique root but is one root which encounters other roots’ “identità come rizoma (...), non più come radice unica ma come radice che si incontra con alter radici”⁴⁰. The rhizomic identity refuses and at the same time goes beyond the idea of single-rootedness in favour of an identity forged through the influence and the elaboration of the most heterogenic cultural elements. For Verdecchia, these elements are no longer to be rejected but willingly encompassed in the identity formation process. The phenomenon of hybridization then not only functions as the context in which the individual lives but becomes also the very basis from which identity develops.

As a consequence, the hybrid condition which so far has represented the origin and the cause of Verdecchia’s existential uneasiness emerges as a great resource, richer than the resources offered by the one-root perspective.

³⁸ Ibid. p. 70.

³⁹ Samir Dayal, “Diaspora and Double Consciousness”, *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, Vol. 29, No. 1. (Spring, 1996), p. 51.

⁴⁰ Edouard Glissant, *Poetica del Diverso*, p. 20.

The reason for this greater richness lies in the different dynamics triggered by these two opposite approaches: the one-root ideal implies the construction of totalizing identities which, being totalizing, are necessarily exclusionary identities since what is perceived as extraneous threatens the purity of that specific identity. Consequently, the range of potential factors that could shape the individual would always tend to be reduced. On the other hand, the rhizomic identity accepts the diversification of the realities that can enter and form the self and this depends on the fact that it is the aspect of relation, and not that of aprioristic exclusion that becomes fundamental.

The concept of relation, according to Glissant, implies an opening towards the other: what is perceived as other, as extraneous, is not rejected but can become part of one's very identity. Thus, the multiplicity of experiential and cultural elements that the subject encounters is no longer perceived as a menace against the stability of the identity dimension but is given a positive connotation in which such extraneous elements are actually allowed to enter the self and contribute in the shaping of the individual's self-identity. There is no exclusive and totalizing identity source but a series of different or even discrepant influences that converge in the internal dimension of the individual. This does not mean that the self is bound to become just an empty vessel destined to be filled with an appalling heterogeneity of inconsistent elements. It means that the individual itself will be involved in a constant work of mediation.

Inclusion then replaces aprioristic exclusion in the identity formation process and the dimension of relation itself is redefined since it is no longer just a means for building identity but to a certain extent, it becomes itself the 'locus of identity'. It could be argued that, in Glissant's conceptualization, the focus is shifted from the dimension of the individuality of the subject to the dimension of contact between the subject and the external world and such dimension becomes the actual location of identity. There is, in a certain sense, a movement towards the outside and the self is fundamentally redefined as relation and not as a solid and enclosed essence.

Therefore, contrary to the one-root identity, which excludes other potential identities to preserve its own uniqueness otherwise inevitably compromised, the rhizomic identity thrives through inclusion and mediation. The

one-root identity is the product of the binary logic which refuses any form of compromise in the name of a monolithic, homogeneous identity. The rhizomic identity is the result of a different logic, which is the one embraced by Verdecchia, in which the myth of the one-rootedness is replaced by the potentiality of the 'relation system'⁴¹. As a consequence, the feeling of belonging, which previously was supposed to originate from the attachment to an exclusive, specific reality, is now to be found in the 'relational approach'. To a certain extent, the idea of belonging is enlarged since such feeling now develops from the attachment to a wider range of identity sources.

Therefore, we can conclude that Verdecchia manages to solve his condition of displacement through a redefinition of the very concept of identity. Identity is no longer considered as a given, as the consequence of an a priori definition but the result of an every-day negotiation. Instead of fighting to attach his own identity to a totalizing and essentialising discourse, like the nationalistic one, the author manages to open himself to multiplicity: what shapes his personality is to be found in the relations he builds with the external world which are not fixed but ever-changing. His identity then is accepted and reconceptualised as an open-ended discourse and such condition is no longer perceived as a negative and threatening one but rather as a condition full of positive potential.

As a result, it becomes evident that the condition of displacement can be overcome through the development of a mentality that rather than negating its existence through the reinforcement of totalizing identities, manages to turn its complexity into a source for creating a more realistic and productive sense of identity.

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 21. The 'relation system' should be intended as that new 'mechanism'/'system of behaviour' in which identity is redefined as a relational one and consequently constructed through and within a constant contact with the other, be it other people or, in a wider sense, the external reality that surrounds the individual with all its heterogeneous elements. As such then the 'relation system' is opposed to that mentality that conceives and defines identity as a monolithic entity which spawns from one precise source. The myth of the unique root is then replaced by the (opposite) ideal of 'prismatic' identity symbolized precisely by the rhizome metaphor.

V. PROBLEMATIC ASPECTS OF HYBRIDIZATION AND TRANS-NATIONALITY: THE CASE OF V. S. NAIPAUL'S *HALF A LIFE AND MAGIC SEEDS*

Through the analysis of *Fronteras Americanas*, the attempt has been made to show how Guillermo Verdecchia manages to elaborate a constructive answer in relation to the question of displacement, thus implying that a multicultural globalised environment is not necessarily negative.

If the social and cultural mechanisms of a globalised society can destabilize the individual's identity, Verdecchia seems to prove that there exists the possibility of overcoming such problematic condition by accepting the plurality of cultural discourses that might become part of the individual's self-dimension. Thus, the author's diasporic experience allows him to acknowledge the validity of a trans-national discourse as a successful means to overcome the individual's sense of displacement. The pluralisation of potential identity locations is no longer considered a menace; on the contrary, it is re-defined as the source for the development of a richer form of identity.

On the other hand, the use of nationalistic ideologies for defining one's identity, together with a monolithic idea of the self are dismissed in favour of a trans-national/rhizomic identity developed through a constant mediation among the heterogeneity of cultural discourses that the individual encounters. Thus, in his case, the very idea of hybridization is charged with positive connotations.

If Verdecchia represents the example of a writer who believes in the possibility of developing such an open mentality, this is not the case with Naipaul whose work presents a much more sceptical position. By taking into consideration two of his latest novels, *Half a Life* and *Magic Seeds*, we can see a different perspective on globalization and the condition of individual displacement, which makes us wonder if the ideal of a rhizomic/trans-national/hybrid identity is really valuable and achievable. Does the individual really have the opportunity to live constructively within a globalised society without experiencing displacement? Since both novels seem to give a negative answer to these questions, exploring and including them in our dis-

cussion on today's globalised societies will fruitfully broaden our perspective.

1.1 A brief introduction to the novels

Willie Chandran is the protagonist of the two novels which narrate the story of his life. The first novel, *Half a Life*, encompasses the protagonist's experiences from his childhood to when he is forty; the second, *Magic Seeds*, starts exactly where the first stops and tells Willie's life story until he is around sixty years old.

Born in India from a Brahmin ascetic and a woman of lower caste, early in life Willie starts to feel unsatisfied within his native environment. After having attended a missionary school in India, thanks to his father's acquaintance with an influential person in England, Willie obtains a scholarship and, at the age of twenty, leaves India to study in London. Here, he joins the bohemian immigrant life of the late 1950's and also takes up a very short career as a writer, publishing one collection of short stories. When his about to finish college, he meets Ana, a girl of Portuguese origins who comes from an unspecified African colony. Willie marries the girl and goes to live with her in Africa where he spends eighteen years of his life before deciding to leave Ana and the African colony for Berlin in order to join his sister Sarojini, a documentarist and an activist with revolutionary political ideas.

After having spent six months in Germany, he is persuaded by his sister to join a guerrilla movement in India that would like to free the lower castes from the power of the richer landlords. Willie spends seven years living in the Indian jungle until deciding, together with another member of the guerrilla group, to escape from the movement and turn himself in to the police. While in jail, thanks to the intervention of his sister and an old English friend, Willie is given amnesty.

The narration ends with Willie going back to London after almost thirty years. Here, he is given hospitality by his friend Roger who also manages to find him a job for a magazine specialised in architecture.

1.2 Willie's identity and existential displacement

The impression that emerges from the early stage of the narration is that Willie's identity is highly problematic. He is constantly accompanied by a feeling of strangeness (towards other people and towards the places where he lives) that prevents him from experiencing a fulfilling sense of being and belonging. In this sense, his very name, Willie Somerset Chandran, symbolically expresses the character of Willie's existence as something truly hybrid and transnational. Willie is named Somerset, with all its connotations of Britishness, after an English writer his father admired. It is as if this mongrel Anglo-Indian name represented a sort of sign of what Willie's future life will be, a life devoid of any deep bond with any specific place and culture.

His difficulty of developing a strong sense of belonging becomes evident quite soon. When still a young boy in India, Willie, fascinated by his Canadian teachers, "began to long to go to Canada, where his teachers came from. He even began to think he might adopt their religion and become like them and travel the world teaching"⁴². Unsatisfied by his family environment, Willie starts to see Canada as an idealized land which could offer to him the possibility of a new beginning. Willie likes to imagine himself as Canadian thus suggesting that acquiring a new culture does not represent for him a negative or potentially frightening perspective. On the contrary, the idea of erasing his own identity in order to build a new one is unproblematically perceived as positive. What Willie longs for is to replace his identity with the Canadian one rather than enriching his own Indian identity through the knowledge of a new, different culture. Significantly, it is said that he would like to become like them: it is not simply a matter of being attracted towards a different, unknown country, but rather, it is the manifestation of the will to radically change one's identity. This is confirmed also by the fact that his desire to become Canadian is as strong as his direct knowledge of the Canadian culture is limited: Willie's desire to go to Canada then is based

⁴² Vidiadhar S. Naipaul, *Half a Life*, New York, Vintage International, 2001, p. 38.

on a fantasy that arguably reveals more about Willie's discontent with his own identity.

One among several episodes shows us Willie who, having to hand in an essay for school and allured by the ideal image he has of Canada, starts to write a story in which he pretends he is a Canadian boy with Canadian parents. By inspiring himself from some American comic books that he has found at school, Willie manages to create and talk about details of the life of this family that otherwise he would have never been able to know, let alone to report. Not only is he able to obtain such precious pieces of information but, when writing the story, he manages to sound in a certain sense authentic; it is as if the life he is describing were his own, part of his existence rather than just a made-up narration.

This is a paradigmatic episode which in a very early stage of the story subtly reveals certain aspects and mechanisms that would characterize the protagonist's adult life as well. On one side, as just noted above, the episode expresses Willie's difficulty to perceive himself as part of his native environment. On the other, what emerges is Willie's tendency and ability to adapt to new realities, to being able to capture and assimilate the fundamental aspects of a culture in order to reproduce them. In this way, Willie reshapes his identity on the basis of someone else's identity and culture, trying to make the newly assimilated cultural traits look as if they were his own. In this sense, the full marks with which his composition is awarded could represent a sort of symbolic anticipation of his future success in assimilating and reproducing cultural modes that do not belong to him.

At twenty Willie leaves India to study in London. For the first time in his life, Willie has the opportunity to engage himself with a foreign reality. His childhood escape fantasies are eventually replaced with a real situation. Nevertheless, once he comes in contact with this new environment, Willie does not really express a very different attitude from the one he had when he was a kid: the same idea of constructing his personality at his own will through the assimilation of elements that do not belong to him, is still present as a positive solution to his feeling of displacement. The fact of actually being in a new location does not really alter Willie's tendency to self-consciously re-shape his self-image. For this reason, not surprisingly, when

he is in London, Willie starts to think explicitly of “re-making himself”⁴³. He does so by reinventing the story of his family telling, for instance, that his mother came from an ancient Christian community.

Therefore, in a conscious way, Willie tries to literally build his own identity by himself, in order to create the image he wants others to have of him. Within his new shell Willie feels more confident and socializing seems to be easier. Ironically, as soon as he is experimenting with this new power his tutor tells him that “he seems to be settling in”⁴⁴. What seems to happen is that the more Willie actively manipulates his own image and conceals his authentic inner dimension, the more easily he seems to interrelate with others. The success of this strategy is confirmed by the fact that, during Willie’s time in London, but also in all the following experiences of his life, he always looks well-integrated within the community.

Yet by doing so, Willie ends up creating a fake identity, like the Canadian one he had created years before, an identity made of experiences, places and discourses that he has never personally encountered in his life. In this way, if on one side the easiness with which he is able to express traits that are not part of his ‘true’ identity allows him to be in control of his own self-image, on the other the distance between himself and other people is destined to constantly grow, since instead of sharing his personal, intimate dimension with them, Willie prefers to hide behind a self-constructed identity. It is as if Willie’s way of interrelating with others was based on a two-fold strategy: on one side, he never expresses his real thoughts, thus living in a condition of total closure towards the external world and on the other, as noted above, he relies on a constant manipulation of his external identity, thereby absorbing cultural and identity elements that he does not necessarily perceives as his own.

The problem with this behaviour is that it does not give Willie the possibility of developing any sense of true belonging: this is evident when he is about to finish college and, having not decided yet what to do next, he is suddenly struck by an unsettling urgency to understand what path he should take. Certainly, he does not want to return to India, a country in which he

⁴³Ibid. p. 58.

⁴⁴Ibid. p.58.

never felt at ease, but he does not want to stay in London either: the city is never mentioned as a possible permanent location for him. Despite the several years spent in London and the fact that he got integrated, there is no episode in which he shows to have developed any kind of bond with the place; even if there is not a complete rejection of the city, the only thing that emerges is that Willie does not foresee any future for himself in London. London, although not completely unknown, remains alien and extraneous to him; it is certainly not the place that could become “home”.

While the character ruminates about his unclear future, it becomes increasingly clear that such absence of perspectives derives from the fact that, during the years he has spent in London, he always put aside this question, letting the time flow and passively waiting for an answer to come: “all that he had now was an idea – and it was like a belief in magic – that one day something would happen, an illumination would come to him, and he would be taken by a set of events to the place he should go. What he had to do was to hold himself in readiness, to recognise the moment”⁴⁵. Such passivity, this sort of eternal waiting for an answer from the outside, accompanied by a total lack of the ability (or maybe the will) of actively planning his future choices will characterise much of Willie’s life.

Predictably, the answer from the outside does not come and eventually, not seeing any other alternative, Willie asks his girlfriend Ana to go and settle with her in Africa. While talking to her, Willie says: “you know I’ve nowhere else to go”⁴⁶. Such statement is quite revealing since not only does it confirm the fact the Willie never tried to think seriously about his future life, but it also expresses what mechanisms regulates Willie’s choices: the will to go to Africa is justified by the fact that there are not any real alternatives in his eyes. Therefore, although his final decision might show a great commitment, (Willie is leaving Europe in order to start a new life in another continent), the real motivation is rather a negative one: the lack of any authentic desire/possibility of the character to locate himself in a specific place.

⁴⁵Ibid. p. 114.

⁴⁶Ibid. p. 123.

As soon as he arrives in Africa, he would like to leave the place: “I am not staying here. I am leaving. I will spend a few nights here and then I will find some way of going away”⁴⁷. The arrival in the new country is not perceived as a positive moment, potentially charged with good expectations for the future, on the contrary, it is an unsettling moment, full of anxiety and lack of enthusiasm. Nevertheless, continuing to behave according to the habit that has accompanied him so far, he does not express his feelings, he does not externalize his true thoughts: what he does is “(...) acting reasonably and lucidly. Neither Ana nor anyone else would have known that there was anything wrong”⁴⁸. Willie’s refusal to share his thoughts inevitably puts him in a detached position, always distant from the other people who, apparently, look close to him. Such discrepancy and conflict within the character (the apparent external closeness to other people as opposed to his real internal deep detachment) marks his condition of loneliness since he is destined to be constantly isolated.

Inevitably, Africa does not become his home and the feeling of strangeness and detachment that he already knew in India and in London remains: the place where he now lives does not belong to him, it is not his house: “I felt very far away from everything I had known, a stranger in that white concrete house with all the strange old Portuguese colonial furniture, the unfamiliar old bathroom fittings”⁴⁹. His feeling of strangeness towards the house expresses also a more general sense of strangeness towards the environment in which he is living. This is confirmed by the fact that Willie, while talking with his sister about his life in Africa, says: “I always felt a stranger in the house”⁵⁰ thus revealing how such feeling never abandoned him during those years. At this point, considering also his previous experiences, it could be argued that Willie’s sense of strangeness is not due to the time that a person might need in order to become acquainted with a new place, it may be instead the sign of something deeper since Willie is never able to overcome such an unsettling feeling.

⁴⁷Ibid. p. 125.

⁴⁸Ibid. p. 125.

⁴⁹Ibid. p. 132.

⁵⁰Ibid. p. 141.

After eighteen years, a sudden incident breaks the dull rhythm of Willie's life: one day he slips on the marble steps in front of their colonial house and he injures his head. Suddenly, the pain he experiences awakens a sort of new awareness in him that leads him to decide to leave Ana. "The physical pain of my damaged body was like the other pain that had been with me for months, and, perhaps for years"⁵¹. The physical pain becomes the access to the awareness of a deeper sufferance: the fact that the life that he has been living so far does not belong to him. He therefore decides to say it to his wife:

I'm forty-one. I am tired of living your life. (...) when I asked you in London I was frightened. I had nowhere to go. They were going to throw me out of the college at the end of the year and I didn't know that I could do to keep afloat. But now the best part of my life has gone, and I've done nothing (...) I have been hiding for too long⁵².

On one side he confirms again how the decision to move to Africa was just a sort of makeshift but on the other, his condition of deep existential detachment clearly emerges when he says to his wife: "I'm tired of living your life"⁵³. For Willie, the eighteen years spent in Africa have been an attempt at assimilating not only a language, but also an alien culture. He tried to make that life become his own but ultimately such attempt failed and for this reason, the African colonial reality is bound to remain his wife's life and not his.

The alienated condition of Willie's existence in Africa is due to the fact that the character lives through a mimic approach: what he tries to do is to assimilate and reproduce his wife's culture. But the problematic aspect of this mechanism lies in the fact that ultimately Willie does not truly get possession of that culture, but rather acts *as if* that culture belonged to him. This means that all the cultural discourses which he reproduces are not really part of his identity; they are just a means to adapt, to merge with a specific environment. For this reason, when Willie is leaving his wife, he says that "[he

⁵¹Ibid. p. 211.

⁵²Ibid. p. 211.

⁵³Ibid. p. 211.

has] been hiding for too long”⁵⁴. Such metaphor expresses quite effectively the extent to which Willie perceives how his life (and consequently his identity) has not been an authentic one in Africa. The burden of imitating and duplicating someone else’s culture seems to have become unbearable, his life has been in a certain way, purpose-less and false, and apparently, the only possibility to regain control over his destiny lies in the fact of abandoning his wife (and his life) in Africa and starting a new one somewhere else. Again though, there is not any clear plan or desire of understanding where he should go and what he should, or would like to do. The only certainty is still a negative one: the necessity of leaving Africa, as before there had been the necessity of leaving India first and London then.

At the age of forty-one, Willie has lived a life which has brought him across three continents and experienced a wide range of different cultures and realities; nevertheless, in front of such plurality, the character feels superficial or shallow, rather than enriched. The variety of experiences, people and cultural discourses that he encountered did not help him in shaping a clear sense of identity and belonging, on the contrary, it seems that such a pluralisation of possibilities has only favoured a condition of alienation.

Willie’s departure from Africa marks the end of *Half a Life*. Throughout this first part then, Willie appears as an individual whose sense of displacement never leaves him. At the same time, paradoxically, thanks to his ability to mimic the various cultural environments he finds himself in, he is never explicitly rejected by the societies in which he lives. But this play does not help Willie to feel truly rooted anywhere, on the contrary, it only enlarges the distance between himself and the external world, condemning him, as the title suggests, to a half-life.

Nevertheless, at the end of this first novel, Willie seems to be no longer able to sustain this way of living; he seems to truly desire to make the effort of creating a life for himself. The passivity that has characterised his previous life, a passivity that made him live with the wrong conviction that whatever solution would have come from the outside seems to have been overcome. Being no longer a child, Willie has reached a mature age in which he

⁵⁴Ibid. p. 211.

seems to have identified and understood the problematic mechanisms that so far have regulated his approach towards himself and the world. His conviction of regaining control over his life and identity is linked to the realization of the necessity of abandoning a 'mimic life'. He seems to be aware of the fact that pretending to have assimilated a foreign culture will never give him any sense of true identity. This apparent epiphany and subsequent determination to reclaim his own life marks the end of *Half a Life* and the sequel, *Magic Seeds*, continues from exactly the same point.

Magic Seeds, the second novel, starts with Willie living in Berlin with his sister Sarojini. The new air of Berlin has been a great relief after the gloomy period in Africa, but soon we come to realise that all Willie's constructive purposes of taking control of his life are not destined to be fulfilled.

His visa is expiring soon and Willie, exactly as it happened in London years before, is forced to face the reality of thinking about what to do. But the only answer that he is able to give his sister is: "I don't see what I can do. I don't know where I can go (...) I was always someone on the outside. I still am. What can I do here in Berlin?"⁵⁵. Willie is still lost, his only active force being that of escaping from places and situations confiding every time in a new start. His sense of displacement is not diminished after the departure from Africa, and Berlin does not seem to be the city where he could finally settle.

His decision to leave Africa might have seemed as a signal of a rupture, as the point where he manages to change attitude primarily towards himself, yet when we rejoin him in Berlin, Willie remains concerned with the same questions. That Willie is still uncertain and confused suggests that his determination was just temporary and did not derive from a real, substantial change in his character personality. The fact that Willie has not gone through such a profound change, is also proved by his persistent refusal to share his personal thoughts, even with the sister. Moreover, the narrator explains that Willie refuses to reveal his true feelings to both other people as

⁵⁵Vidiadhar S. Naipaul, *Magic Seeds*, London, Picador, 2004, pp. 1-2.

well as to himself; thus, at this point of the narration, Willie's extreme difficulty in creating any form of authentic dialogue or form of communication becomes evident:

This habit of keeping things for himself had been with him since childhood, at home and at school; it had developed during his time in London, and had become an absolute part of his nature during the eighteen years he had spent in Africa, when he had had to hid so many obvious things from himself⁵⁶.

Willie's refusal to confront both himself and other people has become a deep rooted habit that is destined to further radicalise the character's isolation.

So, still searching for a stable point of reference, Willie soon becomes the victim of his sister's certainties: what allures Willie is that Sarojini seems to have a clear vision of the world that allows her to find always an answer for everything and to interpret reality with no difficulty. This is certainly true, but the reason that lies behind such unchallenged certainty is that Sarojini relies on a Manichean vision of the world: having a rather radical mentality, for her the world is fundamentally divided between oppressors and oppressed. The Western consumerist society is seen as a massive failure since it is considered as a system that thrives only on uneven political and economic power relations. Sarojini speaks of the existence of two worlds:

One world was ordered, settled, it wars fought. In this world without war or real danger people had been simplified. They looked at television and found their community; they ate and drank approved things; and they counted their money. In the other world people were more frantic. They were desperate to enter the simpler, ordered world. (...) the two world coexisted⁵⁷.

Such a view of contemporary reality does not allow for more complex or even only ambiguous situations, while at the same time problematically en-

⁵⁶Ibid. p. 5.

⁵⁷Ibid. p. 10.

compasses all human societies. Motivated by her radical ideology, Sarojini, together with her German partner Wolf, shoots documentaries to show the activity of various revolutionary groups all over the world. Her cause is that of giving a voice to those who are fighting for their freedom and right of emancipation. Willie, who on the contrary is living the distress of not having any specific ideology through which to interpret reality, is fascinated by his sister's approach, by the fact that "her world view was able to absorb everything"⁵⁸. For this reason, he begins "to enter her way of looking" since "there was a logic and order in everything she said"⁵⁹. What attracts Willie is exactly this idea of clarity and order, a worldview which is therefore neither confusing nor complex but, on the contrary, linear and understandable. And if, accordingly, the world is comprehensible, so is her perception of her own identity and locating herself in the world is no longer difficult.

All of a sudden, Willie thinks to have understood what his place in the world is: "it was clear in his own mind now to which world he belonged"⁶⁰. He rejects his previous life in London and Africa as an unauthentic life in which he did anything but hiding his true self both to others and to himself. All his previous desires and needs now seem to him to have been "false"⁶¹, as they were not part of himself but the product of an alienated condition. It is at this point that Sarojini starts telling him about an Indian guerrilla movement whose leader is a certain Kandapalli: according to Sarojini this revolutionary movement, which fights to emancipate the poor low-caste Indian villagers from the land owners' abuse of power, is part "of the same regenerative process in our world"⁶². Willie decides to join the movement and therefore leaves Berlin for India. As the narrator says: "A new kind of emotional life came to Willie"⁶³, the time spent in Berlin seems like a time of reconciliation and revelation, a time in which Willie eventually manages both to find his location in the world and to develop a different, new and more authentic way of relating with himself.

⁵⁸Ibid. p. 9.

⁵⁹Ibid. p. 9.

⁶⁰Ibid. p. 10.

⁶¹Ibid. p. 23.

⁶²Ibid. p. 12.

⁶³Ibid. p. 15.

Nevertheless, what the character fails to notice is that his choice to join the revolutionary movement is less his than his sister's. The revolutionary vision that he has just embraced did not belong to Willie but to Sarojini; it is she who believes that everybody has one's own war to fight and that therefore also Willie should find his own. Once again then, what Willie's is doing is living through someone else's identity and vision of the world. The clear-cut divisions that characterise Sarojini's worldview have probably given Willie a sense of security, the idea that, once embraced that logic, he would have enjoyed the assurance of knowing how to interpret reality. But, since such radical choice is not really his own, soon the same problems that he has been facing throughout his previous lives will come back.

The first signal of this imminent crisis is visible even before his arrival in India:

India began for him in the airport in Frankfurt, in the little pen where passengers for India were assembled. He studied the Indian passengers there (...). He saw India in everything they wore and did. He was full of his mission, full of the revolution in his soul, and he felt a great distance from them. But detail by detail the India he was observing (...) this India began to assault him, began to remind him of things he thought he had forgotten and put aside, things which his idea of mission had obliterated; and the distance he felt from his fellow passengers diminished. (...) He felt something like panic at the thought of India he was approaching. (...) He felt 'I thought of the two worlds, and I had a very clear idea of the world to which I belonged. But now, really, I wish I could go back a few hours and stand outside the Patrick Hellman shop in Berlin, or go to the oyster and champagne bar in the KDW⁶⁴.

Willie's enthusiasm about the cause he has just joined lasts a very short time, and as soon as he begins to see signs that remind him of the country he is about to go, he feels a clear sense of rejection. His commitment to the revolutionary movement is not sufficient to erase his sense of detachment from India. Contrary to other Indian passengers who, once in the Indian air-

⁶⁴Ibid. p. 26.

port “were already at home, already (...) with that authority that separated them from lesser local people”⁶⁵, the way he talks about and describes the place and its people reveals his feelings of alienation from his former home. Furthermore, exactly as it occurred in Africa, as soon as he arrives in India, his strongest feeling is a wish to leave, of going back to where he had come. Therefore, once again, his first reaction is represented by a sense of fear and rejection towards the new situation. All the previous certainties that he absorbed from his sister start to waver and to give space to Willie’s old sense of uneasiness and detachment.

However, despite his negative feelings and his desire to abandon the country, he does not leave and goes on with the plans, waiting to meet the person that should put him in contact with the guerrilla group. It is interesting to notice that, in order to cope with the situation, Willie starts to develop a mental approach, that he defines as his new form of yoga in which “every act and need was to be worked out again, reduced to what was most basic”⁶⁶. What Willie is doing by dedicating himself to such practise, is to narrow his attention to a series of limited aspects of his situation: if on one side this might seem positive, since it will help him facing the physical and psychological stress of the guerrillas life, on the other, in my opinion, it is the sign of a further mental closure that Willie consciously adopts to escape reality rather than facing it, thus deepening his alienated state of mind.

Eventually, he joins the guerrilla group and starts to live in the jungle, sometimes finding shelter in the small country villages, sharing his time exclusively with the other members of the movement. Through the description of the moment in which he meets them for the first time, we get to know Willie’s feelings towards his future comrades:

Willie lost himself in conjecture about the people around him. (...) They were all people in their late thirties or early forties, Willie’s age, and he wondered what weakness or failure had caused them in mid-

⁶⁵Ibid. p. 27.

⁶⁶Ibid. p. 43.

life to leave the outer world and to enter this strange chamber. (...) Among these people (...) he was a stranger⁶⁷.

As this passage reveals, Willie's typical distance from other people is still present; despite the fact that he is a member of a revolutionary group, something that would require a great personal commitment, also in this case, he is not really part of the group, he feels an outsider, he is not integrated at all. Therefore, even though the revolutionaries are quite different from the kind of people Willie has known before, (like the young bohemian immigrants in London or the Portuguese estate owners in Africa), Willie cannot find any way to identify with them. The common revolutionary cause is not sufficient to draw Willie closer to the other members. The condition of extraneousness towards other individuals and towards groups or communities does not leave Willie who, despite his attempts at locating himself in a specific situation, eventually finds himself unsecure, without any solid identity benchmark.

Not surprisingly, the motivation derived from the revolutionary cause keeps on weakening and to top it all, Willie discovers that the movement has split and he has ended up in the wrong faction, a faction that does not respond to Kandapalli's directions. Disconsolate, he writes to his sister: "I must tell you I feel I am lost. I don't know what cause I am serving, and why I am doing what I do. (...) I see only that I have put myself in other people's hands. (...) I am thinking of running away"⁶⁸. The lack of attachment towards the environment in which he is living now seems to be complete and the primary thought that crosses his mind is to "get away and make a fresh start"⁶⁹. Similarly to when he was in Africa and decided to leave the country, Willie's strongest desire is that of having the opportunity to start again, not to change his way of life but to start from scratch a new path, erasing the previous ones. At the same time, despite his deep distress, Willie manages to hide himself as he did before: none of his comrades suspects anything, on the contrary, he is considered to be a trustworthy mem-

⁶⁷Ibid. p. 52.

⁶⁸Ibid. pp. 66-67.

⁶⁹Ibid. p. 71.

ber. This happens because, as it already occurred in Willie's past life, he knows what others expect from him and he consequently creates the proper image to fulfil their expectations.

One day for instance, he is having a discussion with another member of the group, Bhoj Narayan, who is curious to know about Willie's previous life (he knows that he has been living abroad for many years) and motivations. And Willie does not do anything but adapting his answers in order to satisfy Bhoj's expectations: "That was why I came looking for you. I was unhappy where I was. I had a strong idea that *my place was in this world here*"⁷⁰ (emphasis mine). Although for a short period of time he tried to truly believe in the cause, Willie declares this while already thinking of leaving. In order to satisfy his comrade Willie lies; consequently, as if trapped in an eternal spiral in which everything is destined to return, also this time, despite his desire to run away, Willie still looks perfectly integrated.

Therefore, if more than once we saw the character going through what seemed to be a significant shift in his way of living and thinking, (we saw that when he left Africa and also when he joined the guerrillas) it has been always an illusion, a false hope since Willie is still prey to the same kind of mechanisms or mental processes that have characterised his entire life. Even the radical choice of joining the Indian guerrilla movement did not give to him any real purpose, it did not give him that clear vision of the world through which he hoped to create a genuine sense of identity; on the contrary it proved to be just a long nightmare.

Consequently, through Willie's negative experience, the novel stresses how any kind of radical ideology is actually the source of a false sense of security. Willie hoped to find his own place by embracing the guerrilla's cause but the only thing he achieves is to realize, as later he will explain to Sarojini, that "that war was not yours or mine and it had nothing to do with the village people we said we were fighting for. We talked about their oppression, but we were exploiting them all the time. Our ideas and worlds

⁷⁰Ibid. p. 59.

were more important than their lives and their ambitions for themselves”⁷¹. He understands that the commitment he expressed was not really towards the cause; the real motivations were of a selfish nature since the cause was embraced just to satisfy the need of placing himself in the world and not for truly helping the Indian villagers which again are described as a completely alien category of people.

But before realising that, Willie will spend many years in the jungle, losing little by little even the sense of time; his life thus becoming more and more confusing and shapeless.

It was a strange time for Willie, a step down into yet another kind of life: patternless labour, (...) without solitude or companionship, without news of the outside world, (...) with nothing to anchor himself to. In the beginning he had tried to hold to his idea of time, his idea of the thread of his life, in his old way, counting the beds he had slept in since he was born. (...) But that counting of beds had become harder and harder with the undifferentiated days of marching, the villages almost all the same. (...) He gave it up. It was like shedding a piece of himself⁷².

The counting of the beds bears a strong symbolic value since it represents Willie’s attempt to give a sort of meaning to his life, to being able to see his life, to remember and understand his experiences. Remembering the number of beds in which he has slept is his way of anchoring himself to something stable, of being able to retrace his life and therefore having an idea of what it was, or is. The progressive difficulty for him to keep up with the counting reveals how his life is becoming more and more confusing and how he is also losing any form of control over his existence. His life has become blurred and his self seems to be bound to become increasingly more fragmented, shattered among all the experiences, cultures, languages and situations that he has come in contact with but that have not merged together to form an integrated self. If so far, at least remembering all the beds in which he slept was a means to preserve a shape of his own existence, now, even

⁷¹Ibid. p. 167.

⁷²Ibid. pp. 108-109.

that possibility seems to have gone. Willie's capitulation in counting the beds then becomes the sign of the irreversibility of Willie's destiny, bound to move only towards a further and deeper sense of displacement.

At this point, after years of purposeless and risky life, here, lost in the jungle, Willie realises that he is losing also himself, and therefore the only purpose becomes that of surviving. "I've forgotten myself. Now I'm truly lost. In every way. I don't know what lies ahead or behind. My only cause now is to survive, to get out of this"⁷³. Eventually, together with another deserter of the movement he escapes and he gives himself up to the police: for his involvement with the revolutionary actions he is given a ten-year sentence.

A new existence starts again for Willie and soon he becomes acquainted with the new place: "he settled into his new life, as he had settled into the many other lives that had claimed him at various times"⁷⁴. Willie has become an adaptable being, always able to fit in the most disparate circumstances but never able to be really part of them. His adaptability is not the sign of the fact that he feels at home everywhere; rather it is just a functional adaptability, one that does not lead Willie towards any true sense of belonging.

However, Willie will not spend much time in jail: thanks to the intervention of his sister Sarojini and his friend Roger, a lawyer, whom Willie met when he was in London, after six months Willie is free and again bound for London. His return to London signs the last stage of Willie's peregrinations around the world, or, at least, the last one we know of.

Once arrived, after almost thirty years Willie meets his friend Roger who gives him hospitality in his house in St. John's Wood. Here, the image of the bed returns again as a metaphor for describing Willie's condition:

I have never slept in a room of my own. Never at home in India, when I was a boy. Never here in London. Never in Africa. I lived in somebody else's house always, and slept in somebody else's bed. In the

⁷³Ibid. p. 125.

⁷⁴Ibid. p. 153.

forest of course there were no rooms, and then the jail was the jail.

Will I ever sleep in a room of my own?⁷⁵

Willie's realization that he has never owned a home, a place for himself, becomes a revelation of his lack of rootedness: his life has been not only a wandering one, but also a life lived borrowing someone else's places and lives. This, for instance, has been particularly evident in Africa, where he went to live to his wife's house and where for eighteen years he never even worked but was just Ana's husband. Through the narration, the feeling that we get is that Willie for all his life tended to attach himself to the most disparate situations looking as much assimilated as possible without ever building anything by himself: all his choices, all his experiences had been always the result of an adaptation process coupled with a deep refusal of a true personal commitment. The final outcome is that of a life that does not belong to him, in the same way that all the beds he slept in were not his own. Through such metaphor then, Willie's sense of estrangement towards his own existence clearly emerges as the condition that has characterised his entire life.

But such awareness does not trigger in the character any particular reaction: Willie continues to live always in a state of indolence, feeling unsatisfied with his life but without actively doing anything to improve his situation. When the narration finishes, we find Willie still living in Roger's house and working for a magazine specialised in architecture, a job that was given to him thanks to Roger's acquaintances. The only future perspective that Willie sees is "to do something in the architecture line"⁷⁶. Once more then, what Willie, now fifty years old, thinks of doing is to start again from scratch, this time by trying to become an architect.

The final impression we are left with is that of a character whose life and identity will be always incomplete: the variety of experiences that Willie has lived will never coalesce to form a proper identity. Such diversified experiences appear instead as a series of pieces of life that will remain separated and will not contribute in shaping a solid identity. Willie's only possible future then seems to be that of an alienated existence where he becomes a

⁷⁵Ibid. p. 185.

⁷⁶Ibid. p. 284.

stranger even to himself: “what his essence was he still didn’t know, though he had lived so long in the world”⁷⁷.

In any case, Willie is not the only character in the novel to live a troubled and confused existence. The apparent impossibility of living a fulfilling life involves also other characters including his sister Sarojini.

1.3 The myth of the one-root identity: the case of Willie’s sister Sarojini

At first sight Sarojini might seem quite different from her brother; if Willie for most of the time feels lost and insecure about his way of being in the world, Sarojini instead looks far more certain about her own identity. However, ultimately, she also represents an example of alienated life.

Her existential self-confidence seems to derive from the fact that she has found a sense in life by becoming a political documentarist. Therefore, her ideological commitment becomes also the lens through which she interprets the world. Sustained by a solid revolutionary ideology, to her eyes the world is relatively simple to understand: there are those who have the power and exert it to protect their privileges and those who are unjustly oppressed. Nevertheless, the problematic nature of Sarojini’s approach to life does not depend on her political commitment per se, but rather on the fact that she interprets the world exclusively in those terms. Consequently, the negative aspect is to be found in Sarojini’s straightforward and extremist attitude and therefore in the fact that her views tend to simplify the world rather than focusing on and exploring its complexity.

Initially, and especially in front of Willie, her Manichean view seems to guarantee her a firm position in the world; not only does she seem to know exactly who she is, but also how the world works, thus appearing completely freed of all the insecurities and anxieties that afflict Willie: “though her talk never ceased to be about injustice and cruelty and the need for revolution, though she played easily with tableaux of blood and bones in five

⁷⁷Ibid. p. 186.

continents, she was strangely serene”⁷⁸. Her serenity is determined by the certainty deriving from an ideological (and idealized) worldview in which everything can be easily encompassed and classified. It is such ideological strength that both surprises and attracts Willie. It is the desire to live with the same certainty as to how understand things and define oneself that brings Willie to accept Sarojini’s suggestion to join the Indian guerrillas.

Nevertheless, even if apparently Sarojini is not exposed to the insecurities that characterise Willie’s condition, she is not a positive character. The value and credibility of her radical commitment is immediately deflated by the fact the she lives in Berlin under state aid thus depending completely on the very society that she criticizes. Furthermore, her fundamentalism is as strong as it is temporary since after their father’s death, she returns to India to continue her father’s activity in the ashram as a sort of spiritual religious guide. But soon, realizing that the role she has adopted is not what she was imagining, she leaves the ashram to return in Berlin.

Like Willie then, also Sarojini jumps from one life to another but without really finding her own place. Just like her brother, Sarojini does not have any real stability, she lives in different parts of the world but ultimately never looks truly integrated in any; furthermore, the extremism on which she relies does not seem to be constructive; on the contrary, it shows how such a mentality only narrows a person’s view of the world, thus becoming a false source of safety.

Thus, Sarojini’s excessive confidence in her radical worldview, together with the consequent lack of credibility in relation to her commitment might constitute a critique towards any form of blind adherence to totalizing ideologies, since they do not prove to be of any use either in terms of providing any help to the world or in giving the individual a framework through which to positively interpret reality. The character of Sarojini functions as an example of those individuals that decide to rely on a strongly ideological approach to define both reality and themselves. At the same time, it is shown how such an approach is destined to fail since Sarojini herself at some point admits: “I am not too happy with what I have done, though everything was

⁷⁸Ibid. p. 8.

always done with the best of intentions. It is awful to say, but I believe I have sent many people to their doom in many countries”⁷⁹.

Therefore, Sarojini’s failure puts her in the same position as Willie. They are both destined to an uprooted life, without any original and specific culture or place that could become their true and stable identity location. However, Dooley’s review of the novel argues that “although the future is as uncertain at the end of this novel as it was at the end of *Half a Life*, there is nevertheless a suggestion that some progress has been made”⁸⁰. The progress Dooley refers to, in my opinion, is hard to identify: at the end of *Magic Seeds* Willie, together with his sister, might appear wiser in a certain sense, more aware of their condition, but there is no signal for any possible improvement. Nothing makes the reader suppose that a possible positive evolution is or will soon be in act: neither Willie’s purposeless life and estrangement, nor the disappointing life of the other characters involved in the story allow us to hope. On the contrary, it seems that, despite the characters’ realizations, their unfulfilling and displaced life is not going to change.

1.4 Naipaul’s scepticism: the impossibility of overcoming displacement

Naipaul’s novels might be considered as a critique of globalization conceived as a multitude of processes whose dynamics and mechanisms ultimately favour displacement, rootlessness and alienation. The globalised environment in which Willie Chandran and the other characters live, is that of a reality where mobility has become a common condition: the characters, and the protagonist in particular, are no longer tied to one single place for all their life but have the possibility to relocate themselves at will thus engaging themselves with the most disparate cultures and mentalities. For instance, throughout his life, Willie comes into contact with a wide range of different cultural perspectives: from the ascetic ideals of his father to the western Christian culture of his Canadian teacher and from the reality of the

⁷⁹Ibid. p. 159.

⁸⁰Gillian Dooley, *Naipaul Man and Writer*, Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 2006, p. 134.

young immigrants in London to Sarojini's strong political activism and the revolutionary ideology of the Indian guerrillas.

In this respect, Willie and Sarojini both constitute examples of trans-national identities since their entire life is connected to a multiplicity of realities and cultures; they are "subjects (...) who are without allegiance to a specific culture, and who are not bound to any particular society/community"⁸¹. Willie's existence in particular is characterised by a continuous move from one place to another, which takes him to three different continents each one of them with its own specific social, economic and cultural situation.

By considering the kind of lives (Willie's in particular) that are portrayed in the novels, we can infer that Naipaul sees such trans-national or hybrid identities as a failure: the multiplicity of available cultural discourses that might shape Willie's identity seems to be problematic since it only brings him into a profound state of alienation. Willie is never able to negotiate and relate with all the different cultural sources and ends up living a false life where he simply assimilates and reproduces cultural discourses without them really becoming part of his own self. In this way, Willie's life turns out to be a sort of eternal play, where he looks integrated but remains completely estranged from any kind of cultural environment, including his native one. Consequently, for him, the idea of home can exist only in a corrupted way, only as a simulation and not as a real condition. What he is left with is just the ability of pretending to be anchored to a specific reality: "It's the only thing I have worked at all my life, not being at home anywhere, but looking at home"⁸². His inability to identify himself with either place, cause or family puts him in a condition of deep isolation where he is inevitably detached from everything and everybody.

Therefore, for Willie, living in a globalised context means being completely uprooted in any circumstance; his life is reduced to a phantasmagoria, a confusing and meaningless existence where he feels irreparably fragmented. By allowing so many different identities to enter himself, Willie has

⁸¹Anna Izabela Cichon, "Identity Trajectories in V.S. Naipaul", in *A Fluid Sense of Self: The Politics of Transnational Identity*, ed.s Shultermandl S. and Toplu S., Berlin, LIT VERLAG, 2010, p. 48.

⁸²Ibid. p. 74.

become a “floater”⁸³, thus losing the possibility of constructing a ‘whole identity’. For this reason, Willie realizes “with the deepest kind of ache that there was no true place in the world for him”⁸⁴.

It might be argued that the cause for Willie’s meaningless existence is not due to him (to his choices) but rather to the globalised society that as such, has triggered social, economic and cultural mechanisms that ultimately deprive the individual of the possibility of locating himself within this kind of society. In this case then, the responsibility for such failure lies on society and not on the single individual. This interpretation is possibly confirmed by the fact that, in the novels no country plays a positive role as a place in which the individual is able to construct an identity. By employing a colonial categorization of space, what emerges is that in a globalised context, both the ‘margins’, represented in this case by India and Africa, and the ‘centre’, Europe, equally fail to provide acceptable cultural frames of reference. None of the values enclosed within those societies seem to be valuable enough to guarantee a firm position to the individual.

While Bhabha⁸⁵ describes the positive potentialities of globalization and hybridization, Naipaul, by contrast, seems to remain particularly sceptical: hybridization in his case represents the ideal condition for producing alienation rather than a possibility for developing richer cultural discourses and identities. The pluralisation of discourses available to a single individual is seen as a menace rather than a resource. Thus, also the potentialities which, according to Glissant, are enclosed within a ‘polyrooted rhizomic identity’ are completely denied by Naipaul’s perspective. The fact of changing location and being exposed to a multiplicity of cultural discourses will not lead, as Glissant suggests, to the possibility of having more roots, more locations to which the individual is attached and through which he can build his own identity; on the contrary, it will lead only to a final impossibility of belonging anywhere, exactly as it happens in the case of Willie. Consequently, the idea of having a fluid self is seen as the main cause for developing a sense of displacement that is impossible to overcome.

⁸³Ibid. p. 156.

⁸⁴Ibid. p. 238.

⁸⁵ See Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.

What emerges is a deep “scepticism about the possibility of positive self-identification with trans-national concerns”⁸⁶. Willie Chandran was born as an Indian and lives part of his life in Europe and Africa but ultimately what becomes clear is that, instead of developing an identity which is a sublimation of all these parts, he is neither Indian nor African or European. The idea of doubleness, or in a wider sense, the idea of having multiple identities and affiliations, is considered to be problematic and thus in the novels, the very idea of hybridity “is negatively marked and leads the protagonists to displacement in all the environments, to cultural schizophrenia”⁸⁷. What Willie represents then is an example of failed hybridization. The reader is left with a narration that seems to show all the possible negative outcomes of a trans-national existence lived in a globalised context: Willie and his sister might be considered as two victims of a society that is no longer able to give individuals a firm location in the world and on the contrary just leave them in front of an infinite series of possibilities thus condemning them to a displaced life.

At the same time, there are some aspects in the way the main character is developed that might put into question the condition of Willie as the victim of a situation he cannot control. The first ambiguous aspect that emerges more than once throughout the novels is Willie’s passivity and total refusal to take any responsibility for his life. Instead of attempting to improve his situation, Willie is always waiting for a solution from outside:

When I went to Africa I remember that on the first day I looked out of the bathroom window and saw everything outside through a rusty screen. I never wanted to stay. I thought that something was going to happen, that I would never unpack. Yet I stayed for eighteen years. And it was like that when I joined the guerrillas. The first night in the teak forest. It was too unreal. I wasn’t going to stay. *Something was going to happen and I was going to be liberated.* But nothing happened, and I stayed seven years⁸⁸ (emphasis mine).

⁸⁶Cichon, “Identity Trajectories”, cit., p. 53.

⁸⁷Ibid.p. 48.

⁸⁸Naipaul, *Magic Seeds*, p. 178.

This deep-rooted passivity is coupled with Willie's refusal of any real commitment and respect towards other people; for instance, he is at ease in having affairs with his friend's partners, and moreover, after leaving Ana in Africa he never tries to contact her because, as he says: "I wanted to forget. I wanted to live my new life"⁸⁹. Willie's approach towards his life is of making "a clean start"⁹⁰ each time he changes location, erasing his past to build his future. But this attitude means that "Willie renounces his duties and obligations and at moments of crisis he runs away with the hope that in new places his life will be easier and problems will solve themselves"⁹¹.

It is interesting to notice that the character himself, aware of his problematic condition, never really blames his choices or behaviours; rather, he blames his destiny thinking that he "was born at the wrong time"⁹². It might be argued that Willie's passivity and irresponsibility confirms the author's will to portray a character whose failed life is due to the particular negative conditions of a globalised society that did not give him the possibility of evolving in any other way. As a result, the trans-national identity that he develops can be only a negative one, an identity which "relies on his rejection of commitments, which, eventually, leads to his utter uprooting"⁹³. Such identity might seem as the paradigmatic example of the kind of identity that individuals are destined to develop if located in a globalised environment.

Nevertheless, despite the difficult context in which Willie is located, in my opinion the reader is given the feeling that, at least part of his unfortunate condition, is due more to Willie's own choices rather than his unfair destiny. His radical passivity and lack of moral commitment seems to be more the result of a free choice and not the manifestation of a behaviour produced by a specific social and cultural context (in this case represented by globalisation). Consequently, this form of negative trans-national identity that Willie represents maybe is not an inevitable outcome for all those who live in a globalised world. Maybe, the individual still has some margin for

⁸⁹Ibid. p. 187.

⁹⁰Ibid. p. 24.

⁹¹Cichon, "Identity Trajectories", cit., p. 54.

⁹²Naipaul, *Magic Seeds*, p. 285.

⁹³Cichon, "Identity Trajectories", cit., p. 54.

shaping his own identity and life. Therefore, the ambiguity lies in the fact that on one side the author's aim seems to be that of criticizing an environment which condemns individuals to an alienated life, while on the other, we might blame Willie's behaviour for his failed existence. In any case, despite such ambiguity about the character, the author's distrust towards a multicultural globalised environment remains evident since throughout the two novels, such context is never portrayed positively.

However, reaching a fuller understanding of Willie is not an easy task. This difficulty in comprehending the character is also a consequence of the fact that in the novels, *Magic Seeds* in particular, the exposition of the contents, the general stylistic tone and the plot itself are particularly challenging.

One of the first aspects that strongly emerge throughout the narration is the evident improbability of "characterisation and event"⁹⁴: none of the characters' personality and none of their actions can be considered as reasonably realistic. Although set within a supposedly realistic frame, there is no credibility as to what happens to the characters, first of all Willie. For instance, his choice to join the guerrilla movement just because he is allured by Sarojini's discourses is not justifiable, it is improbable and excessive. It is not the fact per se which is unacceptable (it might happen that a brother is eventually convinced by the sister to join a cause); it is the author that makes it looking improbable by not developing Willie's internal dimension, thus depriving the reader of the possibility of following Willie in his interior path that eventually brings him to accept Sarojini's suggestion. Despite the fact that the author gives some explanations as to why Willie decides to go back to India, the problem is that such explanations sound more like the narrator's explanations and not the character's.

Consequently, the general impression the reader gets is that the characters look underdeveloped; they do not have their own autonomy but are "moved" by the narrator that forces them to go through improbable situations and to react in improbable ways thus generating a sort of "plotless nar-

⁹⁴Bruce King, "Late Naipaul", *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, Vol. 42, No. 2, (November 2006) p. 226.

native”⁹⁵. In this way though, to involve the reader and make him empathize with Willie’s (or the other character’s) condition becomes rather problematic: “The negligently crafted plot, combined with that looming voice, undercuts any deep involvement on the reader in Willie’s failure to determine his own character, and makes him a considerably less interesting one to watch than many earlier Naipaul’s protagonists”⁹⁶.

Also the dialogues and the very thoughts of the characters appear unnatural and sometimes not really plausible in relation to the situation which is portrayed with the consequence that “characters and the narrator sound alike”⁹⁷. This is particularly evident at the very end of the novel when Willie, after all the experiences he has gone through, reaches the conclusion that “it is wrong to have an ideal view of the world”⁹⁸. Such realization may represent the only real achievement in Willie’s life (and the only positive message within the novel), since he understands that the attachment to any ideological perspective that tries to define the entire reality in a totalizing way, cannot be a positive solution to avoid displacement. Therefore, the critique against any fundamentalism, already displayed through Sarojini’s extremism, seems to be reconfirmed by Willie’s final awareness.

Nevertheless, such potential constructive conclusion does not trigger any further positive development in the story, (symbolized by the fact that Willie does not share his thought, deciding not to be open with Sarojini) and therefore, after an entire life of displacement and alienation, Willie is left only with a negative wisdom, a wisdom that will not prove to be functional in putting an end to his uprooted existence. Moreover, the fact that, as noted above, such conclusion seems to have been attached to the character by the narrator weakens this potentially constructive message, since it sounds artificial. Consequently, some doubts arise about the author’s position regarding Willie’s realization of the negative nature of ideologies. Does the author believe in Willie’s conclusion? According to Dooley “it is unlikely that

⁹⁵Michael Dirda, “Magic Seeds”, *Washington Post*, December 19, 2004, p. BW15. (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A6311-2004Dec16.html> Accessed: 25/07/2012).

⁹⁶Thomas Meaney, “Exile’s Return”, *Commentary*, (March, 2005), p. 82.

⁹⁷King, “Late Naipaul”, *cit.*, p. 226.

⁹⁸Naipaul, *Magic Seeds*, p. 294.

Naipaul is now repudiating the lesson he has spent so many years advocating, so perhaps this is another example of Willie's short-sightedness"⁹⁹. In any case, the ambiguity remains and the reader has to solve the question by himself.

There are also other stylistic aspects whose purpose remains uncertain. If the improbability of certain situations might be interpreted as the author's will to exacerbate reality in order to stress its negative aspects, similarly, the fact that the characters look in a certain sense undeveloped, might be considered as a choice done on purpose in order to symbolize how the globalised context prevents the characters from developing. Thus, their lack of depth would reflect their forced state of alienation. Nevertheless, this interpretation does not sound convincing especially because, as it has been argued above, it is difficult to consider Willie only as a victim of a situation. Therefore, the underdevelopment of the character does not seem to reflect his condition as a victim of society; rather, it looks like a purely stylistic choice. In any case, what emerges is a certain ambiguity in relation to what the author wanted exactly to convey. What purpose does the underdevelopment of the characters serve? What is the purpose of certain ridiculous situations? In the author's eyes is Willie responsible for his failures or is he just a victim? The reader is left alone in the attempt of answering such questions; similarly he is left to himself to deal with a prose that appears to be "flat" with a "deadened tone" that (again) "distances rather than involves"¹⁰⁰. For these reasons, maybe too much is expected from the reader and, as a consequence, the contents expressed within the novel, instead of being strengthened through the style of narration they tend to be weakened.

Anyway, apart from such ambiguities, what seems to remain certain, is Naipaul's will to negate the values of trans-nationality and hybridization thus dismantling the idea that globalization and hybridization processes might be considered as positive phenomena.

⁹⁹Dooley, *Naipaul*, p. 134.

¹⁰⁰Dirda, "Magic Seeds", cit., p. BW15.

Conclusion

The main focus of this dissertation has been the condition of displacement experienced by the contemporary individual within a globalised context and the relative reactions and possible solutions to overcome such problematic state.

Globalization has been defined as a hybridization process in which the level of cultural, economic and social interrelations becomes increasingly higher. As a consequence, “the speed and intensity with which both material and ideological elements now circulate across national boundaries have created a new order of uncertainty in social life”¹. The pluralisation and fragmentation of cultural discourses has developed this insecurity due to the fact that the individual is no longer able to locate himself within stable cultural frames of reference. Such sense of uncertainty does not affect exclusively those people who are physically dislocated and are thus forced to cope with a new, different culture, but it has also become part of the experience of ‘the native’. The individuals “at the junction of complex relational networks, (...) are in danger (...) of being lacerated by too many exchanges and too many desires”². Displacement thus becomes a common condition for the subject, who is overwhelmed by such extensive multiplicity of discourses and possibilities. The very sense of having a clear identity weakens and consequently “we search for permanent anchors”³.

As we have seen, one major reaction against this sense of instability is represented by the attempt to reinforce primary identities like the national one. The essentialist discourse of nationalistic ideologies seems to provide the security the individual is seeking since through it identity is unequivocally defined and circumscribed within clear boundaries. Its oppositional

¹ Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers: an Essay on the Geography of Anger*, United States, Duke University Press, 2006, p. 5.

² Alberto Melucci, “Identity and Difference in a Globalized World”, in *Debating Cultural Hybridity, Multi-cultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism*, ed.s Werbner P. and T. Modood, London-New Jersey, ZED BOOKS, 1997, p. 66.

³ *Ibid.* p. 62.

and exclusive approach relies, as Glissant puts it, on “the deep-rooted conviction that the identity of one being is valid and recognisable only if it excludes the identity of every other being”⁴. This means that identity is conceived as an essence, a stable entity, defined by its opposition to other clear identities. In this sense, also stereotyping plays a key role as a practice through which reality is simplified and solidified to favour the production of an identity in the form of a continuity that does not change through time and for this reason looks reassuring. Thus, the reinforcement of primary identities through the attachment to these kinds of ideologies reflects the individual’s will to “attach [himself] to a stable nucleus in a desperate attempt to reconstitute an essence”⁵. In other words, to the question ‘who am I?’ the nationalistic discourse appears to offer a straight answer.

In contrast, it has been argued that despite this straight answer, the nature of totalising, oppositional ideologies is problematic. The desire to produce an unchallenged understanding of reality is destined to be frustrated, since the more the nationalistic discourse defines reality in binary terms, the greater the ambiguity, as there will always be elements that will not accept categorisation according to the nationalistic criteria. Thus, if on first sight the nationalistic discourse might seem an efficient means to overcome displacement, ultimately it looks unconvincing. Not only does its oppositional logic tends to favour contrast rather than dialogue between different communities, but it also does not allow the individual to negotiate those transnational elements that might be already part of his/her identity. As a consequence, the tendency of retreating into the dimension of national identity is seen more as a fearful reaction against the destabilizing effect of the globalization forces than an effective and constructive means to solve the condition of individual displacement. Therefore, to answer the questions set at the beginning of the discussion, nationalism does not seem to be a positive ideology for shaping identity within a globalised context. Yet simultaneously, it does not seem destined to be easily superseded. The very phenomenon of the reinforcement of national affiliations demonstrates that the transnational dynamics favoured by globalization do not necessarily imply that

⁴ Édouard Glissant, *Poetica del Diverso*, p. 14.

⁵ Melucci, “Identity and Difference”, cit., p. 65.

the concept of national identity is bound to a rapid disappearance. Moreover, within such circumstances, nationalistic discourses seem to express connotations that tend to become increasingly essentialist and divisive. If then, we consider Appadurai's argument according to which "the materials for a post-national imaginary must be around us already"⁶, we must also remember that such imaginary maybe is not so deeply consolidated yet: it is never guaranteed, since it must always contest with fear and essentialist discourses and identities. Thus, despite the fact that our society is undoubtedly expressing trans-national or even post-national traits at many levels, this does not mean that the same is necessarily true for identity formation processes.

If on one side, the insecurity of the contemporary individual within a globalised reality can favour a more radicalised attachment to already existing identities, on the other there is also the risk of just getting lost. This is the situation portrayed by Naipaul through the representation of Willie Chandran's life. In that case, we are in front of a subject who is truly trans-national in the sense that he does not have any strong or precise national affiliation. Nevertheless, such transcultural identity "is an intricate and problematic autoformation project that is not free of faults"⁷. Willie's transnationality is not synonym with a positive existential condition but rather with an uprooted existence: the pluralisation of cultural discourses and potential identity benchmarks that characterises Willie's life produces only a sense of disorientation and detachment. It is true that the character does not resort either to the assuring cosiness of a national identity or to the certainties of fundamentalist ideologies, but this does not allow him to erase his deep sense of alienation. In Naipaul's novels, the globalised context emerges as a highly problematic reality in which the individual is faced with an almost impossible task: with the collapse of stable cultural references together with their accelerated hybridization, the possibility of firmly locating oneself appears to be fatally compromised. Thus, the contemporary globalised context is perceived to be a reality devoid of any positive potential in

⁶ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, p. 21.

⁷ Cichon, "Identity Trajectories", cit., p. 49.

which the individual is doomed to live in a perpetual condition of existential displacement, without any deep-rooted bonds.

But “if the experience of displacement has become the paradoxical point for understanding the parameters of belonging in the modern world, then this would entail a challenge to our conceptual framework for understanding identity and culture”⁸. What this implies, is that if displacement has become an almost basic (and critical) condition of contemporary life, such a condition also offers the chance for producing new discourses in which the very concepts of identity and culture can be rethought. This is exactly what happens in the case of Verdecchia: by taking into consideration his work, it appears that it is possible to overcome both the negativity of nationalistic ideologies and the scepticism of Naipaul’s perspective.

Firstly, Verdecchia’s border logic allows him to go beyond the dualistic and exclusionary thought of the nationalistic approach. In his case, any essentialist claim is dismissed in favour of a logic that conceives hybridization not only as a basic condition of reality but also as a resource to create a new form of identity. This form of identity is no longer conceived as an “essential nucleus or a (...) continuity”⁹ but rather as a process. The idea of a fixed, organic selfhood is rejected in favour of an identity which is shaped and constructed through a constant dialogue between the subject and the external reality. To declare that his home is the border entails that the individual’s location in the world is not defined once and for all, but needs to be constantly discussed.

In this way the author acknowledges that “identity is constructed through a negotiation of difference, and that the presence of fissures, gaps, and contradictions is not necessarily a sign of failure”¹⁰. The aspect of hybridity is no longer charged with negative connotations, or seen as a destructive phenomenon, on the contrary, the acceptance of a hybrid condition as the foundation for any identity discourse, marks “hybridity as antidote to [any] es-

⁸ Nikos Papastergiadis, “Tracing Hybridity in Theory”, in *Debating Cultural Hybridity*, in *Debating Cultural Hybridity, Multi-cultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism*, ed.s Werbner P. and T. Modood, London-New Jersey, ZED BOOKS, 1997, p. 273.

⁹ Melucci, “Identity and Difference”, cit., p. 65.

¹⁰ Papastergiadis, “Tracing Hybridity in Theory”, cit., p. 258.

sentialist subjectivity”¹¹. Identity is no longer expected to “[cohere] into an absolute form”¹² but is seen as the result of a constant negotiation. What is being produced is “an open-ended vision of the self that highlights a multitude of national and outer-national affiliations and identifications”¹³.

Thus, through the development of what can be defined as a trans-national mentality, Verdecchia envisions the possibility of constructing identity beyond a strictly national narrative. The idea of having a national identity is not rejected but rather reconceptualised so that national affiliations are no longer defined as exclusive. Identity is not seen “as purely a matter of “either-or” but rather is always already embedded in a wider set of relations”¹⁴.

It could be said that the value of Verdecchia’s work is represented by the fact that it conceives of hybridity not only as an existential experience but also as a *conscious practice*: the multiplicity of available identity benchmarks is consciously set as the starting point for the development of the self and it is the subject’s task to mediate among such diversification. Therefore, through a reconceptualization of the meaning of identity, culture and belonging, the author ultimately demonstrates that it is possible to overcome displacement. Consequently, also Naipaul’s doubts on the impossibility of truly placing oneself are dismantled, since Verdecchia is himself proof of the opposite.

The kind of discourse that the author develops can be considered as an example of a post-modern approach. The ideal of reaching an unquestionable, stable truth (in this case represented by the idea of having a unique absolute identity) is dismissed, what counts is the awareness that any form of knowledge is a cultural product and as such it can be always re-discussed. Furthermore, contrary to the modern approach that tends to build meaning through an exclusionary and hierarchical process in order to avoid any form of polysemy, the postmodern thinking accepts the heterogeneity of mean-

¹¹ Ibid. p. 273.

¹² Ibid. p. 277.

¹³ Jacqueline Petropoulos, “Performing African Canadian Identity: Diasporic Reinvention in *Africa Solo*”, *Feminist Review*, No. 84, Postcolonial Theatres, (2006), pp. 104-123, p. 107.

¹⁴ Maria-Theresia Holub, *Beyond Boundaries: Transnational and Transcultural Literature and Practice*, New York, Binghamton University, 2007, p.24.

ings that can involve one single object. Therefore, “if the modern problem of identity was how to construct an identity and keep it solid and stable, the postmodern problem of identity is primarily how to avoid fixation and keep the options open”¹⁵.

In Verdecchia’s case, as long as he is following the (modern) tendency of defining himself in terms of either/or, the author is left only with a fractured self. Instead, by conceiving identity not as an essence but as a form of relation, the heterogeneity of cultural and identity aspects that might claim to be part of his identity is no longer expected to be erased. From a monolithic, totalizing identity, the author accepts the idea of having multiple horizontal affiliations; against the essentialising notion of an authentic selfhood, the author moves towards a ‘polysemic self’. The ultimate aim, as noted above, is no longer that of producing an incontrovertible, objective truth, rather, the priority is to be found in the capacity of being engaged with a multiplicity of discourses and being able to mediate among them. “It is not the answer that we must seek but rather a continuous process of answering”¹⁶.

The solution to overcome displacement then lies in the possibility of *learning* to have a multiple sense of self or, as Bauman states, we need to “learn the difficult art of living with difference”¹⁷. Certainly, it is not a simple task, it requires a certain level of awareness, commitment and a quite radical cultural shift and it is not obvious that this form of new mentality will evolve by itself. However, it appears as an achievable aim as Verdecchia seems to prove. If on one side, globalised society might be perceived as a complex, opaque and destabilizing phenomenon, on the other, in Glissant’s words: ‘we need to have the imaginary and utopian force to understand that the chaos is not the apocalyptic chaos of the end of the world’ “dobbiamo avere la forza immaginaria ed utopica di capire che il caos non e’ il caos apocalittico della fine del mondo”¹⁸. Therefore, the very context of globalization, instead of being interpreted only as a negative phenomenon, it

¹⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, “From Pilgrim to Tourist, or a Short History of Identity”, in *Question of Cultural Identity*, ed.s Hall S. and P. Gay, London, Sage Publications, 1996, p. 18.

¹⁶ Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, p. xxiii.

¹⁷ Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, p. 178.

¹⁸ Glissant, *Poetica del Diverso*, p. 57.

can become the source for the development of new discourses that ultimately might improve the existential condition of the individual.

Finally, it is necessary to stress how, despite the fact that *Fronteras Americanas* and Naipaul's novels are works which spawned from, and are primarily linked to diasporic contexts, their validity is not limited to that particular environments. The fact that they have been employed here to discuss about the condition of non-diasporic subjects confirms that postcolonial literature is not significant only in relation to culture-specific realities but produces most effective discourses also for broader and relevant situations of the globalised world.

The dislocation and the challenges experienced by Verdecchia and the character of Willie are certainly more extreme and traumatic than those faced by any typical stable, native individual, yet these experiences are not fundamentally different. For this reason, they have functioned as main reference-point for better understanding both the implications connected with the condition of displacement and the possible responses to it. This suggests that, as with all literature, regardless of its focus, diasporic, postcolonial literatures offer insight beyond the localized reality they may address.

Literature is the result of an individual creative act whose depth allows us to discuss and reflect upon general issues yet starting from a most subjective and unique existential dimension; it gives us the chance of talking of our world by employing a different language, a language which sometimes produces more intense and immediate communication among human beings than other disciplines do. Nevertheless, the perspective of literature has not been the only one which has been taken into consideration since in the First Part of the dissertation a theoretical approach has been adopted. Thus, in this case, literature and theory have been fruitfully intertwined, both bringing their fundamental contribution to the development of the discussion.

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