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Searching for a third-space methodology to contest essentialist large-culture blocks

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ABSTRACT

Here I present the third space as a methodology for contesting the essentialist large-culture distortion and colonising of both researching and engaging with the intercultural. This distortion is deep in the structure of intercultural studies and the everyday narratives that surround us as a major source of prejudice and false certainty. A third-space methodology therefore requires constant and uncomfortable deCentred questioning of the thinking-as-usual. The subsequent intersubjective implicatedness of the researcher requires this personal research history, alongside the 20 years of IALIC, of my own developing approach to the third space by means of whatever methods emerged as appropriate.

Qui presento il terzo spazio come una metodologia per contestare la distorsione e la colonizzazione essenzialistica delle grandi culture, sia nella ricerca che nell'impegno interculturale. Questa distorsione è profondamente radicata nella struttura degli studi interculturali e nelle narrazioni quotidiane che ci circondano, rappresentando la fonte principale di pregiudizi e false certezze. Una metodologia del terzo spazio richiede pertanto una costante e scomoda messa in discussione deCentrata del pensiero consuetudinario. Il conseguente coinvolgimento intersoggettivo del ricercatore necessita di questa storia di ricerca personale, accanto ai 20 anni di IALIC, del mio approccio al terzo spazio ancora in divenire, attraverso qualsiasi metodo emerga come appropriato.

KEYWORDS

Intercultural; decoloniality; autoethnography; orientalism; hybridity; third space

On finding references to third space in applied linguistics literature, my first thought was not the commonly cited Homi Bhabha (1994) text, but a saying by the thirteenth century Persian mystic, Shams-e Tabrizi:

> That scribe wrote three scripts: One he could read but no-one else! The second both he and others could read. But the third neither he nor anyone else could read! That third is myself! (Saheb-e Zamani, 1972, citing Shams-e Tabrizi, saying 56)

Exactly what this means is difficult to ascertain, which is surely the intention, and reflects the multiple interpretations of the third space in the literature (MacDonald, 2019; Zhou & Pilcher, 2019). However, with humility, I wonder if Shams's reference to 'myself' somehow places the onus for understanding on the intersubjective person of the researcher or whoever is engaging with the intercultural.

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Shams's allusion to the mystery of the person does though resonate with Homi Bhabha's (1994, p. 5, 56, 94) assertion that we can all 'emerge as others out of selves' within a natural hybridity if it is possible to escape from 'assumed or imposed hierarchy', the 'politics of polarity' and the Centre 'fixity' of 'colonial discourse'. I will argue that this 'fixity' and 'colonial discourse' also relates to the false structuring of essentialist large-culture descriptions that have long plagued intercultural studies. I will also argue that to escape from this fixity requires what Soja (1996, p. 3) refers to as a 'radical restructuring of long-established modes of knowledge formation', and that 'third space' is itself 'a purposefully tentative and flexible term' which concerns 'the radical *challenge* to think differently' (my emphasis), which resonates again with the 'unreadable' aspect of Shams's third script.

IALIC and a 'radical challenge to think differently'

It is about 20 years ago that I began to write about the intercultural with my (1999) small cultures article which marked my own attempt to meet the challenge of new thinking. In this paper, I will therefore use the invitation to reflect on the 20 years of IALIC to trace the development of a personal research trajectory, encouraged by the critical presence of IALIC, which has tried to arrive at and understand third-space thinking. Because it is only in the recent years of this trajectory that third space has explicitly featured, it is useful to look back at the unconscious roots of the concept – and to trace why it has become crucial in a deCentred methodology for both researching and engaging with the intercultural – as an interventionist antidote to dominant, essentialist, positivist and indeed racist large-culture thinking.

The cruciality of critical events

The beginning of my researching the intercultural was precipitated by a conviction that what I saw around me was very different to almost everything that I read and heard at conferences. I also realised that it had taken very particular events to enable me to see this.

Despite six years of experience in Iran that had shown me otherwise, during my masters course in 1979 I was seduced by literature about the 'learning problems' of students from so-labelled 'traditional cultures' (e.g. Berger et al., 1974; Clark, 1976). Therefore, when a group of Iranian language students I taught at the time said they only wanted to learn grammar, I falsely believed this to be clear evidence of the stereotype. Similarly, when I set up a language centre at Damascus University in 1980, I did not question my job description to 'introduce active learning' in 'an Arab culture' that was falsely perceived to discouraged it.

It took two critical events to unseat these stereotypes. In back-of-the-class observation, the same Iranian students complained in their private talk that their British teacher was not sufficiently 'communicative' to keep them 'actively engaged'. When we invited them to design their own classroom, they turned it into a radically student-led learning laboratory. Similar observation of a Damascus University lecture revealed an inspiringly active engagement among the students, despite their silence, in face expressions, scribbling in their notebooks and body language.

These events are reported in my 'struggle to teach English' book (2005, pp. 100–103). Indeed, this 'struggle' to put aside large-culture stereotypes had continued throughout my career, where traces of essentialism crept into my PhD thesis and publications, despite them ostensibly arguing the opposite, well into the 1990s.

I confronted such essentialist residues directly in my study of Hong Kong students on a language immersion programme in Britain when I found infantilising language in my own research diary (Holliday, 2005, p. 31). Again, there were chance critical events that helped me to see the true, non-essentialist reality – the same students 'actively' engaged in their own spaces, in a large university lecture in Hong Kong, on school attachments, when working on projects in their home room, and in a highly critical and satirical theatrical review of British life. I also saw a video of similarly

stereotyped students in a secondary school class in Japan 'actively' engaged in private conversations about how to answer questions from their teacher (pp. 90–91).

Importantly, once these non-essentialist realities became evident, they were immediate flashes of truth breaking through the powerful large-culture narrative. But why was this distorting large culture narrative so powerful?

Colluding forces of distortion

There are a number of colluding, and indeed colonising forces acting to inhibit our non-essentialist understanding. The most obvious, because it claims science, is the structural-functionalist theory that societies are organisms within which each part both mirrors and serves the functioning of the whole (Durkheim, 1893/1964). This implies that the values and practices in, e.g. classrooms, are governed by the next level up. This supports the mapping of national cultures that both define and confine the values and practices of all the people in them, and within broader civilisational blocks such as the East and the West (Bolten, 2014; Hofstede, 2003; Triandis, 1995).

The power of the structural-functionalist notion of successive layers of confining and defining culture has also infiltrated scholarship that purports to claim the opposite. While opposing 'segregation and fundamentalism' and supporting 'pluralism' and 'human rights', UNESCO (2010, p. 3) implies a confining and defining role of 'culture' as 'the set of *distinctive* spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group' (my emphasis). While stating that 'cultures are themselves multiple', even where the reference is to small cultures, Deardorff (2020, p. 4) nevertheless suggests an essentialist confining and defining role where '*each* culture is the sum of assumptions and practices shared by members of a group, *distinguishing* them from other groups' (my emphasis) and 'a nested series of progressively smaller groups'.

A second influence that colludes with structural-functionalism is methodological nationalism. Perceived to be precipitated by nineteenth century nationalism, it is accused of making nation the prime category of social science investigation (e.g. Beck & Sznaider, 2006). Indeed, it is this nationalism that has promoted grand narratives of nation and civilisation that not only idealise 'us' and demonised 'them' but has also entered popular imagination sufficiently to be the first easy thought on the minds of all the people naïvely interviewed by such as Hofstede. That grand narratives are ideologically constructed is established in the postmodern turn (e.g. Mannheim, 1936; Mills, 1959/1970; Schudson, 1994). I had already read Mannheim and Mills in my undergraduate sociology.

This collusion results in a powerfully seductive essentialist literature and an unmovable L2-C2 fix that inaccurately connects learning language with learning 'its culture', which has colonised and plagued in one way or another every corner of applied linguistics, encourages the native-speakerist construction of foreign language as 'native' to a specific 'other' culture, and, again, seeps into popular perception. It has also been fed by the university neoliberal requirement for large-culture commodification (Collins, 2018; Kubota, 2016) which inhibits paradigm resistance (Holliday & MacDonald, 2020).

Not a new globalisation or new hybridity

Seeing the large-culture position as an essentialist distortion therefore makes me disagree with Kramsch and Uryu's (2020, pp. 204–206) suggestion that interest in third spaces emerges because the 'neat territorialisation' of large cultures has *become* blurred. This neat territorialisation has instead, I believe, always been a myth. I find very convincing Canagarajah's (2018, p. 32) statement, in his discussion of translanguaging, that territorialisation has *always* been a construction, and that (1999, p. 209) 'hybridity has *always* been there in non-Western communities' before 'colonial powers divided these communities arbitrarily into nation-states' and imposed the 'convenience of a uniform language'. Indeed, Quijano (2007, p. 175, 178) explicitly argues that decoloniality requires undoing structural-functionalist, nationalist and colonialist imposition of cultural

identities and *returning* to our prior 'freedom to choose between various cultural orientations'. Elif Shafak (2010, p. 109) gives us a sense of this freedom in her description of the central Anatolia where Shams-e Tabrizi arrived in 1244. It is a place where Arabic, Romany, Venetian, Frankish, Saxon, Greek, Persian, Turkish, Kurdish, Armenian and Hebrew could be heard, and that their speakers suggested an 'incompleteness, of the works in progress that they were, each an unfinished masterwork'. This hybridity is not however something that has been left in the past. Its incompleteness resonates with Amritavalli's (2012, p. 54) observation that she cannot apply the 'native speaker' label to her use of any of the five languages she works with every day in India. I imagine that this normalised hybridity was also the case across Europe before nationalism; and Baumann (1996) finds it in his ethnography of a London suburb in the near present.

I therefore maintain that 'incompleteness' is how we all are all the time and indicates not a new blurring or an imperfection but the rich hybrid norm suggested by Homi Bhabha (cited above). That it replaces national identities for all of us, as the margins appropriate Centre ground in their own terms (Stuart Hall, 1996, p. 619) with an 'upsurge of new forms of life' (Guilherme, 2002, p. 128) is a *renewed* emergence. This defiance against being defined is I think implied in Shams-e Tabrizi's 'unreadable' third script, with his singularly designed first script and easy second script being what is falsely written by positive structural-functionalists.

Reclaiming culture as acts of positioning

However, while bounded cultures, large or small, are a figment of structural-functionalism, methodological nationalism and colonising grand narratives, Baumann (1996, p. 20) argues that we all also need, at the same time, for multiple reasons, to *construct* the idea of bounded cultures as part of our hybridity. We *construct* cultures to establish practices and values in classrooms, workplaces, the military, sites of performance, service, duty, and in the politics of how we position ourselves with others. We nevertheless have diverse cultural lives beyond these constructed boundaries. This can be seen in multiple forms of resistance in extreme cases of totalitarian states and régimes of oppression. They may, however, not always be visible (Holliday, 2011, p. 178ff; Rostami-Povey, 2007; Sawyer & Jones, 2008), for example where biding time until circumstances change results in strategic essentialism (Danius & Jonsson, 1993, interviewing Gayatree Spivak). It is however a false and naïve structural-functionalist assumption that 'lack of personal freedom' even in a majority of national settings implies lack of self-direction and criticality everywhere 'in the culture'. Indeed, it may imply the opposite.

Even where the claiming of bounded culture is a political or emotional rallying point, we must not therefore take this as evidence of the claimed practices and values or reduce the speaker to them. It could be an act of resistance against marginalising political forces; and serious heed must be taken of Modood's fear that Cantle's non-essentialist 'interculturalism' might ignore minority cultural identities (Antonsich et al., 2016, pp. 489–490). Also, we must preserve the figurative meaning of 'culture' – of flows of literature, art, music, cuisine, architecture and so on which we nostalgically associate in an open and creative way with nation and civilisation – and appreciate people's need for specific and sub-cultural identities (Blackman & Kempson, 2017).

My notion of a third-space methodology does not therefore indulge in the practices and values claimed by essentialist statements about culture, but instead seeks to understand the positioning behind them. Hence, when a so-labelled 'international' student states 'I already have a culture' (Amadasi & Holliday, 2018), we researchers need to explore further to find that this is not about 'refusing to integrate', but is instead an act of resistance against racist abuse from people who *accuse* her of not 'integrating'. Our thick description needs to notice that elsewhere she demonstrates considerable 'hybrid integration', where newcomers 'exercise agency in constructing' and 'negotiation' of their 'hybrid identities' (Baraldi, 2019).

My research partnership with Sara Amadasi introduced me to the necessity of getting to the bottom of the positioning implicit in the statements people make about culture (e.g. Harré & Van

Langenhove, 1999). This took us into the third-space exploration of how researchers' intervening to bring out this positioning, for example in the interview with the above student, also become part of the data. This contributed to my exploration of what types of research methodology are creatively possible to uncover intersubjective complexity from the early 2000s through successive editions of my book on qualitative research (Holliday, 2016b).

Reconstructed ethnographic accounts

I was already familiar with the basics of ethnography – of how one should look around the research environment before making decisions about next steps (Spradley, 1980, p. 32). This looking around provided a place for noticing the private talk amongst the Iranian students during preliminary classroom observation referred to earlier. Hearing Ryuko Kubota's reconstructed ethnographic account of three friends sharing conflicting views about culture at the 1999 New York TESOL convention (published as Kubota 2003) showed me the way to go further in this looking around. It was my first experience of a convincing analysis of how essentialist and non-essentialist statements represent personal positions in response to the competing ideological narratives that surround them.

I found that the validity of this, sometimes called creative non-fiction, was enabled by the post-modern, constructivist revolution in ethnography which recognises and manages the subjective implicatedness of the researcher (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Reconstructed ethnographic accounts can express the broader political and ideological issues that cannot easily be seen in particular extracts of data such as interview transcripts (Agar, 1990). They therefore became the basis of my part of *Intercultural communication (*Holliday et al., 2021), the first edition of which was written while visiting my family in Iran in 2001 and witnessing on a daily basis the culturally strange as unexpectedly familiar.

By introducing several characters in sometimes difficult conversation, reconstructed ethnographic accounts can capture the cultural positions that people express at different times and in different circumstances – how we all spin, construct and reconstruct our positioning regarding the larger narratives that surround us (Botting, 1995; Goodson, 2006) as they splinter into our personal narratives (Lyotard, 1979, p. 22; Mannheim, 1936, p. 52).

An example of how this multiple characterisation reveals participants' positioning is in Holliday (2019, pp. 37–38). Gita is arguing with her friend Francesca about the latter's essentialist beliefs that she has picked up from an intercultural communication course in her workplace. To test their different positions, they sit in a café together and theorise where the people they see around them come from based on their appearance and body language. Gita is amazed at the racist cultural stereotypes that she too finds herself forming. She has to stop herself from automatically imagining that a woman wearing a hijab is therefore oppressed by 'her culture'. She finds this prejudice within her even more shocking because she believes that both she and Francesca are Othered by similar false stereotypes because of what she refers to as their 'Mediterranean appearance'.

Once the principles of reconstructed ethnographic accounts are mastered, a world is opened for collecting material (rather than more organised 'data') everywhere. Conferences become excellent locations to observe how academics and students come together from diverse backgrounds and meet, perform and position themselves in multiple formal and informal locations – in seminar rooms, corridors, cafés, hotel lobbies and other sites. This is sadly the element that is lost in the virtual events during COVID. The 20 years of IALIC have contributed to this canvas for active observation.

Blocks and threads

It was when being taken to a conference by car by a Chinese colleague that my concept of blocks and threads emerged (Holliday, 2016a, p. 322; Holliday & Amadasi, 2020, p. 53). *Threads* are resonances between ourselves and others that pull us away from divisive large-culture essentialist *blocks.* In this

case, I noticed children's toys on the back seat of his car that led me to think of a thread with my own experience and talk to him about childcare and work-life balance.

There are two key resources that encourage threads. The first is our natural hybridity that recognises that all of us are many things, thus providing a sufficiently broad and rich personal canvass to enable us to find an interculturality of elements of ourselves in others and others in ourselves. The second is our personal cultural trajectories – elements of our everyday personal past cultural experience that we can recover to resonate with those of others.

Hence, noticing the toys in my Chinese colleague's car enabled me to connect something in his evident trajectory with my experience of my daughter as a parent and a university academic and my own memory of parenting. The hybridity is in how each of us are brought up in very different national and generational cultural environments while at the same time having something common to share. This interaction between the specific and the general is evident during the current COVID pandemic, where we see people across the world quickly develop new cultural practices in common but at the same time differently dependent on local histories and circumstances that range between political and economic structures of national and smaller groups.

My grammar of culture (Holliday, 2019, 2022) maps the struggle between threads and blocks. On the one hand, our personal cultural trajectories, enabled by the underlying universal cultural processes that we all have experience of, draw from the positive richness of our upbringing such as educational, media and creative cultural products and artefacts. On the other hand, these threads of hybridity are under constant attack from the colonising collusion of essentialist large-culture forces described above.

There is therefore a struggle taking place in the conversation with my Chinese colleague. Throughout the process of choosing to talk about common experience (threads), I have to fight off destructive and indeed racist narratives (blocks), derived from the dominant collectivist stereotype, about whether or not he can 'really make up his own mind' about the aspects of childcare that he describes.

Referring again to COVID, I have a very recent experience of the thread-block struggle while talking to a Chinese student by video conference. I suggested to her that in China 'they' find wearing face-masks easier than 'we' do in Britain because 'they' have a long tradition of this practice 'there'. While at least part of my intention was to draw the common thread of the shared experience of mask-wearing, unsaid, but invading my mind, was the essentialist block that Chinese people easily wear masks because of collectivist tradition. She, however, perhaps conscious of this Othering between the lines of my question, retorted that she hated the imposition of mask-wearing rules. At this point, I became aware of the prejudice in my question and think I managed to extend the thread by saying how I also felt about mask wearing. However, I also had to fight off the extension of the prejudice in another block – the essentialist supposition that perhaps she had learnt this critical individualism while being a student in Britain. Of course I should have known better, having written extensively about the dominant West as steward discourse which falsely imagines the liberationist impact of Western education (e.g. Holliday & Amadasi, 2020, pp. 17–20, 59–60).

Small culture formation on the go

Understanding the transient, highly negotiable nature of encounters like this, which are open to blocks as well as threads, led me to the concept of the everyday process of small culture formation on the go, where people come together to engage with and construct culture. This is far from the large-culture normative construct of learning or adapting to another culture's prescribed values and practices. Small culture formation on the go may indeed result in disagreeing, introducing change or deciding not to participate in found practices and values. It involves the messy, political interculturality described, or found to be indescribable by Dervin (2016).

When dominant large-culture definitions are put aside, small culture formation on the go reveals culture as a seamless and shifting extent of human behaviour. Any part of it that we encounter has

the properties of the whole that run across the boundaries that we have artificially chosen for the purpose of study or to help us make sense (Holliday, 1999, p. 255). Hence:

> As interworked systems of construable signs … culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviours, institutions, or processes can causally be attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly – that is thickly-described. (Geertz, 1993, p. 14)

Therefore, when we approach such as a classroom, a school, a friendship group, a family, a community, a business meeting, or a marketplace, what we see going on and what we try to make sense of connects with cultural behaviour elsewhere and in one way or another with our existing store of cultural experience. 'On the go' implies that we and everything about what we encounter is on the move with shifting multiple connections – whether we are someone who needs to make decisions about how to take part or a researcher about what to notice.

Geertz's reference to thick description implies the piecing together of instances of experience both in formal research and in everyday encounters with the intercultural. This means that the intercultural, in this ongoing, ever-present context, is not about confronting other bounded cultures but about the everyday process of encountering something new. Prime examples are first going to primary school, visiting the family next door, and joining new groups and jobs, which bring immediate encounters with unfamiliar values and practices. I was interested in how quickly a group of masters students at a Chinese university, when pushed to put aside the easy essentialist notion that 'all Chinese culture is the same', were able to find examples of cultural strangeness in other Chinese families. This everyday small-culture learning connects with the notion of learning discourses in Lankshear et al. (1997) and Risager (2020).

My emerging definition of the intercultural is therefore whenever and wherever we encounter cultural practices and values that cause us to position and reposition ourselves. Importantly, this positioning and repositioning concerns all involved parties whether 'arriving' or 'already there', if it is indeed possible to distinguish. Helpful here is Simmel's (1908/1950, p. 402, 405) conceptualisation of the 'stranger' as someone who can have resonance with the people 'already there' who also both belong and do not belong and are continuously reassessing the thinking-as-usual.

What it takes to find the third space

While small culture formation on the go is the location for finding threads of hybridity, this is also the place where all the instances of attack from essentialist blocks described above also take place. This is depicted in Figure 1, where the softer domain of threads on the left is attacked by the firm box of large-culture blocks on the right. While the blocks are supported by the apparent certainty of the neatly layered structural-functionalist image of culture (right), the threads of hybridity are supported by the far softer and harder-to-understand image of a complex extent of culture in which boundaries are only sense-making constructs (left).

The purpose of the third-space methodology (bottom), is to intervene into the moment of attack, represented by the two impacted arrows (centre). That the third-space methodology needs to be an uncomfortable and seriously deCentring process of questioning the thinking-as-usual is also at the core of the possibility of decoloniality (Pennycook & Makoni, 2020, p. 7; Quijano, 2007). The constructivist intersubjectivity of the methodology (bottom of the figure) is necessary to make sense of the complex positioning that I have noted as being at the core of threads of hybridity throughout the paper so far.

I have argued throughout that this finding of a third space is extremely difficult and is not possible in research methods that involve simply asking and then reporting what participants say or even what we see them do. Getting to the often hidden positioning, which is implicit in the struggle depicted at the centre of Figure 1, requires fathoming discoursal and ideological forces, the like of which, as Fairclough (1995, p. 36) reminds us, we are 'standardly unaware'.

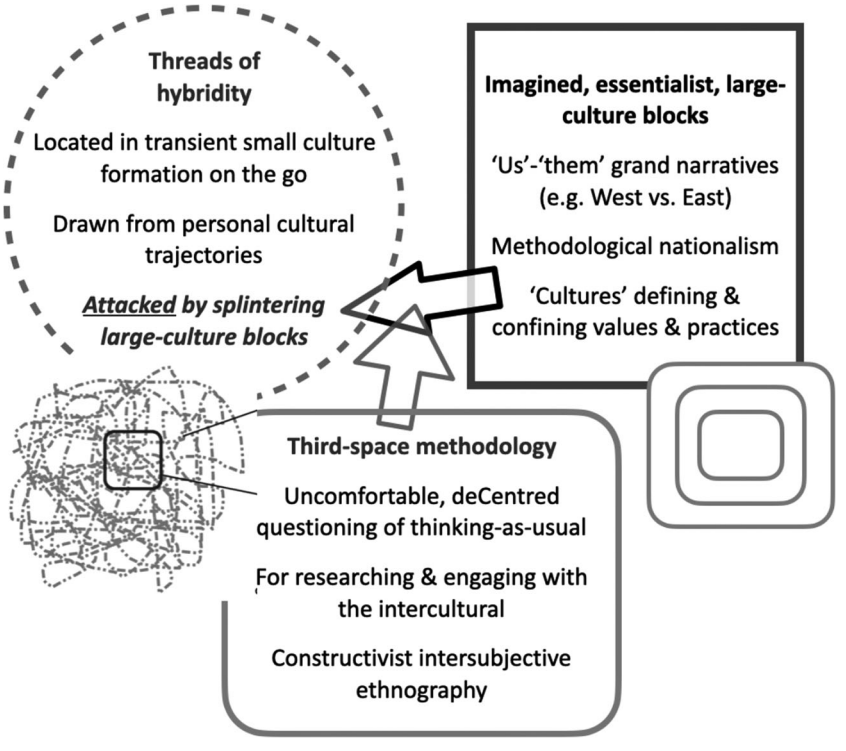

Figure 1. Third-space intervention.

That this unawareness includes 'us' researchers is implicit in the impossibility of reading Shams-e Tabrizi's third script. Nevertheless, realising the cruciality of our intersubjective implicatedness in finding the third script behind the student's 'I already have a culture' statement discussed earlier led Sara Amadasi and I to interview each other and research students about our researcher positionality in our recent book (Holliday & Amadasi, 2020, pp. 78–99). The reconstructed ethnographic accounts in the book also involve characters who are composites of our own researcher experience, some of which take us into the past to unlock and deal with sources of prejudice.

One such is the account of Matt encountering a noisy woman on a train whom he presumes therefore to be 'foreign' and not able to appreciate his imagined cultural values of personal space (Holliday & Amadasi, 2020, p. 22). Without speaking with her, and pushed into action by texts from his non-Western-identifying friend, Kati, Matt interrogates his own ideological imaginations of race and gender, drawing threads with events in his past, working out in his own mind a way in which to locate and put aside the prejudice he finds he is carrying with him.

Travelling to the distant past and distant lands

This looking into the past was inspired by the postcolonial novel, *The Moor's account* (Lalami, 2015), also discussed in Holliday and Amadasi (2020, pp. 25–29). This recounts North African Mustafa being taken as a slave on the Spanish expedition to pre-colonial Texas in 1527. He is freed and employed as a doctor by the unexpectedly 'civilised' indigenous people (p. 268). Eventually arriving in colonial Mexico, he is asked to report that they are 'uncivilised', e.g. that they 'kill their own infants' and 'treat their women like beasts', to justify Spanish colonisation (p. 269). His observation that the Europeans create truth simply by stating things to be true (p. 10) resonates with the

positivist structural-functionalist large-culture myth and the basis for neoliberalism; and Crown (2015) notes that the novel described how 'we frame the narratives of our own lives'. In my view, this travel to distant lands in the distant past – what Soja (1996, p. 11) refers to as 'journeys to "real-and-imagined" places' – succeeds in shaking our thinking-as-usual sufficiently to take us into the uncomfortable third space.

Unexpected threads and re-negotiating thinking-as-usual

This is just one example of how good postcolonial literary fiction can succeed in shaking us into unexpected threads through revealing the complex, normal hybridity of characters. I am thus, for example, able to identify with, rather than defining as culturally Other, several of the Syrian characters, even in the lead up to civil war, in *The stray cats of Homs* (Nour, 2020). They really are people just like me living in different circumstances – as we would also all expect to feel about characters from the distant past in Jane Austen or Shakespeare because if their richly rounded complexity.

A series of recent research papers have helped me to see further a blend of the creative fiction seen in the postcolonial novel and qualitative methods. Badwan and Hall (2020) use walk-along ethnography and a posthumanist viewpoint, with visual and personal reflections responding to the physical environment, to connect past and present and find deCentred threads. Ros i Solé (2019) looks at the materiality of the physical environment to reconceptualise language and culture in its complexity of relationships. While she speaks of languages, cultures and third space, these are with deCentred fluidity that defies the thinking-as-usual. The 'vibrant identities' special issue (Ros i Solé et al., 2020) 'captures … the entanglement of material, dynamic, and multiple configurations of life' (p. 397). Collins and Pajak (2019) take their analysis away from methodological nationalism and find the third space both in and as the means for finding everyday moments of discord and identity in their ethnography of a swimming pool.

The relentless need to search ever further and deeper is evident in Sara Amadasi going back to her earlier research events to uncover the nature of the positioning between her and the other involved parties. Hence, years after writing-up her study of children with migration backgrounds in an Italian school, she recovered her field notes of initial contact with the children and how the research events were set up with them and their teachers (Holliday & Amadasi, 2020, pp. 37–38). A crucial further finding here was that the children were a*lready* applying *even more* agency and cultural competence in how they initially resisted her researcher's plan that she later 'found' in focus groups with them (p. 42).

The large-culture interpretation of this would be that the children were *learning* agency from the new 'Western culture' they were encountering. Our very different interpretation is that Sara needed to enter into a difficult third space to question the thinking-as-usual of the research event in order to see that the children were b*ringing* existing expert agency and cultural experience to their interaction with her.

Autoethnography and the analytical third

Thinking of going back to distant times and distant lands led me to my recent autoethnographic study of my travel to Iran in the 1970s (Holliday, 2022). This was to test my theory that at a time *before* the instant global communication referred to by Kramsch & Uryu (cited above) the large-culture theory was already false. Indeed, if there w*as* going to be large intercultural contact it would certainly take place in what to me at the age of 23 was an extremely foreign location at a time when even international telephoning was difficult.

My experience of reconstructed ethnographic accounts helped me find resonance with the concept of analytic autoethnography (Anderson, 2006), which allowed me to represent recollections of experience in Iran in reconstructed *auto*ethnographic accounts that I could then stand back from

and make sense of. Partly to anonymise, constructing composite characters and how they interacted again helped me to explore my positioning.

Finding an explicit reference to third-space methodology in the work of Thomas Ogden also enabled me to name the process of focusing at the point of struggle for meaning in the centre of Figure 1. His conceptualising of the 'analytic third' as a site of 'reverie' in which the psychoanalyst sits back and contemplates what their patient, the 'analysand', is saying (2004) helped me to be both the researcher analyst and the analysand of me encountering the intercultural. The resulting reverie enabled me to question the thinking-as-usual at 'the cusp of the past and the present … created anew' (p. 178). 'Recognising the individuality of the analysand' and their 'recognition of the separate individuality of the analyst' and 'their interpretations' (p. 191), enabled me to put aside the individualist-collectivist essentialist block and to see the hybridity both of myself and of the Iranian characters in my reconstructed autoethnographic accounts.

The shock to grand narratives

There is no doubt that in my first year in Iran I suffered huge culture shock. The third-space methodology however enabled me to see that this was not to do with the collision of two large cultures. It was instead about being overwhelmed by the attack from large-culture blocks (at the centre of Figure 1) that led me into false 'us'-'them' interpretations of the practices and values that I encountered. Third-space reverie about the small culture formation on the go (left of the figure) enabled me not only to see the falseness of the imagined large-culture threat. It also helped me to find threads from my personal cultural trajectory that helped me to win the struggle against the blocks. The outcome was unexpected connections with and understandings about the Iranian people and their practices and values that I encountered. The 'cusp of past and present' in my analysis enabled me thus to see freshly what I already knew at the time but did not appreciate because of the essentialist grand narrative that I took with me.

In the process of deCentring my researcher position, and also finding a source of the large-culture blocks in my initial culture shock in Iran, I looked again at Orientalism (Edward Said, 1978) as the major influence on my upbringing before travelling there. I had already written about the general influence of this Western grand narrative in *Intercultural communication and ideology* (Holliday, 2011). Its characterisation of the East as solidly and uniformly alien, 'indolent', 'traditional' and 'backward', I feel has strong resonance if not causal relationship with the collectivist large-culture stereotype.

While at the time unaware of it, I recalled the presence of this Orientalist grand narrative throughout my upbringing (Holliday, 2022, pp. 23–27) in educational texts, science fiction, children's literature, and cinema. Major themes were an idealisation of the 'simple morality' of what were in effect presented as 'my ancestors' the ancient Greeks, in opposition to the 'evil empires' of the East and the right to travel and represent if not rescue the world. This memory was helped by my later recognition of this discourse, again in the 'cusp of past and present', in media and other influences since leaving Iran.

Eventual arriving

It is not the purpose of this paper to report the substantive findings of my autoethnographic study of travel to Iran. I will however use this to make a final reflection on what seeking out a third-space methodology has enabled me to do, while at the same time, thinking again about Shams-e Tabrizi's third script of unknowing, realising this will always be a work in progress into an increasingly apparent uncertainty of what is going on in the intercultural.

Therefore, it is to do with finding what the intercultural is not – a *prevention* of fixity. What trying to enter into a third space in revisiting my time in Iran prevented was a pinning down, mapping, or profiling of two, large, British and Iranian national cultures, or of trying to interpret practices and

values as sub-sets of these bounded cultures. I instead saw the possible ways in which the shock or conflict that I faced was more to do with grand narratives of prejudice that I brought with me, specifically Orientalism, and of which the people I encountered were either explicitly or tacitly aware.

It became very apparent that the struggle and attack in the centre of Figure 1 was there to varying degrees in every event that I encountered, and that third-space thinking was therefore very necessary to deal with this. That large-culture Orientalism constantly got in the way necessitated this moving away from, in effect, a positivist, structural-functionalist thinking-as-usual. Being able to stand back and look at myself as the analysand was crucial in this, as was constructing Iranian characters in the reconstructed autoethnographic accounts, as I now see them in the different light of my current awareness of needing to put aside the Orientalist threat. The ability to put Orientalism aside and to see another less definite reality was also informed by my weight of personal cultural trajectory since that time through my experience of living and working in Syria and Egypt and with so-labelled 'international' locations, students and colleagues since. This is not though to forget that those experiences, if a third space was not struggled for, were also, falsely, sources of easy, positivist, essentialist answers, as noted earlier. This is why simply exposure to intercultural experience is often not enough, If we do not see through and around the seduction of dominant grand narratives, such as Orientalism, or the false imagination that only the West is individualistic, we will simply reproduce our easy ability to manufacture prejudice.

Thick description was also crucial, during the reverie implicit in the analytic third, to recall and connect successively to other events and characters. I also had a small amount of material from the time – an Iranian student assignment that described me as an English teacher and several journal descriptions of my first days in Iran. These I could incorporate into or juxtapose with the autoethnographic accounts; and in so doing I read them in ways that I had not before and saw yet new connections. Again, therefore, looking around, differently, through a third-space lens, will enable one to see what has always been there but never really appreciated.

The overall impact of the third space was therefore seeing familiar material, events and people in new ways, with the overall effect of recognising a hybrid modernity that spoke out against the Orientalist grand narrative wherever I looked, if only I could learn to see it. One example of this was evident in the fact of finding the same world literatures that I read in my upbringing, on the bookshelves of my Iranian friends, which they had inherited from their parents' generation. Another example was me advancing my knowledge of political discourses, avant guard theatre, soap opera and national myth through Iranian media, and finding the roots of professionalism that I carried into my later career in the manner in which taxi drivers managed the hybrid identities of their passengers in shared taxis.

This found intercultural richness represented a modernity that had been claimed and monopolised by the West but in fact had always been there. Another example was with language. The importance of being my English self in Farsi and bringing Farsi into the English I spoke, resonating with Risager's (2020) notion of linguaculture. This realisation of the hybridity of language was the antithesis of Western foreigners who interpreted integration to be imitating a reduced and exoticised imagination of the host culture which offended an Iranian claim to own the world. This attitude to language also seemed to be an antidote to what I began to understand was my complicity in subtle yet powerful 'Western judgement' of how Iranian people should behave. Another example was professional. As a beginning English teacher at the British Council, I began to see that my desire for professionalism led me into a pre-native-speakerism that prevented me from seeing the hybrid modernity of my students and the cosmopolitanism of the Iranian teachers who mentored me but were then replaced by so-labelled 'native speakers'.

What this most recent research experience in my trajectory begins to tell me is that there may be two parallel worlds. One is false and imposed by the collusion of political and academic large-culture narratives that conceptually divide us into neat, bounded and separated entities of practices and values. There is also a decolonised world all around us if only we can find ways to see it. It

comprises the natural hybridity of huge cultural diversity that defies fixity that has always been there. It is a place where marginalised realities everywhere can claim Centre ground. It is this world that takes difficult third-space thinking to see. Understanding and researching this world is I think explicitly or tacitly the IALIC quest. It is however important to note that the third space is a means of looking which requires serious rethinking of the research methodologies that we employ, in a relentless struggle against positivism, as it does of the everyday methodologies we all use to engage with the intercultural.

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