

USING CREATIVE NON-FICTION TO PINPOINT MOMENTS OF DECENTERING IN INTERCULTURAL MEDIATION

Adrian Holliday

To connect the three elements in the title, I will first explain the principle of deCentering and its cruciality for intercultural mediation, and then how creative non-fiction is a useful methodology for this purpose. I will then demonstrate how this works with an example of a previously published creative non-fiction account and conclude with what can be learned from this.

DeCentering and starting from the small

DeCentering is necessary to contest a false, dominant, Center perception of culture as suggested by a number of postcolonial and critical cosmopolitan writers (Bhabha 1994, 56; Baumann 1996; Stuart Hall 1996, 619; Beck and Sznajder 2006; Kumaravadivelu 2007; Quijano 2007; Delanty, Jones, and Wodak 2011; Canagarajah 2011). In summary:

- *The Center perception* is that cultures exist as separate homogeneous collectivities that exclusively associate language, culture, nation and civilization that define and confine who we are, and that hybridity is the product of blurring globalization.
- *The deCentered perception* is of a natural hybridity of multiple shifting and porous cultural realities that have always lived creatively alongside each other, and that:
- *The Center reality* has been constructed by Western colonial and nation-state organizing and reification of culture. This encourages 'us'-'them' essentialism and racism that hides and does not recognize the deCentered reality and its contribution.

The Center perception is seductively powerful in academic and popular narratives because of the apparent science of methodological nationalism, apparent opportunities that it offers the colonized, and grand narratives of nation. Therefore, particular and focused efforts need to be made to see the natural hybridity that exists all around us. This requires entering into a difficult third space (Soja 1996; Holliday forthcoming).

DeCentering therefore requires beginning not with presuppositions about cultural differences and incompatibilities, but, instead, starting with direct observation of the normal hybridity of cultural life from the small, or the 'bottom-up' (Stuart Hall 1991, 35). It is this direct observation of 'small culture formation on the go' (Holliday 2019) that is served, not only, but very usefully, by creative non-fiction.

The relevance of creative non-fiction

Creative non-fiction is an ethnographic method that collects together the researcher's experience of social events that cannot easily be captured through more established modes of data collection and analysis. Agar (1990) explains that more 'formal' data, such as interview transcripts, can only ever be a partial representation of the multiplicity of probable ethnographic interpretations. Creative non-fiction represents this multiplicity through a series of characters with different and sometimes conflicting positions. Rather than focusing on the Center perception of conflict between reified cultures, this enables a focus on conflicting Center and deCentered discourses *about* culture with which we often express our positioning and social alignments—reifying culture while at the same time 'making' it as a hybrid flow (Baumann 1996, 31).

This deCentered creative non-fiction thus acknowledges the intersubjectivity recognized by post-modern, constructivist ethnography (Clifford and Marcus 1986), and also required in the decoloniality project (Quijano 2007, 172). It therefore employs the ethnographic disciplines of making the familiar strange and thick description. Because the researcher is also implicated through their own intersubjective positioning, the discipline of allowing meanings to emerge also ensures that the creative non-fiction takes on its own life beyond their initial preoccupations.

Creative non-fiction is therefore employed as text to educate readers in the nature of intercultural conflict and how it may be addressed (Holliday 2019), as well as data in empirical research texts (Holliday and Amadasi 2020).

Demonstrating how it works

The example of creative non-fiction in this chapter concerns four characters, Stefan, Alicia, Roxana, and Jane, in a workplace setting, taken verbatim from Holliday (2019, 101–2), where an earlier analysis can be found. It describes an instance of conflict in which a dominant group marginalizes newcomers. While much of my creative non-fiction is based on particular interview and observation data, this one is based on what I commonly see and hear happening around me. The characters are therefore composites of a wide range of people. I have chosen this example because of its particular focus on how the actions and positions taken by the characters represent personal scripts derived from the splintered normalization of Center and deCentered positions (see Lyotard 1979, 22; Goodson 2006; Wodak 2021, 105–6). It also demonstrates how apparently innocent cultural stereotyping leads to 'unwitting' racism, as described by the Macpherson report (1999, 6.4, 6.17) following the murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence, and how Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence leads to between-the-lines micro-aggression by the ostensibly well-wishing West against migrants (Flam and Beuzamy 2011).

Following is the full text with numbered paragraphs for ease of reference:

It's what you wear

- 1 When Stefan first met his new colleague, Roxana, he was so pleased to see someone different around the place. She was also personable and friendly and clearly knew her job very well. He knew he had to be careful though and that he mustn't just jump to conclusions that she was foreign. He had been through the company's online diversity training course and knew all about that. He had found the course a bit of a chore and had been quite cynical about it, but on meeting Roxana he began to see its relevance.
- 2 Roxana did announce that she was born and brought up in Ex, but that she had been living here since her late teens when her parents came to this country. He imagined

that, therefore, he could refer to her as 'foreign.' Indeed, once they got to know each other better, he found her very easy to talk to and her 'foreignness' became one of the topics of their banter.

- 3 Anyway, it was so clear to him that Roxana was different. Stefan couldn't work out exactly what it was until one of the other women in the office said that Roxana was 'flashy,' 'extravagant,' 'materialistic,' and 'a bit of a show-off.' Roxana certainly did come over as being quite exotic. Somebody said that she dressed as though she was going to a cocktail party rather than the office. Stefan thought it odd that they should say this when he considered the expensive power dressing of some of his more senior women colleagues. But then he heard Roxana talking about how she missed the servants they had in Ex and how it was so good when she and her family visited their friends who had a villa in the South of France and were able to retain some of their 'old lifestyle.' Roxana actually had quite a lot to say and didn't seem to notice the stony silence that these comments were met with. She certainly wasn't the submissive image that everyone imagined of women from Ex.
- 4 On further reflection, Stefan wondered if Roxana's growing unpopularity had anything to do with her being foreign. Everyone knew someone who was annoying because they talked things up instead of the general preference here to talk things down. With Roxana, it was something more.
- 5 He got an answer when he met with his friend, Alicia. When he told her about Roxana, Alicia said that it wasn't just a matter of Roxana's personality and that there was an important factor connected with her being foreign and even coming from a particular part of the world. Alicia said that she herself was from a part of the world which meant that she also had experienced at least part of what Roxana must be going through and that when she started reading about post-colonial politics as part of her university course, she could see how a lot of things began to connect.
- 6 Alicia explained that there were deep national grand narratives that traced themselves right back to things like the war between the Greeks and Persians in the fifth century BC, and even the story of David and Goliath, which represented the small person defeating the powerful giant. Alicia said that the idea of the clever, agile, self-directed, free-thinking small nation defeating the huge, corrupt, wealthy, and depraved empire underpinned much of how people here pictured the rest of the world. She said that these narratives were all around them, whether it was endless references to defeating the 'Evil Empire' in games and movies, or government rhetoric about spreading 'democracy' across the world when what they are really interested in is oil money. Stefan said he understood all of this but couldn't see what it had to do with Roxana. He knew that Alicia was going to go on and on about this, but he did want to get to the bottom of it.
- 7 Alicia said that it was all also connected with a Protestant religious thing which disapproved of anything materially wasteful or inefficient. Stefan said that this was surely something in the past because there was so much wastefulness and inefficiency. Alicia replied that this wasn't the point. It is what's in people's minds that's important. A conviction of functional superiority can exist quite well alongside waste and inefficiency. She said that this is probably why people get so angry when they see blatant and open showiness in people like Roxana, when they themselves are so mixed up about it. They associate Roxana's whole demeanor—her dress and open expression of luxury—with the extravagant corruption of the Evil Empire.
- 8 Stefan thought about the issue of functional superiority. He remembered that even though Roxana was very good at her job, people kept praising her as though it was

unexpected, as though she had learned it from them. Then Alicia began to go on about how she felt so intimidated by people here. She said they repeatedly talked down at her, refused to take her behavior seriously, calling it ‘theatrical.’ She said that women seemed afraid of her stealing their men, as though she was some sort of siren. She said this was evident in the way these women shot possessive looks at their husbands if the latter got into any sort of conversation with her during social occasions. Then, the husbands themselves seemed extremely cautious and uncomfortable about saying anything to her at all when their wives were not present. Alicia said she hated how these so-called ‘feminist’ women referred to her as being nothing more than ‘glamorous’ and ‘decorative.’ She said that where she comes from women are far more adult, trusting, and less possessive of how men and women behave with each other.

- 9 At this point Stefan had had enough and told Alicia that, as much as he liked her, she needed to stop taking all this too seriously. He really was surprised that someone with such a strong personality could feel so intimidated.
- 10 Later on, back in the office, Stefan’s colleague, Jane, was talking about Roxana. She said that Roxana’s behavior could be explained in terms of her culture—that Roxana didn’t realize, even after ‘being here so long,’ that in the culture of the country she was living in people were critical of women being submissive regarding material gender roles. Stefan immediately remembered what Alicia said about feminism and felt even more confused.

Taylor & Francis

Countries of origin?

As a general rule I do not reveal the characters’ countries of origin because this would invoke in the reader national or civilizational culture stereotypes. Even if known to be false, they would get in the way of analysis (Baumann 1996, 1–2). They are voiced or implied only by the characters to indicate that they are their constructions.

I do however employ ‘Ex’ (also in Holliday and Amadasi 2020) as Roxana’s fictitious heritage, to represent the tacit construction of the so-imagined ‘exotic’ that seems recognized by all the characters. Alicia’s announcement that she comes from the same part of the world as Roxana (par. 5) also allows the implication that Stefan and his colleagues are, by contrast, Western, and that her resistance is against the ‘viscerally felt’ power of the West (see Jabri 2013, 11, 5).

Leaving of statements of origin to the characters also recognizes how the imposition of where one ‘comes from’ can itself be a form of micro-aggression when implying a lack of right to ‘be here.’ It therefore heeds Quijano’s assertion that decoloniality recognizes ‘a freedom to choose between various cultural orientations’ (2007, 178) in resistance against colonialism and nation-states organizing people into separate ‘geocultural identities’ (171). That this labeling may indeed change dependent on who is speaking to whom is well-reported in Baumann’s (1996) ethnography of a multicultural London suburb. That Alicia says that she is ‘from a part of the world’ that enables her to understand what is going on with Roxana therefore implies not a Center-defining ‘nation’ or ‘culture’ but a geopolitical area that has, in her terms, particular power relations with the West.

Stefan and searching disbelief

I pursue what I think is a common disbelief in micro-aggression by presenting Stefan as ambivalent about what he sees going on with Roxana. I present him as a partially non-committed onlooker (par. 3) to better show his perception of the different ‘sides’ to what is going on and

how he forms his views. Although his initial observation of how Roxana is treated (par. 1) makes him appreciate the required diversity training, he is still unsure that aggression is actually taking place (par. 6, 8, 9). He gets bored with Alicia ‘going on’ about it (par. 8). The possible, in his terms, innocence of Roxana’s treatment is also implicit in my choice of title, ‘It’s what you wear’—as though ‘it is not us who are marginalizing *you* until *you* break the rules that *we* have established for ourselves.’ He does nevertheless seem to appreciate what a cruelly excluding topic ‘what you wear’ can also be. Situating the aggression amongst women colleagues, while corresponding with what people upon whom I have based the characters of Roxana and Alicia have told me, also enables Stefan to distance himself from it as somehow ‘their affair’ rather than his. While the micro-aggression is explained to him by Alicia (par. 5–8), it is not explicitly stated to him until the final paragraph, when, despite thinking more about the connections she has presented to him, it is still not certain what he concludes.

Even if Stefan disapproves of Roxana’s treatment, I show him recognizing the narrative of the ‘wasteful and extravagant’ Other as a fact with which he possibly colludes. Therefore, even when Roxana breaks the stereotype of the ‘passive non-West’ by being talkative, she still falls into the corrupt extravagance narrative by ‘talking things up’ (par. 4), especially when referring to ‘the South of France’ (par. 3) as the beginning of the ‘extravagant’ South and East—all of which fit the grand narrative proposed by Alicia (par. 7). However, again, while Stefan recognizes the grand narrative, he still might not think it is Othering or indeed racist. This therefore hints at how we are all, to use Fairclough’s (1995, 36) phrase, ‘standardly unaware’ of the racist nature of narratives which we employ.

This depiction of disbelief is based on my personal insider knowledge of Stefan’s implied ‘whiteness,’ and its denial of its Other-defining, Center, colonizing racism on account of its claimed ‘well-wishing’ Western gaze (Delanty, Jones, and Wodak 2011) which I refer to elsewhere as the West as steward discourse (Holliday 2019, 79–80).

Alicia and the Orientalist grand narrative

I also keep Roxana’s perception of how she is treated unclear throughout the account. I voice this instead through Alicia (par. 5–8), based on her own felt injustice at being thought of as having brought nothing of value from her background. This is partly to indicate that it can take others to rationalize the nature of such aggression. I place what is in effect the Orientalist grand narrative (Edward Said 1978), which I believe to be a major source of intercultural prejudice (Holliday 2011, 71–4; 2022), into her words to indicate a personal sense-making of the theory, as it is meaningful to her, with whatever accuracies and inaccuracies that might involve. This also reflects how I, like Stefan, first heard about Orientalism as recounted by a friend who is one of the inspirations for Alicia, and was set upon a personal learning trajectory to find ways to deCenter. I aim to show that the authenticity of these theories therefore depends on how they resonate with our lives and how we speak into them.

Alicia’s critique of ‘so-called “feminist” women’ (par. 8) has some basis in critiques of ‘Western feminism’ not appreciating Eastern women’s long-standing fight against patriarchy (Afshar 2007; Rostami-Povey 2007, 113, 119). It is, again, her relating her own life experience of this that makes it important—to recount her personal anger at having her personal feminism and gender-related social skills doubted because of ‘where she comes from.’ It is also important to note that Alicia herself essentializes the presumably ‘Western’ women who attack her as lacking ‘adult’ attitudes to gender relations because of where *they* ‘come from.’ Again, I leave it to readers to surmise whether she believes this also racist stereotyping, or whether this is ‘strategic essentialism’ (Danius and Jonsson 1993, interviewing Spivak)—what she needs to do in her struggle to claim Center ground for herself, in her own terms (see Stuart Hall 1991, 35).

Roxana's silence

By keeping Roxana only spoken about by others, I wish to imply how aggression can go on relentlessly without being mentioned by many of its victims. I have heard numerous successful professional people, who have lived 'here' for many decades, tell me that they have learnt silently to 'put up' with racist aggression. This perhaps unexpected phenomenon is well reported by Kebabi's (forthcoming) study of high-status employees in British universities, including of 'nearby' Southern European origin. As with Alicia and Roxana, the hesitancy with which I name their 'origin' represents the ambivalence of Kebabi's respondents regarding the common labels imposed upon them.

I do though present Roxana as being vocal in ways that annoy her colleagues (par. 2–3). We do not however know what is behind her statements and whether or not they are her own attempt at strategic essentialism—feeding back the stereotype that is expected of her to gain personal space, or as her way of opposing, by exaggerating 'extravagance,' the dominant Western imagery that Alicia complains about.

Jane, the punchline, and food for discussion

In the very final paragraph of the account, I introduce Jane, one of the colleagues that Stefan has heard talking about Roxana. This is the first time that I allow an explicit voicing of the essentialist narrative that Alicia has described. Hardly any of the detail that Alicia has recounted is there though. Readers, like Stefan, are therefore left wondering about the extent that what she says amounts to Orientalist racist Othering. The key 'evidence' is in Jane saying what Roxana should have learned after 'being here so long,' thus denying that she has brought anything of value to the 'culture' in which she now lives—implying that she is a foreigner from an incompatible 'other culture.'

Leaving much in the creative non-fiction open to interpretation and discussion is one of the aims in engaging readers in a discussion about what is going on. It is hoped that the characters are sufficiently recognizable and unfinished to allow readers to find multiple resonances that lead them also to question themselves.

The nature of intercultural mediation

The picture of intercultural mediation supported by this use of creative non-fiction is not one of people from distinct cultures, large or small, learning how to understand each other and find resolution. It is not a vignette of 'intercultural contact' or 'intercultural dialogue,' as in, e.g., Kramsch and Uryu (2020) and Deardorff (2020), respectively. Creative non-fiction is instead a device that helps to explore and make sense of the *blocks* that substantiate intercultural prejudices and the *deCentering threads* that dissolve them (Amadasi and Holliday 2018). Intercultural here is not between cultures but refers to how we position and reposition in the everyday experience of hybrid cultural diversity.

Fig 24.1

A map of this process is my grammar of culture (Holliday 2011, 131; 2019; 2022, 20) in Figure 24.1, following C Wright Mills' (1959/1970, 234–5) "grammar of the socio-logical imagination." It indicates the potential for threads and the sources of blocks (in italics) that come to play in the everyday practice of small culture formation on the go (center right).

Regarding the creative non-fiction example in this chapter, also discussed in Holliday (2019, 103–4), the grammar helps us to understand that:

- Alicia brings the *cultural resources* (left of the figure) of knowledge of postcolonial theory and gender agency from her background and *personal cultural trajectory* (right center) which she also associates with Roxana. She claims this as a *deCentered thread* that she carries to the West.
- Jane makes the *essentialist statements about 'culture'* (right of figure) that 'we are critical of women being submissive regarding material gender roles.' This is a *Center block* that excludes Roxana and represents the '*us*'-'*them*' *grand narrative* (bottom left) referred to by Alicia.

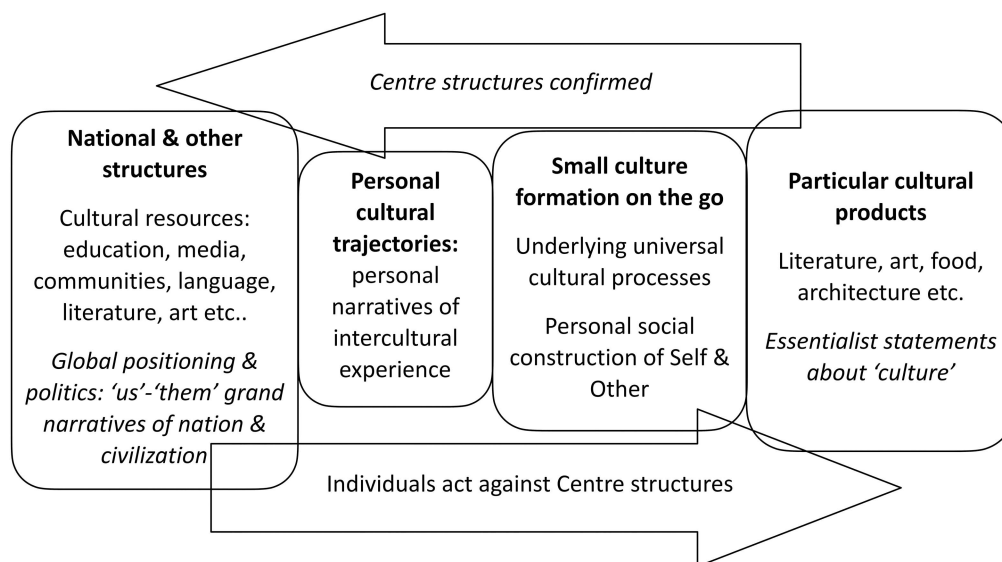


Figure 24.1 Grammar of culture

- Stefan refers to the *cultural product* (right of the figure) of power dressing as an attempted thread with Roxana.
- Regarding the arrows (top and bottom), depressingly, despite Alicia's attempted *action against Center structures*, the major *block* is that the *Center structures are confirmed*.

This list is by no means exhaustive and does not claim to be a definitive interpretation. The grammar invites readers to continue to explore what is going on in the creative non-fiction.

The outcome in this particular case may indeed seem depressing in that there is no resolution for Roxana; and Alicia does not allude to success in being recognized for who she is at a personal level. However, the story in this creative non-fiction is by no means finished. Readers have witnessed and may identify with Alicia's analysis and Stefan's ambivalence in at least remembering what she has told him when he hears Jane's statement. They have been exposed to a deCentered narrative. It is not in the necessary nature of creative non-fiction that things are not resolved within the storyline. However, even in cases where characters do show evidence of successful mediation, these are only small steps in an ongoing story of intercultural conflict and prejudice that is created by the continuing 'us'-'them' politics of the world we live in.

At the same time, the particular example in this chapter demonstrates the deeply difficult nature of the decoloniality project—in finding deCentered threads to connect with such as Roxana's ostensibly 'well-wishing' colleagues and overturning the West as steward discourse.

References

- Afshar, Haleh. 2007. "Muslim Women and Feminisms: Illustrations from the Iranian Experience." *Social Compass* 54 (3): 419–34. 10.1177/0037768607080838
- Agar, Michael. 1990. "Text and Fieldwork: Exploring the Excluded Middle." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 19 (1): 73–88. 10.1177/089124190019001004
- Amadasi, Sara, and Adrian Holliday. 2018. "'I Already Have a Culture.' Negotiating Competing Grand and Personal Narratives in Interview Conversations with New Study Abroad Arrivals." *Language and Intercultural Communication* 18 (2): 241–56. 10.1080/14708477.2017.1357727

- Baumann, Gerd. 1996. *Contesting Culture: Discourses of Identity in Multi-Ethnic London*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Beck, Ulrich, and Natan Sznaider. 2006. "Unpacking Cosmopolitanism for the Social Sciences: A Research Agenda." *The British Journal of Sociology* 57 (1): 1–23. 10.1111/j.1468-4446.2006.00091.x
- Bhabha, Homi K. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Canagarajah, Suresh. 2011. "Translanguaging in the Classroom: Emerging Issues for Research and Pedagogy." *Applied Linguistics Review* 2 (2011): 1–28. 10.1515/9783110239331.1
- Clifford, James, and George E. Marcus, eds. 1986. *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.
- Danius, Sara, and Stefan Jonsson. 1993. "An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak." *Boundary 2* 20 (2): 24. 10.2307/303357
- Deardorff, Darla K. 2020. *Manual for Developing Intercultural Competencies: Story Circles*. New York: Routledge. 10.4324/9780429244612
- Delanty, Gerard, Paul Jones, and Ruth Wodak. 2011. "Introduction: Migration, Discrimination and Belonging in Europe." In *Identity, Belonging and Migration*, edited by Gerard Delanty, Ruth Wodak, and Paul Jones, 1–18. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. 10.5949/UPO9781846314537.001
- Fairclough, Norman. 1995. *Critical Discourse Analysis. The Critical Study of Language*. London: Longman.
- Flam, Helena, and Brigitte Beauzamy. 2011. "Symbolic Violence." In *Identity, Belonging and Migration*, edited by Gerard Delanty, Ruth Wodak, and Paul Jones, 221–40. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. 10.5949/UPO9781846314537.012
- Goodson, Ivor. 2006. "The Rise of the Life Narrative." *Teacher Education Quarterly* 33 (4): 7–21.
- Hall, Stuart. 1991. "The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity." In *Culture, Globalization and the World System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, edited by Anthony D. King, 19–40. New York: Palgrave.
- Hall, Stuart. 1996. "The Question of Cultural Identity." In *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*, edited by Stuart Hall, David Held, Don Hubert and Kenneth Thompson, 595–634. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Holliday, Adrian. 2011. *Intercultural Communication and Ideology*. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC: Sage. 10.4135/9781446269107
- Holliday, Adrian. 2019. *Understanding Intercultural Communication: Negotiating a Grammar of Culture*. 2nd edition. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge; Routledge. 10.4324/9781351139526
- Holliday, Adrian. 2022. *Contesting Grand Narratives of the Intercultural*. London: Routledge. 10.4324/9781003039174
- Holliday, Adrian, and Sara Amadasi. 2020. *Making Sense of the Intercultural. Finding DeCentered Threads*. London, New York: Routledge. 10.4324/9781351059190
- Jabri, Vivienne. 2013. *The Postcolonial Subject. Claiming Politics/Governing Others in Late Modernity*. London: Routledge. 10.4324/9780203112250
- Kebabi, Amina. forthcoming. 'Identity' and 'Belonging' in the Personal Lives of High-Status Professionals Living in the UK: Racism, and Freedom in Material and Non-Material 'Culture'. Unpublished PhD project in preparation. Faculty of Arts Humanities & Education, Canterbury Christ Church University.
- Kramsch, Claire, and Michiko Uryu. 2020. "A Global Agenda for Ethical Language and Intercultural Communication Research and Practice." In *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Intercultural Communication*, edited by Jane Jackson, 204–18. London: Routledge.
- Kumaravadivelu, Balasubramanian. 2007. *Cultural Globalization and Language Education*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Liotard, Jean-François. 1979. *The Postmodern Condition. A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press.
- MacPherson, William. 1999. *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry: Report of an Inquiry*. Command Papers 4262–1. London: The Stationery Office.
- Mills, Charles Wright. 1959/1970. *The Sociological Imagination*. Reprint. A Pelican Book. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Quijano, Aníbal. 2007. "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality." *Cultural Studies* 21 (2–3): 168–78. 10.1080/09502380601164353
- Rostami-Povey, Elaheh. 2007. *Afghan Women: Identity and Invasion*. New York: Zed Books.
- Said, Edward W. 1978. *Orientalism*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Soja, Edward W. 1996. *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Wodak, Ruth. 2021. "Re/Nationalising EU-Rope: National Identities, Right-Wing Populism, and Border-and Body-Politics." In *National Stereotyping, Identity Politics, European Crises*, edited by Jürgen Barkhoff and Joep Leerssen, 95–121. Amsterdam: Brill. 10.1163/9789004436107_007