

Constructing Cultural Identities: Migration of Culture(s) Symposium
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Migration Beyond the Second Generation: Ancestry and Identity in Historical and Fictional Narratives

This paper is an exploration of ancestry and cultural identity in texts which fall into various genres, including history and fiction. The main focus will be on the Irish-Australian authors Thomas Keneally and Christopher Koch, and the ways in which they deploy ancestry to aid in the construction of a hyphenated Irish-Australian cultural identity. It will suggest further possibilities for research into ancestry so that familial origins can be seen as rhizomes rather than roots.

Many studies of the effects of migration on cultural identity focus on the first and second generations – that is, migrants themselves or their children. These two groups experience the effects of migration in markedly different ways. However, in the study of ancestral narratives the researcher must take a particularly long view of migration, since the ancestor usually lived at least three generations in the past. This further complicates the cultural flows and currents which Arjun Appadurai has identified.

As with many studies of migration and cultural identity, the study of ancestry is markedly interdisciplinary. When reading ancestral narratives, whether fiction or non-fiction, the reader is forced to approach the text from various directions, rather than simply reading it as literature. Instead, the reader must consider history, politics, philosophy, religion, sociology, anthropology and cultural analysis, to name just a few. This presents challenges for a linear model of scholarship which is based on the mastery of a particular discipline. These are the types of challenges which Patrick O’Sullivan confronts in his six-volume study *The Irish World-Wide: History, Heritage, Identity*. While these challenges are naturally difficult for researchers to confront and overcome, they also provide unique opportunities for the study of a cultural phenomenon which, by definition, transgresses borders.

While the study of migration and cultural identity does transgress disciplinary boundaries, it also works across genres of writing. The two broad genres this paper will address are history and fiction. Of course, the two are not merely mutually exclusive, but they can be separated for the sake of discussion.

In historical narratives, writers such as Robert Hughes and Patrick Howard explore the experience of forced migration to Australia, or the transportation of convicts during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Thomas Keneally does the same in his most recent non-fiction, *The Commonwealth of Thieves*. Such texts aim to present this history to a popular audience but must deal with issues such as the interpretation of history and the essentialisation of experience. In *The Great Shame* Keneally looks much more explicitly at Irish migration, and his focus on settlers as well as convicts problematises the issue of free will in migration studies. All of these texts must also contend with the fact that popular history inevitably draws on narrative structures which are borrowed from the novel, especially in the case of Keneally.

Because of this, historical fiction is also a common choice for the exploration of cultural identity through ancestral migrations. In novels such as *Bring Larks and Heroes* and *Schindler's Ark* Keneally sketches the outlines of a proto-nation: his characters form a cast of national prototypes which implicitly constructs a hyphenated cultural identity. *Bettany's Book* does the same through an explicit ancestral narrative, but it also questions the assumptions of Australian settler culture and depicts characters who do not take a triumphalist national narrative for granted.

On the other hand, Christopher Koch is concerned with the construction of male gender identity in *Highways To A War* and *Out Of Ireland*. He also differs from Keneally in that his ancestral identification is based on a lack, or absence: the descendant experiences his family origins as a type of festering wound hidden under the surface. For this reason Koch's outlook tends to be much darker and more pessimistic.

In all of these texts the construction of cultural identity through migration experiences is considerably complicated by a focus on ancestry rather than more recent migration. This situation creates distinct problems since the historical distance means that one must rely on memory, which can challenge the perceived authenticity of ancestral identification. However, the advantage is in the creativity and flexibility which this distance allows: there is more potential for the transformation of conventional identities. Given a long view of migration through ancestral narratives it is much more possible to conceive of identity in terms of a rhizomic structure rather than a purist, linear notion of ancestry as the roots of an individual or family. This is merely one possibility for the future direction of research into ancestral narratives.