

H-France Review Vol. 16 (September 2016), No. 199

Jerrold Seigel, *Between Cultures: Europe and its Others in Five Exemplary Lives*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. 275 pp. Bibliography and index. \$49.95 U.S. (hb). 978-0-8122-4761-9.

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In *Between Cultures*, the distinguished intellectual historian Jerrold Seigel examines the lives and writings of five figures who have lived—by choice as well as, in some of the cases, by necessity—between Europe and another culture, in the shadow or the aftermath of colonialism. The career of his first subject, the British explorer, writer, translator, diplomat, and spy Richard Francis Burton, stretched across the mid- and late nineteenth century. His final example, the acclaimed Turkish writer and 2006 Nobel Prize laureate, Orhan Pamuk, is still active. Between these two figures, Seigel explores the careers of the British army officer, diplomat and memorialist, T.E. Lawrence, the French orientalist, Louis Massignon, and the acclaimed Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe. As this initial summary suggests, Seigel approaches questions of cultural identity, difference, and hybridity through the lens of intellectual biography. If intellectual history as a field has often been criticized for abstracting concepts from contexts, Seigel, in this book, maintains that we can only understand what the idea of inter- or bi-culturality means by considering the ways in which it has been lived.

Over the last three decades, academic reflections on inter-culturality have essentially fallen into two camps. While some celebrate it as an antidote to racism, orientalism, and other forms of cultural essentialism and identitarianism, others see it as a side effect of cultural domination. Embracing one's cultural hybridity, this second group suggests, ultimately amounts to living on terms prescribed by a hegemonic Western culture, while maintaining a superficial, all too often exoticized, connection to another place. On this perspective, Western scholars and writers' interest in knowing other cultures can never be fully disentangled from the colonial project of knowledge-gathering, while non-western intellectuals' commitment to "living between" is viewed, with suspicion, as a sign of assimilation.

Seigel's approach to the question is at once more skeptical and more generous. He recognizes the effort to live between cultures as a genuine and, in many ways, laudable intellectual and ethical project, albeit one that is constrained by many limits and fraught with tensions. He accords his five subjects the benefit of the doubt, even when, as in the case of Burton, they're far from being immune to accusations of racism. *Beyond Cultures* reminds me, in this respect, of the late critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's observation that, in our concern with unmasking the mechanics of power, we often fall into an accusatory mode that leads us to reproduce the very stereotypes and binarisms that we're trying to deconstruct.[1] Eschewing this kind of relentless suspicion, Seigel portrays the attempt to live between cultures in a positive light, while also highlighting the failures to which it is subject. Straddling two cultures, he argues, brings rich rewards yet it is not always a happy or innocent state.

Beyond Cultures is a well-written book that engagingly combines narrative and synthesis as Seigel lays out the twists and turns of his subjects' interpretative journeys. It will find an audience among scholars of history and literature, and it will also speak to lay readers who are interested in the topic as a whole

or in one or more of the figures whom Seigel examines. Some readers, however, may feel frustrated by the book's limited engagement with the body of theoretical writing devoted to hybridity and diasporic or transnational identities. *Beyond Cultures* makes no reference, for example, to Homi Bhabha, who is widely considered to be the leading theorist of cultural hybridity and "third spaces," and while it has much to say about dressing-up, disguise and masquerade, there's no reference to Judith Butler's influential work on the performativity of identity. The introduction and conclusion to the volume are concise, reflecting Seigel's limited engagement with the critical literature on the topic. Though this probably stems from a deliberate choice to privilege life histories over theoretical abstractions, I for one wished that Seigel had done more to connect his expositions to these concepts.

The introduction focuses instead on the reasons behind the selection of Burton, Lawrence, Massignon, Achebe, and Pamuk. Seigel defines the criteria that he has applied, the qualities that unite his subjects and his decision to incorporate historical and geopolitical diversity. He explains that each of his five figures not only inhabited two worlds but also self-consciously cultivated bicultural identity. Each also generated a substantial body of documentation, not least his own published or manuscript writings and correspondence. One of the strengths of the book is that it privileges these writings over external analyses. Rather than imposing his own descriptions of how it feels to live between cultures, Seigel draws, as much as possible, on his subjects' own words: "being able to draw on a rich archive makes it possible to examine their careers and experiences in terms they developed themselves, native to them as individuals, rather than imposing some vocabulary or conceptual idiom from the outside," he explains (pp. 10-11). But while the choice to use his subjects' own words is commendable, it also seems to lead to some questionable exclusions.

One of these boils down to the relation between the experience of elite figures such as writers and diplomats and the many other people who find themselves living between cultures. Seigel argues that deliberate experimentation and self-reflection sets his five subjects apart from these masses, "among them immigrants, many Jews throughout history, Islamicized Christians in medieval Spain, and various hyphenated peoples throughout the globe today," who navigate between different cultures. He specifically excludes immigrants on the basis that they are principally engaged in transitioning from one culture to another, though he concedes this process may take several generations. This seems to me, however, to be a questionable assertion. Many immigrants strive to hold onto important aspects of their culture of origin while at the same time embracing local laws and customs. As the eloquent sociologist of migration Abdelmalek Sayad observes, "To immigrate means to immigrate together with one's history (immigration itself being an integral part of that history), with one's traditions, ways of living, feeling, acting and thinking, with one's language, one's religion and all the other social, political and mental structures of one's society."^[2] And if a complete transition requires several generations, can't the lifespan of a single immigrant include the kinds of conflicts and attempts at synthesis described by the more prominent figures he examines? The implicit division between intellectuals and the masses reminds me of the one drawn by Edward Said, in the essay "Reflections on Exile," between writers and political dissidents whose exile has the fringe benefit of being *bon à penser* ("Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience," he writes in the opening sentence), and the masses whose forced displacement has fewer (or perhaps other) compensations.^[3] If Said and Seigel have a point, some topicality is lost in the decision to focus on lives which—as *Beyond Culture's* subtitle registers—are "exemplary," yet scarcely representative.

A second major exclusion is that of women, the five figures whom Seigel considers all being men. Seigel explains that he had hoped to include one or more women and gives a list of potential candidates: Lady Esther Stanhope, Mary Worley Montagu, Isabelle Eberhardt, Pearl Buck, and Ruth Prawer-Jabvahl, among others. But he concludes, as though wanting to dismiss a decision that he can't really defend, that "it would create too bulky a digression to try to justify all of these exclusions here but none seems to me to offer the rich texture of materials provided by the figures included" (p. 11). Instead of adding a bulky digression, Seigel should simply have included women. Since, as he explains at several junctures, gender

and sexuality play a major role in shaping human experience within and between cultures, there's every reason to examine women's viewpoints as well as men's. It has been a basic insight of feminism that if the criteria or standards being applied exclude women, then the problem probably lies with the standards. But I'm actually not convinced that there are no women who meet the criteria that Seigel applies. An example that comes to mind is the writer Assia Djébar, who lived physically and intellectually between Algeria and France, drawing on both French and Algerian cultural traditions. In 1956, with the Algerian revolution underway, Djébar gave up a prestigious place at the *École normale supérieure* and headed to Tunis, where she wrote for the nationalist mouthpiece *El Moujahid*. A half century later, in 2005, she became the first Algerian to enter the *Académie française*. Between these two defining moments she wrote constantly, in both autobiographical and fictional texts, about her relationship to France and Algeria, and about a cultural heritage marked by both hybridity and difference.

One of the main conceptual goals of *Beyond Cultures* is to reflect on what exactly we mean when we talk about "cultures" and to what extent cultures determine individual experiences. Drawing on the insights of thinkers ranging from Nietzsche to Thomas Nagel, Seigel argues persuasively that to live between cultures means viewing both one's culture of origin and another culture as being, at the same time, partial, fallible and worthy of defense and preservation. He observes that while no one ever fully inhabits a culture, it's nonetheless almost impossible to live without the behavioral norms and forms of solidarity that cultures provide. In the conclusion, he offers a dialectical account of how cultures operate, arguing that identity, whether individual or cultural, is contingent on difference. Both individuals and cultures, he argues, become themselves by imitating and borrowing from others. They are works in progress, engaged in an endless process of becoming or transformation. The only state in which someone can be said to be identical to him or herself, immune from change and indifferent to the mimetic draw of the other, is death. This point emerges eloquently from a story within a story that appears in Orhan Pamuk's novel *The Black Book*, which Seigel cites in the final chapter. In this tale, an Ottoman Prince who wishes to "become fully himself" gives up reading and communicating with others and starts imagining himself as a rock or a stone—a desire for stasis that presages his death (p. 220). Seigel also offers a dialectical account of the relationship between culture and sexual identity. He argues, in a Freudian spirit, that while desire leads us to transgress cultural interdictions, including those pertaining to race, class, and gender, such transgressions are a mode of engagement with the law as boundary rather than an attempt to dismantle it.

Seigel acknowledges that some will regard the very idea that there are distinct cultures as a misguided attempt to build fences around practices and norms that don't constitute separate or integral wholes. On this view, there is no "European" or "Arab" culture, but rather shadings of similarity and difference, and zones of hybridity. Some of those who reject the binarism of East and West prefer categories such as the "Mediterranean" or the "Atlantic world" that acknowledge the role of cultures, but see them as continuums forged through exchange rather than as discrete entities. Though Seigel doesn't necessarily reject these positions, he defends the categories of East (or South) and West by insisting on their performative quality. Since his subjects all wrote extensively about the contrast between the West and the rest and tried to situate themselves in relation to these poles, they may be said to exist. He nonetheless repeatedly nuances this claim by acknowledging that cultures are mutable and interconnected.

Each of the lives examined in the book represents a different mode of intercultural existence and raises a different set of questions. Richard Francis Burton, deeply alienated from Victorian British culture, felt an almost compulsive attraction to India, Persia, and the Arabic-speaking world—feelings nourished by his deep knowledge of their literary traditions, which in turn was made possible by his prodigious gift for languages (in general, I'd have liked to hear more about the role of languages: when and how the various subjects learned foreign tongues, how fluent they became, etc.). But Burton also held starkly racist views on Africans and Jews. Seigel struggles to explain the fact that Burton wrote about these

groups in terms that alternated between a cultural and a biological understanding of race. More historical background on the history of racial thought would have served to contextualize these slippages. From its first emergence, thinking about “race” has been heterogeneous and internally fractured. If the overall trajectory has been from geography and culture to biology and genetics, we nonetheless encounter biological claims at early moments and cultural ones much later on. In addition, while Seigel’s discussion of Burton is long and richly detailed, I would have liked to hear more about his role as translator of the *Arabian Nights*, not least because the *Nights* corpus is itself an exemplary product of intercultural relations.

T.E. Lawrence emerges as the most tormented of the five figures. Less given to racism than Burton and less prone to disguise and manipulation, he nonetheless promoted an Arab revolt against Ottoman rule while knowing all along that the terms of the secret Sykes-Picot agreement would impede the creation of a united Arab nation. Seigel deftly handles Lawrence’s guilt over this betrayal and the complex manner in which he positioned himself in relation to the British establishment. Much of the chapter is devoted to analyzing Lawrence’s complex psychology, which, by the account that Lawrence himself gave in *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, was marked by a deep concern with personal integrity and purity, and the feeling of being divided into lower and higher orders. But Seigel conscientiously resists the temptation, to which some other scholars have succumbed, of attributing Lawrence’s idiosyncrasies and distinctions to his sexuality, or worse, of according explanatory power to his possible homosexuality.

Louis Massignon met Lawrence when he was deputized to François-Georges Picot, but the already famous Englishman barely acknowledged his existence. Unlike those of his British counterpart, Massignon’s critical attitude toward imperialism took shape slowly. During his service in World War I he was less clear-sighted than Lawrence about the aims, methods, and effects of European colonial power. By the time of the Algerian War of Independence, however, he’d become a staunch opponent of France’s refusal of Algeria’s independence. Massignon’s attraction to Arab and Persian culture was inflected by his religious piety. A specialist of the medieval Sufi master Mansur al-Hallaj, his Catholic spirituality was nourished by his study of Hallaj’s mysticism. Seigel finds that in Massignon’s case, affinity with another religion and its modes of cultural expression was interwoven, at least indirectly, with his sexuality. He presents evidence that if Massignon immersed himself in Catholic and Islamic spirituality it was in part to overcome the feelings of attraction to other men that he first experienced when he was a student in Syria.

I feel that Seigel’s discussion of Massignon, the leading orientalist of his day, would have been enriched by a more sustained attempt to situate him within the field of oriental studies, of which he was a leading light. Instead, Seigel reserves the question of orientalism until the book’s conclusion, in which he briefly debates the ideas of Edward Said. Seigel argues that by seeing in orientalism only the will to dominate, Said loses sight of the destabilization of self and attraction to the other that it often involves. Though this argument may carry some legitimacy, it should be noted that many readers have proposed important amendments to Said. Some of these argue that alternative or counter-discourses, such as those that evince a deep attraction to Arab culture, far from undermining Western hegemony, may further empower it.

The first non-European subject whom Seigel considers, Chinua Achebe, is the one whose life was most directly shaped by colonialism and also the first of the two novelists examined in the book. The chapter devoted to him hones in on the relationships among life, biography, and fiction, asking how life shapes novels and to what extent the latter capture, depart from, or, in some cases, have an impact on life. A defender of African cultures against the encroachments of colonialism, Achebe was also a critic of those local practices which, perhaps due to his Western education, he saw as barbarous. Seigel takes the interesting decision to compare him to two near contemporaries who were also leading lights of the first wave of modern African literature: the Senegalese writer Cheikh Hamidou Kane and the Sudanese Tayeb Salih. As Seigel explains, while all three dealt in their works with colonialism, decolonization,

and relations between the colonizer and the colonized, there were also differences of language (Achebe wrote in English, Kane in French, Salih in Arabic) and of religious affiliation. Though these comparisons are interesting, I wonder if they're necessary given Seigel's acknowledgment that interculturality takes many forms. Some readers may in fact wonder why the one African writer examined in the book is treated as a member of a generation or literary cohort whereas his white or European counterparts aren't.

The final chapter, on Orhan Pamuk, considers the case of a writer who is deeply reflective about East-West relations and whose postmodern narratives deploy metaphors of mirroring, doppelgängers, and alternate selves to highlight the unstable relation between life and fiction. Pamuk's career is also of interest because it illustrates both the material dangers and the rewards of writing between cultures. As a critic of restrictions imposed on free speech by the Turkish authorities, he has endured censure and been decried as a western puppet at home while at the same time winning accolades abroad. Though Pamuk is certainly a remarkable writer, it's perhaps fair to say that his path to the Nobel Prize was smoothed by his status as a literary dissident, both a victim of human rights abuses and a defender of those freedoms.

Thoroughly-researched and richly textured, these five intellectual biographies elucidate the ways in which people have navigated the cultural and intellectual encounters of the colonial and post-colonial eras. As such they make a valuable contribution to ongoing debates in the study of colonial history and historiography, orientalism, and travel literature. Their limits are, to a great degree, those associated with the methodological task that *Beyond Culture* sets itself: that of approaching subjects as much as possible on their own terms rather than evaluating them in light of contemporary political sensibilities and theoretical constructs.

NOTES

[1] See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003).

[2] Abdelmalek Sayad, *The Suffering of the Immigrant*, translated by David Macey (Cambridge, Mass.: Polity Press, 2004), p. 3.

[3] Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 127.

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