

# Research paper

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## Title

**By analysing the work of Njideka Akunyili Crosby and Fiona Rae this paper will argue that transcultural art can enhance understanding of the human experience amid unprecedented levels of migration and displacement.**

## Abstract

As international migration continues to increase at an unprecedented level, there is a need to better understand the human experience of migrants and displaced people. This paper describes the meaning of transcultural in the context of the research and uses Bhabha's (1994) notion of the Third Space as a theoretical foundation to analyse the impact of migration on the artistic expressions of two contemporary transcultural artists, Njideka Akunyili Crosby and Fiona Rae. This paper also argues that Bhabha's thirty year old publication remains valid and relevant for the increasingly culturally-hybrid society today. Through understanding the artists' transcultural narratives and contrasting their work, the research provides an insight into the process of sense-making along the transcultural journey. Petersen (2017) contends that art can be an instrument of orientation and has the ability to negotiate contradictions and complexities. Petersen's notion leads to the contention by this paper that work by transcultural artists can play a role in enhancing society's understanding of the human experience of migrants and displaced people. This paper combines the research insights with botanical metaphors to highlight the differences between ways of forming affiliations or 'root planting' for the migrant and the native. This paper proceeds to argue that there is a role for the contemporary transcultural artist as a translator, mediator and bridge-builder between people and cultures in today's hybrid society where both the migrant and the native can benefit from critically understanding transcultural art to gain a better appreciation of the human conditions involved in migration.

**Keywords:** culture, transcultural art, migration, sense-making, Third Space

## Introduction

The latest World Migration Report published by The International Organization of Migration (2024) states that the estimated number of international migrants has continued to increase reaching a record of 281 million globally where the number of those displaced had already hit a record high by the end of 2022 at 117 million. Research by Eigearthaigh and Berg (2010) into the difficulties experienced by migrants as they try to adapt to life in a new country indicates that cultural differences continue to isolate and marginalise those who are not native to a particular society. With such an unprecedented rate of increase in migration, this paper argues that there is a need to better understand the human experience for migrants and their difficulties. Culture is described as ordinary by Williams (1989) who contends that every human society has its own shape, purposes as well as meaning and that every human society express these in institutions, arts and learning. Williams explains that culture is the meanings and practices of ordinary men and women that composed culture. Culture is later referred to by Williams (2002) as one of the few most complicated words in the English language. This paper will follow William's (1989) definition of 'culture is ordinary' to examine what happens when a migrant artist moves to a country where the culture is different and how migration impacts their artistic expression when they are not only transnational but also transcultural. This paper will then evaluate the role of transcultural art in enhancing the understanding of a migrant's experience. The meaning of 'transcultural' in this context is defined by Buchanan (2018, p.439) as:

The movement of ideas, influences, practices, and beliefs between cultures and the fusions that result when the ideas, influences, practices, and beliefs of different cultures come together in a specific place, text, or contact zone.

Eigeartaigh and Berg (2010) assert that prior to the nation state being at the heart of political discourse from the nineteenth century, crossing state borders did not have the same cultural implication as it does today; there was no sense that one was transnational simply from moving from one political state to another. Eigeartaigh and Berg (2010, p.7) further explain that:

The idea that states/countries and their cultures are congruent emerged from the widespread perception of the state as the legal and political expression of a sovereign, unified and culturally unique nation.

This paper argues that the contended connection between national boundaries and culture exist in our mind in a way that when we travel to a country, we would typically expect to find people practising the cultures of that country in the way described by Williams (1989) and this relationship between the state and its culture is at the centre of debates about national identity which can impact a migrant's sense of belonging.

Petersen (2017) asserts that with respect to identities in flux, art can be an instrument of orientation and positioning of oneself in the world thanks to its ability to negotiate contradictions, tensions and complexities. Petersen (2017) further explains that art can chart how identifications may shift continually and dynamically as one navigates across countries and cultures. This paper examines how a transcultural artist's expression is influenced by their lived experiences of migration from one country to another where the cultural practices are different. From the legal and political perspectives, the artist would become a transnational, however, culturally they would become transcultural through a process of cultural transmutation as they adapt to the new environment. The two

transcultural artists that have been chosen for this research are Njideka Akunyili Crosby and Fiona Rae. The background of the artists will be considered briefly with the primary focus on analysing their artistic expressions to understand how transcultural artists navigate their journey. Bhabha's (1994) notion of the Third Space will be used as the theoretical foundation for the analysis leading to an evaluation of the role of transcultural art in enhancing our understanding of the human experience amid unprecedented migration and people displacement.

This paper will be analysed through the author's lens as a transcultural artist who explores her hybrid identity through her autoethnographic art practice. The author was born in Hong Kong to Chinese parents under British Colonial rule then migrated to Britain as a teenager in 1980. As a migrant artist, the author finds resonance with both artists, especially with Akunyili Crosby's description of her Third Space in *Njideka Akunyili Crosby* (The Museum of Contemporary Art, 2018). Through this research, the author aims to evaluate the role of the transcultural artist and their art to locate her practice in an increasingly culturally-hybrid society.

## Theory

Njideka Akunyili Crosby was born in 1983 in postcolonial Nigeria. She moved to study in the USA when she was a teenager and subsequently settled in Los Angeles where she works as an artist. In her lecture, *Njideka Akunyili Crosby* (The Museum of Contemporary Art, 2018), Akunyili Crosby explains the transcultural influence on her art practice using Bhabha's notion

of the Third Space. Bhabha (1994) uses the concept of the Third Space to explore the impact of the hybrid identity borne by transnational or transcultural people. Bhabha (1994) asserts that when two cultures come together, an 'in-between' space is formed where there is an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present. The encounter creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Bhabha (1994) calls the 'in-between' space the Third Space. In *Njideka Akunyili Crosby* (The Museum of Contemporary Art, 2018), Akunyili Crosby describes the Third Space as like the intersection of a Venn diagram. The intersection is neither one culture nor the other, it is an ambivalent process that causes something new to emerge which may contain characteristics from the two cultures. Bhabha (1994) asserts that it is in the intersection space where the burden of the meaning of culture is carried and is where culture is negotiated. The transition journey within the Third Space is personalised based on one's lived experiences as discussed by Couldry (2000). Couldry (2000) asserts that each person carries with them an individual history of reflection which cannot be reduced to merely shared cultural patterns but one that is unique to them.

This paper acknowledges that the work by Bhabha (1994) was published three decades ago and cultural studies as well as our understanding of hybrid identities have evolved since. However, this paper contends that the fundamental idea of the Third Space remains relevant today because the notion of the burden of culture being carried and negotiated within an area of intersection remains true in today's society evidenced by the contemporary artist, Akunyili Crosby, who has built her art practice around the Third Space concept as she describes in her lecture *Njideka Akunyili Crosby* (The Museum of Contemporary Art, 2018,

33:19). Further evidence is captured by Grunitzky (2004) in a collection of testimonies by transcultural people about their negotiations within areas of cultural intersection with one contributor in Grunitzky (2004, p.217) stating that such day-to-day cultural navigations demand their time, effort and perseverance. Iyall Smith and Leavy (2009) list a set of empirical studies on hybrid identities with a chapter dedicated to occupying the Third Space. Iyall Smith and Leavy (2009, p.334) refer to Bhabha's description of the Third Space as being both a location and a process; offering a place to be at play in the fields of identity, traversing through large swaths of historical constructions and social contracts. Iyall Smith and Leavy (2009) contend that the study of multiracial identity might benefit from Bhabha's description of what occurs in the Third Space as theoretical scaffolds. This paper therefore contends that the work by Bhabha (1994) remains valid and relevant today as it did thirty years ago as evidenced here with a renowned contemporary artist's practice and more recent literature either reflecting Bhabha's (1994) theory or using his research as theoretical scaffold .

### **Analysis of Akunyili Crosby's work**

In *Njideka Akunyili Crosby* (The Museum of Contemporary Art, 2018), Akunyili Crosby locates her art practice in the transcultural intersection or Third Space as defined by Bhabha (1994) where characteristics of the two cultures that have influenced her are present but as a whole something new emerges and is unique to her. Akunyili Crosby refers to her Third Space as being active and alive; it is constantly changing, adopting and appropriating to form new things. Through the use of collages, Akunyili Crosby brings together different visual languages ranging from American beauty magazine images to pop art and her family

photographs to develop new and distinctive visual styles to express her transcultural narrative.

The artwork selected for analysis is *Portals* (2016) (see Fig. 1), a mixed media diptych in acrylic, transfers, coloured pencil, collage and commemorative fabric on paper. Each panel is 7x8 feet.



Fig. 1 - Akunyili Crosby, N (2016) *Portals*. Mixed media. Available at: <https://www.njidekaakunyilicrosby.com/work/portals>

The left hand panel shows a female figure that is painted based on the artist's photographs of herself. She is seated at a table appearing pensive facing the viewer. The floor and part of the wall are covered in images of family photographs as well as borrowed images from popular culture; the images are purposely faded thereby adding ambiguity to the setting. Zelt (2018) explains that Akunyili Crosby uses readymade photographs to control her narrative and to craft a representation of American identity which is multiplicitous across geographies. Akunyili Crosby's style combines her training in Western art academies with visual culture from her Nigerian heritage using mass media and personal family images. As a

result, *Portals* is simultaneously legible across multiple audiences. Whether or not an image is recognisable to a viewer is determined largely by their social experience. The push and pull between personal and public imagery is analogous to the sensory experiences of Akunyili Crosby's move to the United States from Nigeria reflecting her own lived experiences.

In *Njideka Akunyili Crosby* (The Museum of Contemporary Art, 2018), Akunyili Crosby explains that she seeks out things that exist in the Third Space for her work. One of those is the commemorative portrait fabric from Vlisco, a Dutch company that has been designing and manufacturing printed fabrics for African women since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Akunyili Crosby asserts that Vlisco developed patterns that spoke to the Nigerian women despite it being a European company and something transcultural has emerged out of the 'back and forth' adapting process with the portrait fabric being the result. Akunyili Crosby constantly looks for ways to integrate the portrait fabric into her work and the fabric is used as wall covering in *Portals*.

Examining closely, *Portals* reveals photo transfer images on the chair that the female figure is sitting in. The photo images are of the artist's wedding (see Fig. 2). Zelt (2018) asserts that it is symbolic for these personal images to bear the weight of the figure because Akunyili Crosby refers to her marriage as the 'contact zone' where she navigates the two cultures. Zelt (2018) states that Akunyili Crosby defines a contact zone as a place 'where things collide and grapple with each other' to create something new. This area of the painting acts as a

contact zone on multiple levels where it brings together the artist's painting skill with her use of image transfers compositionally whilst creating a foundation for the seated figure.



Fig. 2 – Close-up details from *Portals*. Akunyili Crosby (2016).

The panel on the right of the installation shares the same setting but without the figure.

This paper argues that the framed pictures stacked on the floor represent the intention to make a home but their placement on the floor and the missing figure imply a temporary and transitory existence.

### **Analysis of Rae's work**

Fiona Rae was born in 1963 in Hong Kong. She lived in different countries in Asia while growing up before moving to Britain where she received her art education. She now lives and works in London as an artist. In FT Arts (2011), Rae acknowledges the different cultural

influences in her work and she describes the two styles as being in dialogue with each other rather than clashing. The Royal Academy (s.d.) describes Rae's work as full of restless energy, humour and complexity, which has set out to challenge and expand the modern conventions of painting. The research finds two aspects of Rae's paintings where transculturalism is evident; they are her use of symbolic images and her gestural brushstrokes. Two pieces of work have been selected to illustrate these points respectively.

In FT Arts (2011), Rae responds to the question of her use of pop images by explaining that the unusual or 'not meant to happen' appeals to her; by placing images that are not meant to carry high emotional or superior feelings next to expressive brush marks, an interesting dialogue takes place. Rae (2009) states that the way she makes paintings reflects the way she experiences the world and therefore inevitably what she is like as a person. Rae (2012) expands on this point by explaining that if she were told not to disrupt the picture plane then she would wish to do so immediately as an act of defiance against high modernist painterliness. She would use graphic signs, symbols, recognizable images and cartoons, spray paint, glitter, whatever seems like a good idea at the time. It is not something that she questions in a self-conscious way but she feels it is vital to forge ahead with all the energy, positivity and self-belief that she could muster giving an idea of the way she approaches her art spontaneously.

Referring to Rae's childhood in Aisa before moving to the UK, Presneill (2021) asserts that as a child moving around, Rae started to see elements that were out-of-context and then come to recognising the self as the loci for bringing the disparate elements together for sense-

making. Her paintings therefore reflect her experience of trying to make sense of the world through engaging with all the different parts. Presneill (2021) explains that Rae does not experience the world as a complete whole with clearly delineate boundaries and she feels a mismatch between herself and the outside world. Presneill (2021) further contends that as artists, we filter the world through our histories as well as experiences and what comes out is a mixture of both; it does not imply anything and the meaning of the painting is fluid with the work taking up a life of its own during the making process and afterwards. This fluidness and its constant evolving nature is aligned with Bhabha's (1994) notion of the Third Space in the case of Rae's work where the push and pull between Asian and Western artistic styles signifying the cultural negotiations that take place along her journey.

In *Art in Yorkshire* (2012), Rae discusses how she responds to images that she has seen and the painting, *Maybe you can live on the moon in the next century* (2009), size 72 x 59 inch (see Fig. 3), is an example of how she uses kitsch images of a panda and love hearts to interrupt her brushstrokes demonstrating her approach of adding features that are unexpected or 'not meant to happen' in order to create an interesting dialogue between cultures. Patel (2012) describes this painting as mining the tension and anxiety produced by cultural signs that are inevitably decontextualised in the global flow of information. Patel (2012) further asserts that the ambiguous piercing gazes of the panda evoke just as much a sense of menace as of cloying cuteness; and the push and pull between these two is underscored in the occasional clash between exuberant, romantic colours and moody dark washes. Patel (2012) believes that the overall work sidesteps sugarcoating globalisation and suggesting there is something inherently sinister about it.



Fig. 3 – Rae, F. (2009) *Maybe you can live on the moon in the next century*. Oil and acrylic on canvas. Available at: <https://fiona-rae.com/paintings/2007-11/maybe-you-can-live-on-the-moon-in-the-next-century/>

Throughout the different periods of her artistic development, Rae's work continues to be highly gestural with her brushstrokes reminiscent of Chinese calligraphy techniques. In BBC Art and Artists series (2014), Rae is seen in her studio starting a new gestural painting with several works of Chinese calligraphy displayed in her studio (see Fig. 4) demonstrating her interest in Chinese art which appears to influence her work.



Fig. 4 – Rae’s studio image from BBC Art and Artists series (2014). Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p026gcbz>

Examining her brushstrokes more closely, they exhibit the ‘flying white’ technique as frequently used in Chinese calligraphy. Schardt (1995, p.43) describes ‘flying white’ or ‘feibai’ as a method of applying pressure to the brush in Chinese calligraphy, which causes the hair to separate, leaving streaks of white spaces (see Fig. 5) giving the effect of speed and vigour which is widely used in Rae’s paintings.



Fig. 5 - Example of ‘flying white’ in Chinese art. Schardt (1995).

In *Figure 1a* (2014) from Rae's Greyscale period, size 72 x 51 inch (see Fig. 6), the 'flying white' technique is used throughout the composition. The changing of the brush direction mid-stroke whilst keeping the pressure and then lifting away from the canvas towards the end of the stroke is typical in Chinese calligraphy. However, the materials are Western art materials of oil and acrylic paint on canvas. The combination of brushstrokes and materials reinforces her narrative of the two cultural styles being in dialogue with each other on her canvases.



Fig. 6 – Rae, F. (2014) *Figure 1a*. Oil and acrylic on canvas. Available at: <https://fiona-rae.com/paintings/2014-15-greyscale/figure-1a/>

## Research findings and discussion

This paper has analysed two artists' work and found that they express their transculturality in different ways. Akunyili Crosby uses mixed media photographic images combined with painting to create deliberate curations of day-to-day domestic scenes whereas Rae uses abstract gestures with symbols to create a dialogue between her different cultural influences. Akunyili Crosby's approach is about story-telling whilst Rae focuses on spontaneous responses and discoveries in her practice. For Rae, conflicts between the different styles are typically played out within the borders of her canvas whereas Akunyili Crosby's work implies a running commentary about history and identity.

Akunyili Crosby refers to her Third Space when talking about her work and her images show a continuous exploration through collages of photos and found images from the different cultures to express her transcultural narrative in storytelling form. She looks for artefacts from the Third Space to support her stories such as the Vlisco fabric. Her selective use of images is indicative of the cultural navigations described by Bhabha (1994) and her canvas is representative of the 'contact zone' – a phrase she uses to describe the cultural negotiations in her daily life including her marriage. Unlike Akunyili Crosby, Rae does not position her work as addressing the Third Space. Rae's narrative is expressed dynamically and spontaneously on her canvas. Her use of brushstrokes that resemble Chinese calligraphy and the out-of-context symbols are manifestations of her transcultural journey. Although she does not refer to herself as a transcultural artist, her cultural negotiations are executed live on the canvas as the painting evolves according to Presneill (2021).

The two artists live out their transcultural journey in different ways reflecting their individual approach to sense-making and reinforcing Couldry's (2000) assertion that each person carries with them an individual history of reflection which cannot be reduced to merely shared cultural patterns but one that is unique to them. However, both artists have made themselves the loci of sense-making on their transcultural journey as described by Presneill (2021) with their narratives expressed through their art. In analysing the impact of migration on an artist, Petersen (2017, p.96) borrows the idea from Bourriaud who uses a botanical metaphor to describe a migrant's way of forming affiliations as 'radicant', meaning a plant that spreads out in different directions above ground and drops sucker roots as it spreads, like ivy or strawberry plants. Petersen (2017) contrasts this way of growing to a 'radicle' in botany that grows out from one root and thus remains rooted in its original habitat. Petersen (2017) contends that migrants share similar ways of forming affiliation or 'roots planting', as demonstrated by the analyses in this paper where both artists' expressions have been influenced by experiences along their transcultural journey and have made themselves the loci of sense-making as seen through their art. Petersen (2017) proposes the notion of 'the artist as a migrant worker' as a way to stimulate reflection on how boundedness and mobility interact and structure the artist's sense of belonging as they root-plant along the way. Petersen (2017) explains that instead of cementing the myth of the artist as a detached creator, the proposed notion invites a more profound exploration of how the artist's role can be reconfigured as that of a translator, mediator and bridge-builder between people and cultures. This paper agrees with Petersen's (2017) proposed role for the artist and further argues that transcultural art can offer resonance to migrants to enhance their sense of belonging by openly exhibiting the complex sense-making involved along the transcultural journey. The argument can be substantiated by Damasio (2021) who

assert that feelings are important contributors to the creation of a 'self' and that creation is a mental process oriented by the perspective provided by sensory channels such as vision and hearing. Damasio (2021) states that feeling is one of the foundations of consciousness and conscious minds help organisms clearly identify what is required for their survival. Therefore, this paper contends that visual or sensory interactions with transcultural art can contribute towards creation of the 'self' for migrants to enhance their sense of belonging and the resulting consciousness can support their survival in a new environment. In addition, this paper argues that it is equally valuable for the native, or 'radicle', to critically understand transcultural art to enhance their appreciation of the migration human experience; especially as a way to humanise those involved in migration or displacement thereby helping to address any xenophobia within our increasingly culturally-hybrid society. It is in this way that a transcultural artist can meaningfully act as a bridge-builder between people and cultures as described by Petersen (2017).

## Conclusions

This paper has found that Akunyili Crosby's narratives as presented in her art are well-curated and searching; whereas Rae's artistic expressions are spontaneous, dynamic with some purposely conflicting elements. The research has found that Akunyili Crosby uses her art to search for meaning within her Third Space to address her transcultural identity, whereas Rae lives out her transculturality live on the canvas without self-conscious questioning resulting in something new that is emerging from her cultural intersection.

This paper has demonstrated that contemporary artists, such as the two analysed, express their narratives in ways that provide insight into how sense-making takes place along their transcultural journey. Although their artistic expressions differ, both artists have made themselves the loci of the sense-making process. Petersen (2017) contends that art can be an instrument of orientation and has the ability to negotiate contradictions, tensions and complexities. Petersen's (2017) contention supports the argument by this paper that transcultural artists can play a role in helping society to better understand the human conditions experienced by migrants and displaced people. The feelings of drifting in and out of belonging and the need for sense-making are personal and complex therefore not easy to articulate. Given the contemporary artist's ability to express their conditions through their art, this paper is in agreement with Petersen's (2017) proposal to evaluate the migrant artist's role. This paper contends that through a deeper understanding and wider appreciation of transcultural art by both the migrant and the native, the human experience involved in the migration process can be brought to light with the artist acting as a translator, mediator and bridge-builder between people and cultures as described by Petersen (2017) in our increasingly culturally-hybrid society.

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### List of figures

Fig. 1 - Akunyili Crosby, N. (2016) *Portals*. Mixed media. Available at: <https://www.njidekaakunyilicrosby.com/work/portals> (Accessed 05/11/24)

Fig. 2 – Close-up details from *Portals*. Akunyili Crosby, N. (2016)

Fig. 3 – Rae, F. (2009) *Maybe you can live on the moon in the next century*. Oil and acrylic on canvas. Available at: <https://fiona-rae.com/paintings/2007-11/maybe-you-can-live-on-the-moon-in-the-next-century/> (Accessed 05/11/2024)

Fig. 4 – Rae's studio image from BBC Art and Artists series (2014). Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p026gcbz>

Fig. 5 - Example of 'flying white' in Chinese art. Schardt (1995)

Fig. 6 – Rae, F. (2014) *Figure 1a*. Oil and acrylic on canvas. Available at: <https://fiona-rae.com/paintings/2014-15-greyscale/figure-1a/> (Accessed 05/11/2024)