

Identity and Transculture in *Vice Versa*

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ABSTRACT

Quebec's struggle between francophones and anglophones has deeply affected other immigrant communities' identitarian practices. Within Montreal's eighties and nineties nationalist environment some Italo-Quebecois worked as a bridge between the two groups through the transcultural magazine Vice Versa. The article presents some findings from a case study that looks at how Vice Versa challenged dominant perceptions of identity and its role in society. It assumes that identity is negotiated between individuals, that language and ethnicity are key factors for social mobility and symbolic power on the marketplace, and that these function through hegemony. Through its use of untranslated French, English and Italian and its articles' contents Vice Versa's discourse on transculture undermines the assumption that identity is necessary for social interaction and negotiates new categories that dissolve ethnic boundaries. Vice Versa is a unique example of the emergence of a counter-hegemonic movement questioning identity at its roots.

Key words: *transculturalism, ethnic identity, Quebec, Vice Versa*

Vice Versa and Quebec

Since the sixties Quebec's society has been shaped by the conflict between anglophones and francophones over language use and identity. This struggle has also strongly affected other ethnic groups, while they have had to come to terms with forces pulling them into different directions and influencing their choice of language and identity. The Italian immigrant community in Montreal has been one of

the first to raise a voice offering a solution to all parties involved in the battle. By acting as mediators some members of this group hope to offer some common ground to solve the ethnic and cultural conflict, which splits the country in two and polarizes inter-ethnic transactions. The trilingual magazine *Vice Versa* – with its idea of transcultural identity – is the result of such tensions and cultural debates.

This paper presents some of the findings from a case study* that analyses how *Vice Versa's* discourse on transculture radically undermines the idea of identity as the basis for social interaction, in order to bypass Quebec's problematic notions of nationalist identity.

Identity and Hegemony

My examination builds on Barth's ideas about identity and on concepts of symbolic and linguistic capital by Bourdieu and Heller^{4–6}. Furthermore it draws on Williams' keywords like hegemony and counter-hegemonic practice⁷.

Identity is seen as a dynamic concept negotiated between individuals and groups through the ascription and self-ascription of categories. The negotiation allows acceptance within and outside the boundaries of the group and is only possible when actors in this process have gained enough symbolic power to access the marketplace. Marketplaces operate through hegemonic practices, symbolic domination, and by convincing participants that their rules are immutable. In multi-ethnic societies, ethnicity and language are key factors for social mobility and the distribution of symbolic power. Moreover, the intellectual elites are often the ones in the position to challenge the existing rules, by altering the classification of a group, its identity – and its role in society. However, even when groups look for alternatives to dominant discourses, they seldom attempt to challenge the hegemonic principles that make the existence

of ethnic identity necessary for social interaction.

My analysis concentrates on how *Vice Versa's* actors present transculture as an alternative way of perceiving ethnic identity. Namely, not as a necessary attribute of a group defined by cultural and linguistic boundaries, but rather like the unique product of the blending of ethnic roots, culture and language contact. It concludes that this attempted rearrangement of the relationship between minorities, majorities, languages and ethnic groups draws on completely new, counter-hegemonic practices.

Transculture

Vice Versa was published in Montreal between 1983 and 1996**, at the heydays of multiculturalism – and Interculturalism in Quebec – when »ethnic« voices were emerging in many sectors of social and cultural life. Yet the founders of the magazine felt restricted by the boundaries of self-enclosed and highly oppositional identities promoted by Canadian multicultural »mosaic« policies and by most Italian Canadian institutions, since these labels halted the endless play of self-differentiation and creativity for the sake of identitarian securities, and lead in most cases to a voluntary or an involuntary ghettoization. Therefore, although founded by a group of four Italians and Canadians of Italian origin***, active in Montreal's cultural milieu as authors, professors, artists and publishers, *Vice Versa* also involved intellectuals of differ-

* The study is a qualitative analysis of data which consist mainly of interviews with the magazine's four founders and some conversations with former readers, *Vice Versa: Magazine Transculturel* 1 (1983) – 53 (1996), national and international reviews and articles about the magazine, press releases and some official documents related to *Vice Versa*.

** *Vice Versa* was funded by provincial and federal money, and on some occasions by the private sector. Its total circulation grew from 1500 at the beginning to 8000 copies between 1986–88. Subscriptions reached a maximum of 700/800 to fall to fewer than 500 in its last six years; *Vice Versa* was also available in some European bookshops.

ent cultural and ethnic background. Moreover, the magazine challenged ethnic boundaries by not focusing on the Italian community, and by publishing its articles on culture, art and society in French, English and Italian without translation.

The adoption of the idea of transculture by *Vice Versa* is strictly connected to the attempt to find a new label that better describes the peculiarity of the product of the interaction between groups, and to promote this product in a society where ethnic boundaries are mainly left as a social construct. In order to affirm the positive value of this reality they confront the existing beliefs attached to the meaning and role of ethnic identity and attempt to dissociate the concept of identity from hegemonic perceptions based on nationalist associations with territory, language and ethnicity.

From the interviews conducted, as well as from the material published in and on *Vice Versa*, it emerges that nationality is not seen as a fundamental and necessary element of subjective identity and of society but as a political construction. As it was announced already in the editorial of the first issue the *Vice Versa* group wanted to go beyond national and ethnic boundaries, creating new space for cultural encounters and for an open-minded perspective on culture. This is achieved at both theoretical and practical levels through the idea of transculture.

From a theoretical point of view *Vice Versa*'s transcultural discourse undermines the need for ethnic boundaries from within the discourse on ethnicity. Transcultural identity dismisses the very existence of categories that are usually associated with ethnic groups and stresses values like 'otherness', 'alterity', 'continu-

ous transformation' and 'multiplicity', causing cultural boundaries to fade. The overcoming of the boundaries as well as the creation of a more fluid and less defined ethnic landscape is triggered by inter-cultural and inter-ethnic encounters.

The actual process of 'transculturation' – the process of becoming transcultural, revolves around two key concepts: the notion of the 'Other' and that of 'becoming'. It is set in motion by the presence of minorities – in the case of *Vice Versa* by the Italians – and it takes place through the contact between minorities and the majority. The 'Other' is a fundamental reality, yet not as a presence evaluated in opposition to the 'self' but as part of it, whereas the concept of 'becoming' refers to the idea of continuous transformation. In fact, for transculture there is no static 'being' since constant movement and passage are considered the only conditions that allow to be faithful to difference and Otherness. Difference is one of the defining factors of transculture, an important category – it could be argued, in the negotiation. The crucial aspect of 'difference' is that the differences are an integral personality that can embrace 'Otherness', by occupying the standpoint of different cultures. This means that a person can represent other cultures within their own and their own within others'. The two elements are part of the same unity and cannot be conceived as in opposition to each other, eliminating the boundaries that separate them.

At the level of form, *Vice Versa*'s pragmatic discourse unfolds while using its symbolic power to construct and portray transcultural reality through reports on social and cultural phenomena that reflect the above-mentioned ideas. More precisely, *Vice Versa* 'sells' transculture

*** Lamberto Tassinari, Fulvio Caccia, Antonio D'Alfonso and Bruno Ramirez. Due to its list of popular contributors and its highly intellectual topics, *Vice Versa* played a considerable role by setting new trends in Quebec's cultural and literary debate.

through interesting texts, while at the same time, the process of 'transculturation' is literally set in motion by 'facing readers with Otherness' and by putting the majority in contact with minorities. For *Vice Versa* encounters with 'Otherness' and 'difference' are possible when experiencing, or coming into contact with other realities and individualities. In particular, these experiences may be acquired next to social interaction, through books, theatre, painting, cinema, etc. as means to dissolve the solidity of a person's identity and to share the experience of the Other.

The construction of transculture is completed by extending the discourse also to its appearance and especially to its unconventional approach to language. *Vice Versa* visualizes transculture by translating concepts like cultural exchange and hybridity into original lay-out, images and structure. However the magazine challenges hegemonic associations between language, culture and identity most directly in the use of more languages without translation. The resulting patchwork recalls the uneven, multiethnic make-up of Montreal's society and has a clear ideological charge. It portrays in realistic terms – i.e. without official translations, the inter-ethnic cultural exchange taking place in the city. The decision not to translate the languages used is of considerable significance for an additional reason: it represents a breakdown of the translation model, supported by bilingual policies. *Vice Versa* refuses to »play the game of translation«⁸ in order to show social, cultural and linguistic variety but also as a reaction to multicultural and intercultural policies which mediate between languages and groups.

The End of *Vice Versa*

From issue 1995:49 *Vice Versa* announces a new triangular approach, which »expands« its horizons with a simultaneous

launch in Montreal, Toronto and New York. This shift implies a reorganization of the linguistic balance in the magazine which becomes: »65% English, 30% French and 5% in Italian and Spanish«⁹. After four more issues *Vice Versa* suddenly stops its publication as both provincial and federal governments have not renewed their funding. The magazine is accused of not meeting the standards settled by the relationship between magazine and government because of a reorientation towards society and politics rather than an art and literary showcase.

By and large the magazine's shortcomings and the economic crisis that led to the cuts in government funding in 1996 might have had an impact on the decision to cut *Vice Versa*'s subventions. However, as a matter of fact, the shift to English quickly stirred negative reactions at least among the francophone readership and caused a sharp decrease in the subscriptions.

The magazine was allowed to play the game of (trans)culture for as long as it accepted at least some of the rules of the exchanges at Quebec's marketplace. But the complex situation, the tendency to put up a barrier against threats to the *status quo* of French prevented many readers from accepting a transcultural vision of a broad territory, which implies a majority of English speakers.

Conclusions

On the whole – despite its shortcomings, *Vice Versa*'s merit is to have shown the limits Canadian pluralism imposes on groups and identity, both fundamental paradigms in contemporary social dynamics, and to have recognized the restrictiveness of identitarian practices while trying to offer an alternative solution to them.

Vice Versa's discourse was meant to offer an alternative solution to the para-

doxes of contemporary social structures based on restrictive choices between assimilation and ethnicity, minorities and majorities, and anything else based on group differences, but it found in Quebec's and Canada's politics of national identity an insurmountable obstacle. Yet, *Vice Versa's* counter-hegemonic discourse has been meanwhile picked up by many post structuralist and postcolonial litera-

tures and its influence is being acknowledged. In fact, now that the boundaries of ethnic groups have become too narrow for humans, individuals are developing other, new dimensions. Transcultural consciousness could be a defining characteristic of future social dynamics, as cultures search for the broadest possible framework to shape their interactions.

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IDENTITET I TRANSKULTURALNOST U ČASOPISU VICE VERSA

SAŽETAK

Sukob frankofonog i anglofonog stanovništva u Quebecu uvelike se odrazio na identitet drugih zajednica doseljenika. Tijekom osamdesetih i devedesetih u montrealском su nacionalističkom društvenom okruženju neki stanovnici Quebeca talijanskog podrijetla posredstvom transkulturalnog časopisa *Vice Versa* djelovali kao most između te dvije skupine. U članku se iznose neka saznanja iz istraživanja načina na koji je *Vice Versa* dovodio u pitanje dominantnu percepciju identiteta i njegove uloge u društvu. Smatra se da se identitet uspostavlja među pojedincima, da su jezik i etnicitet ključni faktori društvene mobilnosti i simboličke moći na tržištu te da funkcioniraju putem hegemonije. Neprevodenje članaka s francuskog, engleskog i talijanskog te njihov sadržaj opovrgavaju ideju o nužnosti identiteta u društvenoj interakciji te predlažu nove kategorije kojima bi se nadišle etničke podjele. *Vice Versa* je jedinstveni primjer pojave antihegemonskog pokreta kojim se propituje identitet u svojoj srži.