

# BEYOND HOMELAND: LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF LATVIAN POST-EXILE AND POST-SOVIET LATVIA

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**Abstract.** This paper examines the role of transcultural eco-poetics as a fundamental element in Latvian literature, its significance within the context of Latvia's historical evolution and cultural dynamics at the crossroads of exile, post-exile and post-Soviet experiences after the restoration of independence. The study is dedicated to the dynamics of Latvian American interaction through the lens of two authors: Agate Nesaule (1938–2022) and Tom Crosshill (Kreicbergs, 1985). It delineates three different transnational culture aspects: Latvian American, Soviet-Western, and socialism-capitalism, focusing on eco-poetics, and characters within the text. The post-exile narrative of return reveals both longing for the homeland after exile, and desire to achieve the American dream, and inability to settle in the homeland after a long absence. Nesaule's novel *Lost Midsummers: A Novel of Exile and Friendship* depicts the challenges of assimilation into American society and desire for homeland. Crosshill represents a new wave of immigrants with inherited Siberian deportation memories. The character in his novel *The Cattle Express* is seeking validation of his choices through his ancestral history. Both authors offer insights into the complexities of transcultural experiences.

**Key words:** diaspora, exile, homecoming, Agate Nesaule, Tom Crosshill

## INTRODUCTION

As a starting point for a comparative study of two Latvian American texts, we would like to use the statement of literary scholar Zapf (2016: 54) – 'If sustainability in a biological sense means the ways in which living systems remain alive and productive over time, then the cultural ecosystem of literature fulfils a similar function of sustainable productivity within cultural discourse'.

The question is – could we speak about 'Being Latvian' as a sustainable, productive system over time. We are looking for an answer in transnational literature, which, on the one hand, drifts away from Latvian, because it is written in English or contains material from other nations, whilst on the other hand, these texts talk about Latvian sustainability, confronting it with the experience of different cultures. The starting point in both novels are the occupation of Latvia after WW2 and following deportations and exile. In Tom Crosshill's novel *The Cattle Express* deportation becomes family heritage memories in America,

when character wants to fulfil ‘American dream’ at work on Wall Street. Tom’s personal experience is part of the new migration flow in recent times. The withdrawal of the German army from the Soviet Union during 1944 for the Soviet authorities created a considerable lead time to plan for the reoccupation of the Baltic (Plakans, 2011: 360). Agate Nesaule’s childhood experience of wartime depicted in her novel *Lost Midsummers: A Novel of Exile and Friendship* justifies emigration as an escape from the Soviet Army. In contrast, Tom Crosshill engages with inherited memories of this period. These are two different generations that have come to terms with this historical event. Tom perceives parallels between economic migration and deportation, forced emigration, while Agate is seeking to heal her wartime memory trauma by writing. Both works highlight the complexities of transnational relationships with Latvia. Originally written in English, they have gained recognition in the Anglophone literary sphere, earning various international awards. Reception in Latvia takes place through translations, which indicates the viability of these topics in a wide literary ecosystem.

These narratives contain meeting points of different environments, for example, city and countryside. There are similarities in the spaces inhabited by heroes: communal apartment in Riga vs working space in bank without privacy and shared apartments in New York. Also, celebration of midsummer in farm with oat crowns. The interaction of the environments is characterized by various deformations and, despite that, the possibility to exist fully with a perspective of sustainability.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Researching post-exile literature involves exploring the themes, narratives, and language that arise in literary works written after the author has experienced exile – in the example of Nesaule’s writing. The purpose of the current research is to study the ways how characters or narrators represent the homeland and the past. When the writers return after the period of exile, the former place of residence is different, the memories and the existing reality could not connect (Bannasch, 2020: 2). After the restoration of Latvia’s independence, many people went abroad in search of better economic opportunities and improved living conditions, – this phenomenon appears in the text of Crosshill. The migrant has emerged as the central figure of the twentieth century. No longer seen as an anomaly, migration has become a norm, leading to a deep rethinking of the concepts of identity, belonging, and home (Frank, 2008: 3).

After the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1991 (Plakans, 2011: 402), exile writers from more economically developed countries perceived Latvian society, its environment, and its cities as devastated. Although they felt a sense of belonging to Latvia, they brought with them foreign culture, education, and an economic lifestyle that contrasted with post-Soviet society. Jonathan Culler in his *Literary*

*Theory* (1997: 117) inquires whether there is an emphasis, as in studies of colonial and postcolonial subjectivity, on the construction of a divided subject through the clash of contradictory discourses and demands.

Two key figures in postcolonial theory, Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, have significantly contributed to shaping the foundational principles of migration literature, along with other influential scholars. The main characters of Nesaule and Crosshill show Bhabha's concept of *hybridity*, where they hold on to the previous culture and morals to understand the world which they inhabit. As Bhabha (1994: 2) emphasizes 'the power of tradition to be re-described through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are in the minority.'

On the one hand, the novel *Lost Midsummers* by Nesaule depicts Latvia in the early 1990s as a devastated environment following Soviet colonialism, while on the other hand, the novel *The Cattle Express* by Crosshill reveals – despite its economic growth, the country still does not provide all the necessary opportunities for individuals to achieve certain dreams. Said (2002: 587) considers that 'The more insistent we are on the separation of cultures and civilizations, the more inaccurate we are about ourselves and others.' Crosshill's main character rebuilds his ecosystem as a migrant in the United States by immersing himself in his family's history. In the story of his grandparents' deportation to Siberia, he sees a similarity with his situation in a foreign place.

Nesaule continued to emphasize the state of exile in the novel, the personality of the characters is closely related to being away from the homeland, while Crosshill's character is an economic migrant. The shift from exile to migration disrupts this binary logic by focusing on movement, rootlessness, and the fusion of cultures, races, and languages (Mardorossian 2003: 16).

Portrayals of movement, environment, and diverse cultures become the driving force for new themes about belonging, while paradoxically highlighting one's culture of origin. According to theorist Kaplan (1996: 3) travel, displacement, and migration have become central metaphors for postmodern subjectivity, signifying a break from the rooted, stable identities of modernity – 'Without rejecting or dismissing the powerful testimony of personal and individual experiences of displacement, how is it possible to avoid ahistorical universalization and the mystification of social relations that Euro-American discourses of displacement often deploy?'

Based on the theoretical concepts, a paradigm for narrative analysis is formed, and its most important parameters are environment, history, various movement models, hybridity, memories and post-memories.

## AUTHORS AND TEXTS TO BE ANALYZED

This paper offers a comparative insight into two novels: Nesaule's *Lost Midsummers: A Novel of Exile and Friendship* and Crosshill's *The Cattle Express*. Both texts are published in 2018 and deal with post-Soviet reality and interaction of Western world. Different emphasis has been placed on the deformation of Latvia during the Soviet occupation. Both texts are written in English, but their authors are Latvians. Nesaule was born during German occupation of Latvia during World War II, while Crosshill grew up during Soviet occupation. Both authors are very different – in terms of gender, generation, origin, and experience. They have arrived at the literary reflection of their experiences out of homeland in very different ways and with different motivations; however, the unifying and dominant feature is the need to give voice to an experience that has not had representation until then. In both cases, the writers have chosen to talk about traumatic experiences, which are often not unambiguous, about their individual and societal losses that continue to affect lives even after the events themselves.

Agate Nesaule (1938–2022) is probably the best-known author of Latvian origin. Born and raised in Latvia until she was six years old, written in English, not all her texts contain Latvian material. She gained wide attention with the post-trauma novel *The Woman in Amber* (1995). In the context of the current study, the authors focus on her final novel, in which three or even four ecosystems interact.

Tom Crosshill (real name – Toms Kreicbergs) (1985) graduated from the secondary school in Latvia, studied in the USA, worked on Wall Street, and became a successful author of the fantasy genre in English. Kreicbergs returned to Latvia in 2011, subsequently focusing on the Latvianization of the novel *Lopu Eksprešis* (*The Cattle Express*). In the preface, the author explains: '... it is not entirely true that this novel was written in English only. The result is not a simple translation, but a new work created over four years in the fusion of two languages and cultures' (Kreicbergs, 2016: 3).

The interactions between America and Latvia depicted by the authors, which could be interpreted as literary ecosystems, will be considered in three aspects:

- American dream; melting pot; relationship experience,
- Soviet reality as evil; poverty,
- homecoming.

## MATURE AND ALMOST AMERICAN

The protagonist Peter Ostbergs of Crosshill's novel is a young man born in the Soviet era. In the first wave of opportunities that opened after the restoration of Latvia's independence, he went to the USA to study mathematics. After finishing his studies, he stands on a crossroads of choice – between creative or

capitalist life. Paying off his debts requires a profitable job. He goes on to seek his luck on Wall Street.

After receiving the first generous bank advance – 10 000 euro, Crosshill's protagonist, who had five cents left in his account, went on a long bike ride around the city, stopping at popular eateries. In this situation, he feels 'Mature and almost American.' Comment on the feeling in greater detail – 'That was a rare feeling in a country that welcomed you with a big smile and a hug but never were from elsewhere' (Crosshill, 2016: 18). This feeling of 'Mature and almost American' also characterizes the sense of the world of the protagonists of Nesaule. It also describes the life path of the authors themselves.

Different in many ways, however, we also see the basic structure of the feeling in the protagonist of Nesaule. As a small refugee girl, she came to the USA, got basic education, and very successfully developed an academic career, at the end of her life she felt the nostalgic call of her Latvianness.

In Crosshill's novel, the first steps towards the realization of the dream are taken – Peter – has received an education and is preparing to enter the labour market – this happens quite successfully, getting a job in a prestigious Wall Street bank. However, with that, the novel only begins, marking forebodings that things will not be as rosy as they seem.

The first chapter shows the multi-step interviewing process in quite some detail. The interview is five hours long, so it is also a kind of endurance test. At the finish line, the interviewee will reach a high-ranking official, Jaime Martinez. The name and surname indicate a possible Latin American origin: 'Jaime spoke perfect English, but Peter could hear traces of an accent' (Crosshill, 2016: 13).

This aspect of identity transformation, melting, becomes more detailed in the continuation of the conversation. Jaime, looking at Peter's CV, doubts his suitability, saying

- You're all over the place [...] math. Languages. Computer science. Econ. Literature. Looks to me like you don't know what you want to do.
- [...] literature, that's about knowing how to get your message across. [...]
- Yeah? And theater? You found time to act in five plays while in school.
- Acting is very applicable. I can be a different person with different people. Clients, colleagues, whoever. I can let them see what they need to see, hear what they need to hear. (Crosshill, 2016: 13)

Jaime then confesses that he also played theater at school and that he was Stanley in *Streetcar Named Desire*

- Great, right? Not only the way I look, but the accent, everything. You know that line, Stanley's like, I'm not Polack, I'm American born and raised? (Crosshill, 2016: 14).

Perhaps this is the source of this cross-cultural literature. The transformation of the American dream and the melting pot into cognitive dissonance. It characterizes the protagonists of both novels. To a lesser extent, the world has been created by Nesaule, but her novel has two protagonists – two friends, one of whom remains in an intermediate state.

## OCCUPIED / POST-SOVIET LATVIA: EVIL AND POVERTY

The first page of *The Cattle Express* (Crosshill, 2016) depicts the world of modern transculturality, which is made up of various cultural ecosystems that are in a relationship of tension – attraction and rejection. Different economic conditions, wider opportunities are tempting, but friendship does not form in an environment where career is the priority. It is also difficult to establish a romantic relationship.

Peter successfully becomes a part of Wall Street, tries to integrate into America. At the same time, he assumes a pseudonym and turns to comic art, creating a series about Stalin's terror, deportations, where he tells a personal story about his grandmother. Initially, Peter associates the motive of the deportation with supernatural forces but quickly realizes that the approach is not correct – 'It had seemed wrong, to suggest that there was something supernatural behind the persecutions and deportations and executions of the Stalinist purges. (Crosshill, 2016: 10).

The problem of positioning in relation to the past is caused by the grandmother's final message before her death: 'Those people who packed us on trains, many of them were ordinary people. Some were angry. Some were scared. Some were fools. But evil? There were some, to be sure – but not as many as you might think' (Crosshill, 2016: 11).

Peter chooses the anatomy of evil as a research question in his comic. The focus on evil echoes President Reagan's famous speech about the Evil Empire (Rowland and Jones, 2016), while Nesaule has the motif of evil as well, yet her protagonists seem to choose poverty as the dominant feature of the Soviet system.

Returning to Peter's situation, in his biography he has a post-memory story, which he expresses in the comic. His experience reflected a modest childhood, as it turned out, he came from a mixed family. The father was a representative of the occupied nation, whereas the mother was a representative of the occupier nation. This probably made him turn to the English language and Peter was fluent in three languages, as well as characterised by a marked transcultural dimension of his identity. The deprived life appears in the work of Nesaule. She shows how protagonists say goodbye to their previous lives, how they escape to avoid the advancing Red Army and elude deportation to Siberia. The last prosperous dinner before they become refugees has been depicted in autumn (September) of 1944, at the summer house *Atmiņas* of Kaija's mother Ingrida and

father Kārlis, it is shortly before the family boards a refugee ship in the Liepāja port. Protagonist will not be able to take any belongings with her, only memories as intangible possessions of lost time as baggage. The ritual of the last supper can be perceived as a renunciation of social status – Ingrida was the professor at the University of Latvia and Kārlis Veldre was a judge.

Ingrida watches the birch trees from her office, she was not worried about the summer house, but about the birches. Notably the birch in Latvian mythology relates to the heavenly deities and is one of the equivalents of the cosmic tree. The divine order will be destroyed.

To uphold this divine order, which serves as a social condition, as an unchanging unit, the Veldre family drinks birch tree sap, maintaining a connection with their ancestors. By losing the birch tree sap, the connection with the land given to the ancestors (homeland) is broken. An unquenchable thirst eventually turns into longing and memories of this place. ‘...the mistress of a nearby farm where the cook occasionally buys vegetables and kvass, a drink of fermented birch sap’ (Nesaule, 2018: 40).

Likewise, plants such as ferns and lilies make their appearance. Those are incompatible plants. Somehow – plats between borders. Also, the transition plants between the living and the dead. Protagonists exist in the twilight of death, and distancing is required. They are planning to escape to Germany through the port of Liepāja. Remembering the ferns, and therefore – the connection with Latvia, leads to a state of death, hence, these memories are unwanted and traumatic.

Crosshill states about his protagonist: to say Peter had been poor all his life would be misleading. Sure, he’d grown up sleeping in the same room with his parents. Sure, much of what he wore to school were hand-me-downs and *humpalas* – clothes from German donation shipments. Nevertheless, that was no more than an artifact of life as a post-Soviet citizen. Peter never lacked books for school, or shoes, or dental care. He’d never gone hungry. However, the environment was grey, humble, without options.

The motif of poverty is much more strongly expressed in the works of exiled authors. The relatives of Nesaule’s protagonist are immersed in domestic concerns, have become primitively materialistic. Even the meal prepared for a foreign relative reeks of poverty.

## REUNION AND THE RETURN POSSIBILITIES PARADIGM

Both novels have a motif of return. Crosshill’s character lives in an open, free, globalized world, and when he goes to America, he does not have a clear future. At Christmas, he visits Latvia with his girlfriend of Cuban origin, to whom the post-Soviet scenes seem familiar. After the American experience, Peter is also struck by the post-Soviet poverty, especially in terms of the living spaces, which are in sharp contrast to the country houses surrounded by the harmonious nature,



which he portrays in his comic and which his family has lost due to the Soviet aggression.

Nesaule depicts the arrival of its characters in Latvia after the restoration of independence, but no real reunion takes place.

In Nesaule's novel, Alma is welcomed at the airport with daisies; they remind her of Latvian meadows. Flowers as part of the natural landscape. The absence of flowers further indicates a destroyed and barren living space. Confusion reigns around: the smells of the stairwell, the communal apartment of relatives. The lack of reconciliation and resistance culminates in the food – fish pate. The fish remains have been ground together into a grey mass and served as a delicacy. Alma's memories of Latvian food keep her sane, while her relative – Dahlia has lost this clarity. Also, Alma's demands are unfulfillable, they have no connection with reality, she refuses to notice not only an economically and socially different space, but also the seasons of nature – in summer she dreams of blossoming trees.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, after consideration of the data obtained in the analysis of the texts, it is possible to answer the question raised in the introduction – could we speak about 'Being Latvian' as a sustainable, productive system over time?

The answer is that a transcultural existence abounds in challenges and dangers. The opportunities offered are not always affirming and favourable to the identity of a person.

However, the analysis of two transcultural Latvian texts confirms the thesis formulated by Zapf that 'literature is force of language and discourse, which combines civilizational critique with cultural self-renewal in ways that turn literary texts into forms of sustainable textuality' (Zapf, 2016: 15). This premise is confirmed in the texts by Nesaule and Crosshill. Each of the authors has been able to yield the resources of language, imagination, and discourse for the creation of texts, which are able to function as self-reflexive models of eco-semiotic complexity.

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