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LATVIANS DOWN AND OUT IN ENGLAND AND IRELAND: CONTEMPORARY MIGRATION TALES

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Abstract. The involvement of Latvia in the recent European integration, which started once the Iron Curtain was lifted and the independence of the state was restored (1990–1991), led to Latvia’s accession to the EU and NATO (2004) and produced a new type of Latvian diaspora. The dynamic processes of its formation and development are reflected in Latvian literature, albeit sparingly. Migration narratives, in which various cultures and experiences interact, have brought about a new type of text – intercultural literature. Two novels are particularly salient and have been translated into several languages: *The mushroom testament: the Black Balts among Celts* (2002), the debut novel by Laima Muktuļpāvela and *Stroika with a London view* (2010), the phenomenally successful debut novel by Vilis Lācītis. Both novels focus on economic migrants to the UK and Ireland. They share a similar environment and are humorous and satirical but also have divergent traits, e.g. the gender of the narrators and their attitudes toward acculturation and integration. This study attempts to provide a general outlook on how the new type of diaspora is reflected in literature.

Keywords: Latvian migration literature, transnationalism, intercultural literature, multilingual interaction, imagology, identity, self, other

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1. Introduction

The present day Latvian diaspora is quite heterogeneous, representing a mix of types and professions: top artists, athletes, EU and other officials, executives of international companies, and a large mass of low-income migrants, mostly unskilled workers, seekers of a better life, i.e. better economic and social conditions. Some of these individuals find themselves at the very lowest step of the social and economic hierarchy and therefore are part of the social group once referred to by George Orwell (in his 1933 novel *Down and Out in Paris and*

London) (Orwell 2001) as ‘down-and-out’, i.e. a marginalized social group that must struggle for survival. This group echoes the motif of social exclusion in literature and is the material that is most reflected upon in contemporary Latvian migrant narratives. This article consists of a comparative case-study of two novels written by two important Latvian writers, Vilis Lācītis (born in 1975) and Laima Muktupāvela (born in 1962), foundational to the new tradition of Latvian migration literature. The focus of the novels is the migration within Europe that could be characterized as bridging the divides created by the once unshakeable Iron Curtain.

2. Theoretical and methodological framework

The plots of the novels by Lācītis and Muktupāvela unfold against the backdrop of intersecting cultural spaces that is typical of intercultural literature. We take ‘intercultural literature’, a fluid and dynamic concept, as an umbrella term to account for some aspects of exile, migrant, *Gastarbeiter* literature. Intercultural literature always creates new discourses and touch upon identity issues and so do exile, migrant and *Gastarbeiter* narratives, but the latter mostly limit themselves to purely reflecting on the migrant experiences in the host country. The former involves a dialogue between two or more cultures and some degree of synthesis between them (Chiellino 2000). In some ways intercultural literature resembles the so-called *Brückenliteratur* (literature that functions as a bridge between two or more cultures) introduced by Zafer Şenocak (Şenocak 1986:66) in that it creates an intermediary space of new knowledge which enables the reader to redefine the world. The cultural identity of both communities and individuals, as Michael Hofmann cogently asserts, is indeed always in progress, never accomplished; it constitutes a temporary result of unstoppable processes (Hofmann 2007:11). The new Latvian migrant literature is different from the old classical examples of the migrant narratives in that they took place within Europe and were published in exile after World War II. The notion ‘classical migrant literature’ is genetically related to exile and migration experiences that can be traced back to the first half of the 19th century when various writers fused their exile and migration experience into a new *Weltanschauung* (Victor Hugo, Madame de Staël, Heinrich Heine and others); Georg Brandes, a Danish literary scholar, develops the notion of literary current and posits the existence of a separate ‘emigrant literature’ (Brandes 1906, Danish original in 1872). Brandes emphasized that “*émigré* [---] inevitably belongs to the opposition” but they were not necessarily exiles (“yet were not exiles”) while classical Latvian migration literature (1945–1991) is always exile literature created by the authors who left Latvia after World War II, dreading the reprisals of the returning Soviet occupants. The characters of the new migrant literature preserve their links and bonds with the country of origin and frequently travel back. Its target audience is the readers back home rather than the

readership in the host countries. However, the novels are translated and are available for a larger readership interested in contemporary migration tales.

Intercultural literature relates to imagology, i.e. the image of the other in literary space and its relation to the self-image of the authors of the narratives. It also deals with the perspectives of power and dominance and in this regard partly overlaps with topics of interest for post-colonial and subaltern studies. The conceptualization of the conflicts arising from cultural experiences, strivings for integration and the ensuing setbacks generate experience that could be analyzed in terms of trauma studies.

Intercultural literature can but does not have to be born in a transnational context. 'Transnationalism' relates to movements across state boundaries, for instance, movement of ideas, data, capital, services and people. Intercultural literatures can exist within the boundaries of single multiethnic states, such as Switzerland, Russia, the USA and the Baltic States. With the advent of globalization one could argue that world literatures are increasingly intercultural, as cultures do not exist in isolation and defy a static, illusory essentialism of some purely homogenous cultural values, customs, beliefs and practices. There are countless intracultural differences within a single nation, the same applies to other constructions, such as group and community identities. Homi K. Bhabha asserts that "the very concepts of homogenous national cultures, the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions, or 'organic' ethnic communities – as the grounds of cultural comparativism – are in the process of profound redefinition" (Bhabha 1994:7).

Migrant literature can thus be interpreted and viewed in a number of ways. This study takes into account the above approaches of academic enquiry.

3. Vilis Lācītis and Laima Muktuļpāvela, the most significant authors of contemporary Latvian migration literature

Even though the Latvian diaspora develops quickly and has reached a considerable size (more than 370,000 Latvians abroad, according to a source of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia (*Latvijas diaspora pasaulē*)), the reflection on the issue of migration in literature is less dynamic than for instance in Lithuania and Poland (Laurušaitė 2008). But Lācītis and Muktuļpāvela are salient and striking forerunners of this literary genre in Latvia. The texts of both authors share several features: (1) they are debut novels which immediately made their authors popular and established them as writers; their subsequent work also touches upon other topics but the migration motif is always present; (2) both tell their story in the 1st person and are autobiographical; (3) both reflect the experience of the lowest social classes (down-and-out) thus "posing" as the voice of the subaltern. Despite the shared common ground, the texts also present significant differences: (1) one novel is told by a man, the other is told by a woman – the narrators' world outlook is conditioned by their gender which entails variations in attitudes toward

language, customs, traditions, etc.; (2) they possibly belong to different generations but the Soviet heritage plays an important role in both of them, albeit to a variable degree; (3) their attitude toward migration experience is very dissimilar – the narrator constructed by Lācītis is quite open-minded vis-à-vis the new challenges while Muktpāvela's narrative voice is fearful and conservative which is reflected in the construction of their novels: Lācītis offers the shuttle (circular) migration model while Muktpāvela offers a one-off migration enterprise and commences her narrative with a home-coming scene; (4) the attitude toward migration experience is also reflected in the principles of the composition of the novels: Muktpāvela a single year that stands for a closed cycle. She adopts the ring composition and presents her migration experience in retrospective manner; her narrator also constantly revisits her memories about her previous life in Latvia. Her interaction with the new reality abroad is frequently 'signified' with Latvian cultural signs (names of various writers, literary characters, folklore, home dialect). Lācītis' fictional work extends over several years; the first time is recounted in a great detail (by days), then his time spans enlarge, there are temporal gaps. As time goes by, the narrator is becoming increasingly involved with the new reality: when he returns to London after a short break in Latvia, he feels very much welcomed in London, his home is now there. For Lācītis' narrator, memories are also important but they rather focus on his personal development in the new country of residence. He is not affected by homesickness. For him, motherland stands for lack of modernity, for backwardness. The culture signs of the past are used to a much lesser degree and mostly in an ironic key.

Although both novels are based on various attitudes and have divergent compositional features, they were both very successful. They probably confirmed both authors as established Latvian writers. Their offer matched the expectations and needs of Latvian society – it has seen significant increase in migration in the recent years and consequently and unsurprisingly the reflection of the migration experience in literature allowed society gain insight in this phenomenon by means of concrete tales that possessed a degree of generalization characteristic of art.

Laima Muktpāvela (now Kota) was born in 1962 in Rēzekne. She made her literary debut in 1993 with a nom de plume Fēlikss Baranovskis (male name), publishing short stories that went unnoticed by a larger readership. In 2001, she wrote a short play *Cilvēks no dīķa* (The Man from the Pond). Her debut novel *Šampinjonu derība* [The Champignon Testament] was first published in 2002 and received the Latvian Annual Literature Award in the category "Prose". It was then translated into Lithuanian (2003), German (2008) and Swedish (2011). A fragment of the novel was translated into English (2002) and Czech (2011). The novel has been reprinted several times (last in 2009) and was sold out. A staged version of it was produced in London in 2011 (solo performance by Inta Tirole, directed by Rūdolfs Plēpis). Muktpāvela has since written several biographical novels on famous Latvians, for instance, on press tycoon and public figure Emīlija Benjamiņa (1881–1941) in 2005 and on choir conductors twin brothers Gido Kokars (1921–2017) and Imants Kokars (1921–2011) in 2008. The migration

thread is however present in her subsequent books, such as *Mana turku kafija* [My Turkish Coffee] from 2012. She is married to a Turkish citizen and since 2011 resides in Istanbul.

Vilis Lācītis (actual name Aleksandrs Ruģēns) was born in 1975 in Riga. He was first active as a musician in an alternative and pretty trashy band named *Pupociklu vasara* (2002–2007) and only started his writer's career in 2010 when he published his first novel *Stroika ar skatu uz Londonu* [Stroika with a London View]. Lācītis is a witty nom de plume that refers to an important representative of 20th century Latvian literature, the writer, collaborationist and politician Vilis Lācis (1904–1966). At first glance, this could be seen as a marketing trick, besides, it is quite an audacious attempt to top the success of Vilis Lācis but it also betrays certain insecurity on the part of the author as to the literary fate of his creation. At first, the author completely withheld his identity and only appeared in public in a bear's mask. Lācītis is in fact a diminutive of *lācis*'bear'. Lācītis' novel was loosely translated into English in 2018 by the author with a changed name William B[loody] Foreignerski. The English version diverges from the Latvian original quite significantly so that it could be argued that the text actually exists in two different versions. Lācītis' debut novel in Latvian was a huge success. Lācītis treated the issue of migration in a convincingly comical, vivid manner, he lavishly used slang, jokes and coarse language. It is arguably the first such full-size novel published in Latvian. Lācītis then produced some other novels and shorter texts that are always set against the backdrop of migration but have met less enthusiastic readers' response. Vilis Lācītis currently resides in Oxford, United Kingdom.

So, both texts have reached the international arena which will bring to the fore other interesting issues, such as the intended target readership of the translations and the translation strategies used to make the translation work in the relevant language version. These issues will be examined in a separate article.

4. Peculiarities of the narrative strategies

The novel *The Champignon Testament* deals with the fate of a Latvian economic immigrant to the Republic of Ireland around the beginning of the new millennium. Īva Baranovska belongs to the generation of the “excessive”, “redundant” Latvians that are forced to leave their country looking for a new life and means for subsistence in the setting of contemporary wild capitalism and greedy entrepreneurs who wish to capitalize on the new cheap and defenceless workforce from Eastern Europe. The novel is written in a vivid, wordy, colloquial style. Muktupāvela realistically treats the issues of poverty and social exclusion with dark, caustic humour, at times with sentimental, optimistic overtones. The narrator is arrogant, condescending toward her compatriots whom she sees as neither intelligent, nor educated, nor interesting. She meets various people; they are portrayed mostly as a nameless grey mass (or generically named individuals). Each chapter ends with a recipe harking back to the idea of a literary cookbook.

The recipes have telling names but are mostly based on mushrooms, the Gastarbeiters' staple-food.

The titles of the recipes echo or sum up the content of the chapter in an ironic or contrastive way, e.g. the third chapter *Baltie cūkas ir klāt* [White pigs are arriving] on arrival of the Caucasian (white-skinned) Gastarbeiters (Muktupāvela 2002a:30–38). This chapter concludes with the recipe *Šampinjonu pīrādžiņi "Paradīzes slīpētie dārgakmeņi"* [Champignon Dumplings "The cut jewels of Paradise"], while the chapter on recruitment *Zobaini zirgi dāvanās* [Full-toothed horse as a gift] (Muktupāvela 2002a:20–29), an ingenious pun on the proverb "Dāvinātam zirgam zobos neskatās" [Don't look a gift horse in the mouth!], concludes with the recipe *Šampinjonu salātu Leiputrija* [Cockayne of the Champignon Salad]. Latvian critique Guntis Berelis states that "some of the recipes [---] tap the depths of ancient mythology. These include: "Kuhulin's Toy Box" (a recipe for mushroom cake); "Kali's Necklace" (mushroom decoration); "Trimurti" (mushroom pie where holy trinities are combined: Dievs, Māra and Laima from the ancient Latvian pantheon; Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva; and Óðinn, Þór and Freyr). The text is reflected in the recipes and vice versa. This simple and purely technical addition adds another dimension to the novel." (Muktupāvela 2002b:4) The narrator finds two jobs as mushroom picker: the first is a complete disaster and frustration, where the workers are isolated and underpaid; the second is slightly better in more acceptable socioeconomic conditions.

The novel *Stroika with a London View* tells the story of a young man, the namesake of the author (Vilis Lācītis, in the English version: William B. Foreignerski). He is trying to get away from his failures in the field of music and his inability to provide for his family. The novel starts in the following way: "The Millennium crashed down upon me to the accompaniment of yelling twin babies, an absolute lack of money, and uncertain hopes in the musical field. How was it that others had it all, and I didn't?" (Foreignerski 2018:9). The friends convince him to become a clandestine emigrant to the UK. He must start from scratch and finds new opportunities on a construction site, a topic that is included in the title of the novel in its Russian form, *stroyka* 'building, building site'. Lācītis' narrative is ironic, humorous, adventurous. What the narrator experiences in the proletarian émigré milieu is served with a crime-story intrigue about a corpse that is found in the concrete mass. The novel encompasses a linear narration of several years over which the protagonist evolves from an ancillary unskilled "hand" and a free-loader, loafer and idler to some degree of professionalism. At the end of the story, he even enrolls at a university to study architecture which, interestingly, reflects the biography of the author who, having spent several years in low-end jobs decided to move on to studying anthropology in Oxford. After completion of his studies he has now found a new career as teacher of English as a Foreign Language. The Latvian version of the novel ends with the following optimistic, life-affirming manifesto which is omitted in the English version:

Es ticu, ka kulturālās difūzijas rezultātā bez kaitinošām reklāmām un kaitīgas pārtikas mūsu sabiedrībā no ārpusēs neizbēgami ienāk arī kaut kas labs.

Protams, mēs spurojamies pretī visam, kas ir neparasts un draud aizvietot esošo. Vai man dieniņ, pie mums te nav tā pieņemts. (..) Dzīve ir skaista, un tajā ir ļoti daudz labu cilvēku. Mēs arī par tādiem varam būt, un tas nav nekāds zaudējums – iemācīties baudīt dzīvi un būt jaukam vienam pret otru (Lācītis 2010:178).

[I believe that, as a result of cultural diffusion without annoying ads and harmful food, our society inevitably receives something good from abroad. Of course, we are unwilling to accept anything that is unusual and threatens to replace the status quo. OMG, this is unacceptable here (..) Life is beautiful, and it has great many nice people in it. We too can be like this, and there is no loss in learning to enjoy life and in being nice toward one another.]¹

Both novels concentrate on low-end, destitute members who are at the bottom of the social ladder but the emphases are somewhat different. Muktupāvela is more in the mainstream frame of poor and abused female Gastarbeiter, while Lācītis describes the alternative culture of squatters and drug consumers. Muktupāvela portrays realistic sexual encounters and favours that migrant workers (women) are supposed to provide to their male colleagues (Muktupāvela 2002a:75) but for the protagonist of Lācītis sex always remains marginal or imaginary.

5. Migrants' life: conceptualization and representation

Both novels portray a situation where the protagonists seek a solution to their complete down-and-out situation in their motherland. Both novels are time-set before Latvia's accession to the EU, therefore the access to the EU labour market is impeded by various obstacles and risks. These days the entry in the EU is facilitated but the attitudes toward the workers from the new Member States are slow to change. The workers are better protected now but still fall prey to all sorts of fraudsters and crooks. In fact, they are still in a down-and-out situation; they are simply better paid than before.

For protagonist Īva, the conception of emigration is and remains statically negative, she sees herself as a white slave:

Ko es te plāpāju, ja redzu, ka Latvijas divdesmit pirmā gadsimta ārzemēs strādājošo augstākais dzīves mērķis ir sapelnīt naudu lietām, kas citviet ir ikdiens? Mirdamam strādāt līduma dūmos, lai būtu savs kaktiņš, savs stūrītis. [---] Ai, Dievi, cik nežēlīgi jūs esat [---] (Muktupāvela 2002a:352).

[What am I blabbering here if I see the workers from Latvia in the twenty-first century have as the highest aspiration of life to earn money for things that are plain and ordinary elsewhere? To die in toxic fog and smoke just to have one's own parcel of land and some roof overhead. [---] Oh Gods, how merciless you are!]

Let us contrast this with a passage from Lācītis alias Foreignerski:

¹ Unless indicated otherwise, the quotes are translated by the authors of the article.

In a way, we first immigrants were unable to start a good life where we were born, so we went to discover and conquer the outside world. But what a survival school it had been! [---] What consequences will current immigration have in the future? From the perspective of the colonists – i.e. those who venture into new strange lands full of resources to till the soil, toil at the till, and then send the hard-earned profits back home, in other words, from the perspective of the immigrants – immigration leads to what I consider true globalization. It is like marveling at the world via YouTube and wanting to change your life because of what you see. Cultural and mental changes that come from the inside and are not imposed by outsiders. Many immigrant colonists in the UK have ended up going native, simply because they find British values more reasonable. And they decide to stay (Foreignerski 2018:213–214).

For Lācītis, there is a hopeful integration, while for Muktupāvela there is simply the return to her country of origin. While living in England and having successfully undergone integration in the English environment, Lācītis continues to be a prolific Latvian writer. Muktupāvela is outright negative vis-à-vis her down-and-out experience abroad but, ironically, today she resides abroad and belongs to the Latvian diaspora, albeit no longer at the down-and-out level. Lācītis, too, is no longer a construction-site worker. Both authors no longer live in the indigent circumstances portrayed in their novels. *My Turkish Coffee* (Muktupāvela 2012) is in fact a luxurious publication, written in the manner of rather mainstreamish documentary journalism, like a tourist guide or travelogue. It has a lot of colourful details and captivating stories from the author's daily life in Turkey. The down-and-out experience seems to be a more propitious to narrative inspiration. In her case, a new prosperous life has not given autobiographical material of the kind we find in *The Champignon Testament*.

6. Aspects of multilingual interaction

Both novels use a wealth of non-Latvian language material. First of all, it is the linguistic input of the host countries Ireland and England, i.e. English. There is also a perceivable presence of the cultural heritage language of the country of origin, a country that was occupied by the Soviet Union (1940–41, 1945–1991), i.e. a Russian substratum. In the case of Muktupāvela there is also the residual Latgalian, the narrator's native idiom which she uses once, when at a loss, as it were, thus compensating for her inability to communicate in the language of the host country. The oppressors' heritage (earlier – German, most recently – Russian) has left a heavy imprint on the protagonists' language in both novels, just to quote a few examples from randomly opened pages:

Muktupāvela

- Viļņas tirgus *širpotrebs* (2002a:30) 'Shirpotreb from Vilnius market', Russian *уупнопеб* 'consumer goods';

- Tāds *makaroni pa aeroflotski* (2002a:31, emphasis in the original) ‘pasta à la Aeroflot (the Soviet airline)’, Russian *макарони по-аэрофлотски*;
- [---] notiekošo pārvērš *komeģija-buff* priekšnesumā (2002a:36) ‘transforms the event in a commedia-buffa performance’, Russian and also possibly a blend of Vladimir Mayakovski play *Мистерия-буфф* and the Russian term *буффонада* ‘buffoonery, slapstick comedy’ (originally from Italian);
- [---] verdzība, melnajiem ieeja aizliegta, tiri-piri [---] (2002a:36) ‘[---] slavery, no entry for the Blacks, blah-blah-blah’, Russian *тыры-пыры*;
- **Klasisks buterbrods** [---] (2002a:40) ‘a classical sandwich’, Russian *бутерброд* (originally from German);
- Vai arī ved mūs *do gorodu* (2002a:76) ‘takes us to the city’. Antiquated, archaic Russian *догороду*;
- Lipsta un Bierna *kuharkas* (ibid.) ‘the kitchen maids of L and B’, Russian *кухарка* + Latvian plural ending *-s*;
- *Cottage cheese*. (2002a:59);
- [---] viņš savai *Sally* bija nopircis šādu maizīšcepēju *frīštika* ātrākai pagatavošanai [---] (2002a:66) ‘[---] he bought his Sally such a toaster so that Frühstück could be faster prepared [---]’. Code-switching, German *Frühstück* ‘breakfast’;
- Runiņas par to, ka valodu iemācīšos, ka nekur nepazudīšu, mani tikai uztrauc. Es protu tikai latviešu un krievu valodu. Un angļu valodu esmu noklausījusies skolā un zinu, kā tā skan (Muktupāvela 2002a:23). [The small-talk on the fact that I will learn the language anyway just worries me. I know only Latvian and Russian. And I have heard the course of English at school and I know what it sounds like.]

Lācītis

- That’s it means that’s it! You don’t need anything else. They will know what to do. They will find you a job, and you won’t have any problems with the language. Mate, I’m totally fine with the Russian lingo anywhere in the world because all our folks – well, our ex-folks, from the Soviet-influenced territories – you know what I mean – they all speak Russian. Lithuanians, Ukrainians... never deal with the Poles, though. They’re cunts. (Foreignerski 2018:19);
- He gulped down another shot then chased it with a gherkin for *zakuska* and continued. (Ibid.) Russian *закуска* ‘meal or food to accompany drinks’. The author has supplied a footnote: “There are secrets to good vodka drinking. I’ll share some with you: first, drink it from the freezer. The less you feel the taste, the better. Second, eat something right after – best, a gherkin, or a slice of smoked ham, or something like that. We call this *zakuska*. With vodka, it’s how you drink it that makes it not only effective, but also enjoyable.” (Foreignerski 2018:19–20);

- Being from Riga, I suspected it must have been that special Liepāja upbringing (orig. *zakalka*) that had saved him (Foreignerski 2018:21), Russian *закалка* ‘quenching, tempering, hardening’.

Lācītis’ narrator is aloof and relaxed about his language skills, he plays with all sorts of languages, while Muktupāvela manifests somewhat symbolic estrangement from the new English-speaking reality in a stance “I don’t get it – off I go anyway” that is summed up quite neatly by the following quote: “Kamēr pagriežos, izkustos, uzņemu ātrumu, līdz manām ausīm aizplīvo cerbera teiktie vārdi *mākonim*: “*White pigs are arriving...*” Es nesaprotu, ko tas nozīmē. Bet gan jau. *Go!*” (Muktupāvela 2002a:38). [While I turn away, pick up speed, the words by the Cerberus to the *cloud* hit my ears: “*White pigs are arriving...*” I don’t get what they mean. But anyway... *Go!*]

The protagonists do not excel in using grammatically correct or elegant foreign language material but avail themselves of rather colloquial, approximate, hybrid, mixed or even pidginized forms. Frequent code-switching functions as a shortcut for a lazy or sluggish brain to speed up communication.

7. Imagology

Imagology relates to alimentary and vestimentary codes in social practices and, in literary and other representations, contributes to linking food and clothing with cultural and ethnic identities. (Laurušaitē 2016:120). In a world that is mobile and virtual, the tangible nature of food, and the continuity of cooking traditions give an uprooted émigré individual a sense of stability (ibid.). Laurušaitē (2016:121) claims that food and drinks are crucial for building or deconstructing a Baltic self-image, both literally and figuratively. Food, drinks and the related rituals certainly are part of profoundly rooted traditions and have even been compared to speech-acts and linguistic practices (for instance, by Janīna Kursīte and Ārmann Jakobs-son, quoted in Laurušaitē 2016:121). Food nostalgia is part of these traditions, as domestic food promotes a feeling of ethnic coherence and authenticity and boosts a collective identity. This nostalgia is reflected in Lācītis’ novel in the following way (tellingly omitted in the English version):

Vispār jau atgriezties dzimtenē pēc riktīgas darba ekspedīcijas ar naudu kabatā un jaunu drēbju kārtu mugurā ir forši. Ir tik neizsakāmi patīkami sazvanīt visus vecos cīņu biedrus un uzaicināt iedzert – un būt spējīgam visiem izmaksāt. Skābs krējums, rupjmaize, visādu veidu bulciņas un žāvētas zivis – ak Dies, Lielbritānijā biju aizmirsis, ka tādas lietas vispār eksistē. Cik jauki ieiet kādā kafejnīcā, pasūtīt auksto zupu – kuras ideja angļiem liekas pilnīgi absurda, Dies apžēlojies, kā var taisīt zupu no sarūguša piena un vēl ēst aukstu? – un tad vēl rasolu, ko tev no lielas apmirdzētas letes pasniedz aprasojušā trauciņā (Lācītis 2010:66).

[I tell you, to come back to your country after a real-work expedition, with your pockets full of cash and new clothes on is cool. It is incredibly pleasant to call all your old buddies and to invite them out – and to be able to treat all of them to

a drink or two. Sour cream, rye bread, all kinds of buns and smoked fish, oh my God, in the UK I had already forgotten that such things exist at all. How nice to enter a café and order cold beetroot soup – the idea alone seems totally absurd to the English. Heaven forbid, how is it possible to make soup from milk gone bad and to eat it cold? And then an Oliver salad served on a shiny counter in a dewy, damp bowl.]

Similar passages are found in Mukstupāvelas' work where she describes rye bread and speck as signs of the Latvian national identity. Laurušaitē notes that champignons are turned into semantically charged and existentially connoted symbol (Laurušaitē 2016:121). The aspects of gastropoetics is a fertile field open to further research.

Imagology studies the ways we see the others in literature, often in a stereotypical form:

Rumāņi esot slinki, negribot strādāt. Toties rumānietes esot gudras, ātri apbērnojas uz vietām, dzemdē Īrijā, a īri nedrīkstot ne brēkt, ne kadam tur sazin Eiropas parlamentam sūdzēties un pīkstēt. [---] Vot, tā – nahaļno, iā jāprot dzīvot, kā rumāņi dara Īrijā! (Mukstupāvela 2002a:142)

[Romanians are lazy, they would not want to work. But the Romanian women are clever, quickly get kids *on the spot*, give birth in Ireland but the Irish would not dare to shout or complain to some European Parliament, nor give a sound. [---] That's how, *nachaļno* (Russian: impudently) one needs to live, like the Romanians do in Ireland.]

In Lācītis' case, similarly demonized are Poles:

[---] never deal with the Poles, though. They're cunts. They steal our jobs, working for even less money than we do. If you need any documents – indeed, anything, for fuck's sake, find yourself a Lithuanian, he'll do anything for you. For the money, that is. But don't let him fuck you over. Be vigilant, you know what I mean? As for the locals, they are just plain assholes. I bet you think the English, the French, the Germans, are nice, normal people, just like us, don't you? Bollocks. You know why? Because we never actually knew any of them in the wild, as it were, and our understanding about those bloody foreign capitalist cunts came from Soviet films, where foreign characters were played by our own actors. That's why you think they must be normal people. But they have nothing inside! No soul, just money. They are empties, not humans – that's what westerners are. Simply rich bastards, that's all (...) But above all, be careful with Latvians. No one is going to fuck a Latvian over so unashamedly and painfully as another Latvian (Foreignerski 2018:19–20).

This passage reflects some sort of stereotypical image of the foreigners among the Latvian immigrants and also clichés about Latvians themselves, taken with a pinch of salt. In Latvian popular culture, clichés about the envy and malevolence among Latvians are widespread. A recent public opinion poll revealed that a half of Latvians believe that the old saying *latvieša mīļākais ēdiens ir otrs latvietis* [the favourite dish of a Latvian is another Latvian] holds true (NRA 27.06.2018). Lācītis' protagonist, though, does not linger on this stance but is ironically distances himself from it. He is rather interested in Jamaican smiles and the

positive attractions of London, as can be seen from the following quote: “A Jamaican guy with dreads and a giant rasta cap passed us by and smiled a smile so big you would never be able to squeeze its equal out of any person in Latvia, not without plastic surgery anyway. Even though I didn’t realize it then, the essence of London had begun to work quietly on me, soaking up through my body and soul” (Foreignerski 2018:24). London is of great significance in the novel, “a metropolitan and multicultural city, [---] the key determinant of the poetics of intercultural literature in the novel – it can be a labyrinth, an initiation, a trap or a springboard. London as a city which can afford everything that life can provide, gives one a chance, not only to break away from economic limitations but also from the ideological narrowness in the protagonist’s homeland, as it is depicted in the novel” (Lāms 2016/2017:188).

The self-image of Latvians is bleak. Compare the statement by Mukstupāvela: “Latvieši. Rāmi. Ai, nē, ieturēti, stīvi. Pie ratiem stāvoši kā no ierakumiem. Latvieši tos sev var uztaisīt jebkur un ar jebkuru materiālu. Kā es, piemēram. Dzeru kafijīti, un nevienam nenāk ne prātā man pienākt klāt un jautāt, vai nejutos vientuļa” (2002a:32). [Latvians. Calm. Oh no, reserved, stiff. Sedated just like out of the trenches. Latvians would dig them anytime anywhere, out of anything. Like me, for example. I drink coffee with liquor *Charlotte*, and nobody would think of coming to me and asking whether I feel lonely or not.]

To sum up, the negative imagological prejudices toward ethnic groups (Romanians, Poles etc., including Latvians themselves) demonstrate a telling trend of subaltern individuals: even in the bleakest down-and-out situation, they are inventive enough to locate targets onto which they project negative stereotypes: they can always find someone who is worse than themselves. Finding someone weaker or more objectionable than oneself brings social and emotional comfort. The default Latvian self-image is negative too; this fact could perhaps be explained in terms of traumatic past experiences that could be further investigated in the academic field of trauma studies.

8. Conclusion

Coming closer to the cultures of the Other(s) makes us aware of the limitations of our own perspectives (Mukstupāvela). Alterity and difference call for critical reflection about the patterns of our *modi vivendi* and *cogitandi*, possibly inviting to review them and look for alternatives (Lācītis), perhaps becoming more open to foreignness (Hofmann 2007:8). The issue of otherness has a long-standing history and poignant topicality in the Baltic States, especially Latvia and Estonia (Bazileviča and Sakova 2017:138). The main characters of the two Latvian novels face the challenges of the intercultural setting and use the opportunities of broadening their point of view to a varying degree of success: the protagonist of *Lācītis* is open and ready for acculturation, integration and for a situation of fluid, cosmopolitan liminality, while the narrator of *Mukstupāvela* remains faithful to her

motherland; she returns to it and offers us an *ex-post* narration summing up her experience abroad. Her model is the return to the point of origin and the strict preservation of the borders. Both achieve something new, as their experience stimulated the creation of non-material forms of capital (writer's name, fame, reputation) and fostered specific artistic and aesthetic competences (Laurušaitė 2008:180). These notions hark back to forms of Bourdieu's symbolic capital which are in fact inextricably linked to the forms of economic capital (Bourdieu 2004:160). Both authors also topicalized multilingual interaction and literary imagology. The protagonists of both novels do not move on a smooth path: after all, newness –both new translational experiences and their reflection in literature – is not born easily: “[t]hrough the transnational dimension of migration, diaspora, displacement and relocation the unifying discourses of our time – nation, peoples, community, us – cannot be easily specified, as the global space of cultural difference is above all one of constant negotiation” (Bhabha 1994:318). The migrant tales one finds in Latvian literature show that, in this global space of cultural difference, people seek and choose quite a variety in their strategies of negotiation. In some cases they opt for openness and integration (Vilis Lācītis), while, in other cases, they remain entrenched in their identity and attempt to maintain rigid borders (Laima Muktupāvela).

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