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How to Be an Alien: George Mikes's Anthropology of Emigration

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*The paper examines the best-selling satirical book *How to Be an Alien* (1946) by the Hungarian émigré journalist and prominent British humorist George Mikes (1912-1987). I argue that tackling the issues of emigration, integration and belonging, Mikes employs a mock-anthropological approach: ironically reworking the notions of observation and imitation as survival strategies, HTBA grasps the absurdities underlying both British life and the newcomer's struggle to blend in. The two sequels Mikes wrote to HTBA decades later demonstrate that once the "alien" has been successfully integrated, the sense of acquired Britishness only produces further absurdities. Examining HTBA and a selection of his other works, I also claim that Mikes's satire is an unacknowledged contribution to the modern philosophical tradition of "strangeness" (exemplified by authors ranging from G. Simmel to H. Arendt, Th. Adorno and Z. Bauman). Today, Mikes's legacy continues to inspire expatriates living in London and elsewhere. However, his emblematic work has also inspired a stream of books with diametrically opposite intentions: these encourage their native readers to regain their allegedly fading socio-cultural heritage. In the transformation of Mikes's satire about aliens adapting to new environments into an encouragement of natives to embrace their own, one can witness both the disintegration of traditional cultural belonging and a new appeal of indigeneity.*

Keywords: English literature / satire / intellectuals / emigration / Eastern Europe / Hungary / Mikes, George: *How to Be an Alien* / national stereotypes / strangeness

"Oh God, look at me, I have fallen among strange people!"
George Mikes, "Preface" to *How to Be a Brit* (1984)

When Hungary entered war with Great Britain at the end of 1941, George Mikes, a Hungarian journalist who had worked as a correspondent for Budapest newspapers in London since 1938, found himself an "enemy alien," the citizen of a hostile country. Translating his predicaments into a satirical book *How to Be an Alien* in 1946, Mikes embarked on a long and prolific career as a humorist both in the UK

and worldwide. In the face of the challenges in an alien socio-cultural environment, HTBA offered an enduringly entertaining and thought-provoking perspective on one of the most formative experiences of twentieth-century history, displacement.¹

Life in displacement: A fluidity of labels

Intellectual emigration has accompanied East-Central European history throughout the twentieth-century. Leaving for the UK in 1938, Mikes belonged to a relatively late phase of the exilic waves fleeing the region after 1919 and in the wake of Nazism. Luminaries of these waves included, to mention some of Mikes's fellow Hungarians, the Polányi brothers, Michael and Karl, Georg Lukács, Karl Mannheim, Béla Balázs, László Moholy-Nagy and others, mostly of leftist orientation of various sorts (Congdon 1991). Unlike them Mikes was not a political exile. After earning a degree in law from the University of Budapest in 1933, he worked as a journalist specializing in tabloid news and theatre and film industry gossip; in 1938 he arrived in London to cover the Munich crisis and continued to work as a correspondent for Hungarian newspapers in the next two years. His departure was merely disguised as work abroad: it was motivated by the introduction of anti-Jewish laws in Hungary; its imminent trigger, the *Anschluss* (Mikes, *How to Be Seventy* 96–97).

By the end of 1941, dismissed as a correspondent and losing official connection to his home country, Mikes had found himself in a “state of statelessness”; internment was an imminent threat.² But, unlike his future publisher, the fellow Hungarian Jew André Deutsch who ended up interned on the Isle of Man, Mikes was spared detention. Probably thanks to the fact that he started to work for the BBC's Hungarian Section and became engaged with the *Hungarian Council in Britain* – a moderately effectual émigré organization led by the exiled head of the 1918–1919 Hungarian Republic, Mihály Károlyi (*How to Be Seventy* 142–154).

¹ I thank my students in the European Studies master program at the University of Toronto who between 2015 and 2017 helped me clarify my ideas concerning Mikes and twentieth century East-Central European intellectual emigration. The article was written as part of the OTKA research project No. 112415.

² On London as a site of Eastern European exile during the interwar period: Neubauer 81–83. On “enemy aliens” in British camps during the war: Holmes 20.

After the war, Mikes chose to stay in Britain. He maintained close connections with prewar Hungarian émigré circles (he enjoyed an intimate friendship with Arthur Koestler), but revisited Hungary only for professional purposes: in 1956 he covered the uprising for the British press (resulting in the 1957 book-length reportage *The Hungarian Revolution*), in 1970 he travelled in East-Central Europe as part of a BBC crew (resulting in the 1971 travelogue *Any Souvenirs?*). When during the latter, on some trumped-up charge, Mikes and the BBC team were expelled from Hungary, it only reaffirmed his impression that the geo-cultural space of his nostalgic longing had become virtual: “Central Europe had, in fact, disappeared. Vienna *is* of the West and Budapest *is* of the East. ... But Central Europe is still my homeland” (Mikes, *Any Souvenirs?* 14).

An intriguing feature of Mikes's trajectory is that different periods and aspects of his stay – or, as he put it, his “prolonged sojourn” (*How to Be Seventy* 83) – in Britain conform to different roles in the overall spectrum of displacement ranging from expatriation to emigration, exile, and refugeehood.³ He arrived in London in 1938 as a *de facto* refugee disguised as a visiting reporter; his subsequent involvement in émigré organizations turned him into a genuine exile retroactively. Immediately after the war, Mikes ceased to be an exile: obtaining British citizenship in 1946 instead of going back home turned him into an expatriate. With the communist takeover in 1948, however, he regained his former exilic status: anti-Nazi activities in the West became an object of suspicion in his homeland; most of his friends who decided to return to Hungary were imprisoned or executed (*How to Be Seventy* 154–156). Then again, Mikes never truly considered resettling in his homeland, which makes him more of an expat than an exile, who, by definition, would return if allowed to do so. As a naturalized British journalist, Mikes *was* allowed to visit his country of origin – if only to be formally expelled again, as it happened in 1970. But then, despite his citizenship, as the President of the PEN Club's Writers in Exile branch from 1975 he was a self-labeled exile, who, on the other hand, was keen to see himself as a Hungarian “who emigrated and became an English writer” (*How to Be Seventy* 232). In sum, Mikes's trajectory demonstrates the ultimate semantic fluidity of displacement, that is, the fact that designations are in constant retrospective and prospective flux.

³ On the semantics of exile: Tabori 23–38, Neubauer 4–11.

Quest for otherness: Travel, tourism, anthropology

In parallel with his political activities, Mikes's literary ambitions also date from the time of the war. In co-operation with the composer Mátyás Seiber, he wrote musical sketches for the wartime Hungarian cabaret in London (Scheding 2013). After ghostwriting and authoring a handful of semi-fictional war reportages, it was his 1946 *How to Be an Alien: A Handbook for Beginners and Advanced Pupils* that brought him immense success. A satirical portrayal of the British society in the guise of a survival manual for emigrants, HTBA, still in print after seventy years, has appeared in dozens of editions in dozens of languages and sold nearly half a million copies.

Mikes wrote two sequels (*How to Be Inimitable: Coming of Age in England* in 1960, *How to Be Decadent* in 1977) to his breakthrough success as well as continuing to publish several "How to Be"-themed copycat books on a variety of topics: *How to Be Affluent* (1966), *How to Be Seventy* (1982), *How to Be Poor* (1983), *How to Be God* (1986). In addition, he produced scores of satirical travelogues, among others: *How to Scrape Skies: the United States Explored, Rediscovered and Explained* (1948), *Milk and Honey: Israel Explored* (1950), *Über Alles: Germany Explored* (1953), *Boomerang: Australia Rediscovered* (1968), *The Land of the Rising Yen: Japan* (1970). With conspicuous irony, many of the titles hark back to the early modern conventions of travel writing which promised to conflate *discovery*, *exploration* and *explanation* in depicting exotic lands and their peoples (Rubiés 2002). This generic allusion also evokes the early modern tradition of *ethnotypes* as a framework for identification and exoticization in "cross-cultural caricatures" (Leerssen 25–70). This tradition gives the ironic background for HTBA, too, as it satirically grasps the salient features of the British ethnotype in a variety of fields – looks, dress, language and modes of speaking, cuisine, sexual behavior and so forth. The first sequel will recall HTBA as "a treatise on the English character" (Mikes, *How to Be a Brit* 174),⁴ but occasionally it also refers to other supposedly identifiable national, regional, or ethnic dispositions, like the "Slav soul" (as opposed to which, we learn, "The English have no soul; they have understatement instead" [30].), or the "Central European conceit" (83) (and the prewar stereotype that all the refugees from that region have doctorates [24]). These characterizations are, of course, never hostile but serve as devices of a sarcastic kind in setting up a *mock-anthropological* framework. In fact, in his

⁴ I will quote HTBA and its sequels from this one-volume edition.

autobiography Mikes insists on a radical notion of individualism and a suspicion of any collective identification. However, he also adds that his aversion to identity statements might only conceal the ambiguities he felt in his own (*How to Be Seventy* 109).

The satirical manual format and the image of the foreign traveler inform the bulk of Mikes's oeuvre. Both HTBA and his travelogues present an observer modelled on the travelling anthropologist giving account of the peculiarities of local culture and society but their respective vantage-points differ in one key respect. Whereas in HTBA the observer is an emigrant obliged to adapt to the strangeness he encounters in order to integrate, in the travelogues the focus is more that of a *tourist* who is not to transform into a member of the community. The travelogues present someone who is merely passing through; HTBA is written by and for someone who is *there to stay* among the natives. That is, although it shares many features with tourism, a kind of amateur anthropology, and with anthropology, a kind of "professional tourism," exile or refugeehood has the added political predicament of involuntariness in its otherwise similar "quest for otherness" (Crick 1989).

Accordingly, HTBA lacks a crucial part of travel narratives: it has no *farewell story*. As there is no safe home to return to, here the very aim of the venture is to *avoid leaving*. In contrast, many of Mikes's travelogues do stage farewell scenes. In his account of the 1970 visit to Hungary, the farewell scene acquires an additional symbolic significance as the obligatory question asked by the border guard, "Any souvenirs?" provides the title of the book. The semantics of souvenir, otherwise a tourist obsession in the search for "the signs of signs" (Culler 1989), here opens into a politicized dynamic in which it is the memory of the repeated, and now formal, expulsion from a revisited homeland that the visitor takes away as the reminder of an ultimate farewell.

Anthropology, imitated and subverted

Framed as a manual for post-war emigrants in Britain instructing them how to behave, HTBA presents an intercultural encounter in "a country of exotic oddities" (20) that trespasses the very boundaries of common sense. The first sentence announces this as a *reversal of normality*: "In England everything is the other way round" (20).

Implying a tacit understanding of "normality" that the narrator shares with the implied reader, i.e. the community of "aliens," HTBA's anthropological gaze analyzes the everyday abnormalities of

the English: their fervor for queuing, deemed as “the national passion” (54), and their forms of implicit knowledge, like the maze of addressing persons from various social classes (108–111). The alleged elements of the English national character, e.g. dispassionateness (54), class consciousness (108), and having a “genius for compromise” (48), all are portrayed in a bizarre light.

Bronislaw Malinowski famously scorned pre-scientific ethnographic accounts given by travelers, adventurers, explorers, and settlers as providing merely a “distorted, childish caricature” of what a professional should depict systematically (Malinowski 8). HTBA deliberately draws such a “distorted caricature” (and, unlike Malinowski’s ideal expert, eagerly picks on “the funny and the quaint”) but is nonetheless interspersed with clues of *mock-science*. Starting with the self-label “handbook” in the subtitle and by dividing the chapters so as to examine first the “general” then the “particular” features of the natives, these clues accompany the scientific means of *observation* and *rules* with a parody of scientific rhetoric:

[N]ow observe the last few sentences of this conversation ... A very important rule emerges from it. You must never contradict anybody when discussing the weather. (28)

You must not refuse any additional cups of tea under the following circumstances: it if is hot; if it is cold; if you are tired; if anybody thinks that you might be tired; if you are nervous; if you are gay; before you go out; if you are out; if you have just returned home; if you feel like it; if you do not feel like it; if you have had no tea for some time; if you have just had a cup. (33)

Here mockery is equally targeted at the social practices to be described and the amateurish scientific apparatus describing them. The suggested absurdity of the local ways is amplified by the absurdity of the scientifically sounding rhetoric tackling them. Or, as in the last quote, the very praxis of following the “rules” becomes absurd since the rule itself is so vague as to be applicable to any possible case.

The “rules” thus offered are the means of *integration*: by adopting them an alien could pass as a local. (Note that the modality of presenting the rules is always that of a warning: *never contradict!* As if the manual for new visitors to the land took after a guide to a madhouse or a zoo: do not upset the inmates!) However, while a genuine anthropologist maintains detachment for the sake of objective description, here the point is to learn the rules in order to *blend in*. That is, HTBA encourages the reader to *go native*, normally taboo for the anthropologist (Pratt 38).

As such, HTBA radicalizes the position of Malinowski's *participant observer*, that is, the ethnographer who studies a set of people in their own environment during a long period of involvement. Participant observation, the favored method of data collection for ethnographic description since the early twentieth-century, is still a standpoint *outside* the group (Clifford, "Introduction" 11), but HTBA's observer persona is occasionally already located *within* what he describes. This is what we witness in one of its most widely quoted remarks: "Continental people have sex life; the English have hot-water bottles" (35). As it is not uncommon in genuine anthropology either, Mikes's observer is integrating through intimate relationships: Women frequently figure anecdotally among his informants. From this angle, this one-sentence chapter on "Sex" reads as an experimentally verified social critique, but what is striking is that it latently adopts the dichotomy of 'England vs. the Continent,' the bedrock of British self-perception. Implicitly relying on the terms by which the natives conceive of themselves, the positions of *us* and *them* are already being reversed. (This also signals that addressing "aliens" is part of the satire: the actual audience Mikes had hoped to reach was that of native English readers.) Participant observation occasionally leads to full immersion even for professional anthropologists. Unlike them, however, Mikes's emigrant anthropologist is more like a castaway who stays forever not because of intellectual curiosity: for him, becoming established in the community is not a prerequisite of research but a way of survival.

Picking up on these allusions, the 1986 collected Penguin edition ironically advertised HTBA as an anthropological work:

Mikes has been *studying* the British for a long time; here ... [he] offers the fruits of forty years of *field research* to all aspirant Brits. Having himself been born abroad, Mr Mikes is in the ideal position to counsel others in the same unhappy state – and even Brits born and bred may pick up a few unexpected tips from his ... sharp *observation[s]*.⁵

The true irony of course is that HTBA imitates the conceptual and rhetorical framework of anthropology only to subvert it. Mikes's satire becomes subversive by the very position of the examiner. In classic anthropology the (non-Western) Other was seen as primitive, tribal, preliterate, prehistoric etc. Here it is an Eastern (European) Other, a marginal alien from a periphery, who comes to scrutinize, therefore: to *exoticize*, the West.

⁵ From the blurb on the cover (italics added).

As a result, Mikes's anthropologist persona is not the classic 'sympathetic though authoritative' type but a perplexed and insecure one. The goal of his research is to appear "civilized" (the prerequisite of being an anthropologist in the first place) in the eyes of the natives: the reason never to refuse a cup of tea is that "otherwise you are judged an exotic and barbarous bird without any hope of ever being able to take your place in civilized society." (32) But as the ways of the locals seem to defy common sense, it is increasingly the "alien" who, by contrast, appears as "civilized," i.e. occupying the traditional position of the anthropologist marveling at the weirdness of the natives. The opposition between civilized and uncivilized (the very core of classic anthropology) thus becomes ultimately confused, leaving the reader with the impression that either uncivilized is normal or civilization as such is bizarre.

Framing emigration as an ethnographic fieldtrip, HTBA thus destabilizes the basic disciplinary principles and the political, cultural and geographical hierarchies they construct. Through subversive shifts of perspective (normal/abnormal, civilized/uncivilized, native/alien, within/without), HTBA equally parodies the English, the Central European refugee, and anthropology as such.

How to blend in, how to stand out: The art of imitation

Addressing enforced aliens who, unlike tourists, are there to stay, HTBA takes the necessity of integration for granted. It is to be achieved *by imitation*. As the preface summarizes: "How to be an alien? One should not be an alien at all. There are certain rules, however, which have to be followed if you want to make yourself as acceptable and civilized as you possibly can. Study these rules, and imitate the English" (18).

That is, "how to be an alien" in fact teaches how *not* to be an alien. By imitation, however, one might appear as a local but never really ceases to be an "alien"; at best becomes *unrecognizable* as such. By becoming indistinguishable from the natives, the alien turns *culturally and socially invisible* in his or her own right. Invisibility of this kind is not the only price to be paid for integration. As the preface goes on to argue, the effort of pretending to be English through mimicry is doomed by a peculiar double bind: "if you don't succeed in imitating them you become ridiculous; if you do, you become even more ridiculous" (18). That is, failed integration brings ridicule from the natives; success makes one ridiculous in his or her eyes. (What Mikes hints at here is *self-alienation* and that it only increases the more successfully

integration is being pursued: perceiving oneself as absurdly local, the “alien” becomes *alien* to him- or herself.) As a result of blending in through imitation, self-ridicule is inevitable because the thing to be imitated is profoundly ridiculous: HTBA detects this in every socio-cultural feature of English life. Especially in language which, in line with anthropological traditions, is one of its main areas of inquiry.

As the arena of social intercourse, language is a privileged field of mimicry both in its semantic and pragmatic aspects. HTBA's satire focuses on *accent* (a key feature of British national, regional and social identity formation) and the schemes of *conversation*. In both cases, the lesson to be drawn is to abandon meaning and comprehensibility. “The easiest way to give the impression of having a good accent or no foreign accent at all is to hold an unlit pipe in your mouth, to mutter between your teeth and finish all sentences with the question: ‘isn't it?’ People will not understand much, but they are accustomed to that and they will get a most excellent impression” (38).

To Mikes's *ethnographic ear*,⁶ the avoidance of articulation, or of being heard altogether, in producing an agreeable accent contributes to linguistic integration because the basic feature of English conversation is the very absence of meaningful verbal exchange:

EXAMPLES FOR CONVERSATION

FOR BAD WEATHER

- Nasty day, isn't it?
- Isn't it dreadful?
- The rain... I hate rain...
- I don't like it at all. Do you?
- Fancy such a day in July. Rain in the morning, then a bit of sunshine, and then rain, rain, rain, all day long.
- I remember exactly the same July day in 1936.
- Yes, I remember too.
- Or was it in 1928?
- Yes, it was.
- Or in 1939?
- Yes, that's right. (26–28)

As in the incomprehensible mumbling of the pipe example, the empty gestures of mock-conversation also fail to achieve proper communication. Luckily so, because that is precisely why their mechanical repro-

⁶ I borrow the term from Clifford 1986, 12.

duction serves perfectly the purpose of mimicry, thereby the alien's effort to pass as local: "Learn the above conversation by heart ... it would do wonderfully for any occasion. If you do not say anything else for the rest of your life, just repeat this conversation, you still have a fair chance of passing as a remarkably witty man of sharp intellect, keen observation and extremely pleasant manners" (28).

Being inaudible or repeating non-communicative utterances are viable newcomer strategies because it is not the limited competence of the alien but the very nature of the English language that causes communicative deficiencies. In addition to its lack of semantic definitiveness – we learn that although the word *nice* "is not the only adjective the language possesses" (37), it is capable to express basically everything – its overall vagueness is traced back to a profound semiotic rupture. This rupture occurs between, to borrow Gottlob Frege's terms, *referent* (the object the word indicates) and *sense* (what the word expresses). Whereas for Frege the distinction between *Bedeutung* and *Sinn* is a normal attribute of all languages, HTBA points at such discrepancies to highlight the non-native speaker's perplexity in the face of a perceived semantic incongruence in foreign languages against the backdrop of the perceived flawless congruence in the semantics of his or her own tongue. The divergence of words and meanings is shown to be a particular and all-pervasive feature of English. It is there in the name of the very geographical location where the alien had the misfortune to land: "When people say England, they sometimes mean Great Britain, sometimes the United Kingdom, sometimes the British Isles – but never England" (20). And in the designation of urban spaces:

HOW TO PLAN A TOWN. ... Give a different name to the street whenever it bends; but if the curve is so sharp that it really makes two different streets, you may keep the same name ... if, owing to neglect, a street has been built in a straight line it must be called by many different names ... Call streets by many various names: street, road, place, mews, crescent, avenue, rise, lane, way, grove, park, gardens, alley, arch path, walk, Broadway, promenade, gate, terrace, vale, view, hill. (81)

The semantic absurdity in naming the streets endows a similar absurdity on the social spaces they designate and the social life that takes place on them. The ensuing impossibility of orientation epitomizes the insecurity of the alien: "an English town is a vast conspiracy to mislead foreigners" (80).

The emblematic English social ritual, drinking *tea*, is also shown to rest on the semantic discrepancy of name and denotation: "Once this

refreshing, aromatic, oriental beverage was successfully transformed into colourless and tasteless gargling-water, it suddenly became the national drink of Great Britain and Ireland – still retaining, indeed usurping, the high-sounding title of tea” (32).

The divergence of sense and meaning comes to underlie nearly all English utterances inasmuch as they are mostly either *understatements* or *overstatements*. These also fail to capture the true meaning of a situation as their intent and linguistic expression never coincide. HTBA gives plenty of examples, the funniest ones from the phraseology of wooing (30–31). The *politics of understatement* pertains to the status of the alien. Mikes is worth quoting in full:

The British Civil Servant, unlike the rough bully we often find on the Continent, is the Obedient Servant of the public. Before the war, an alien in this country was ordered to leave. He asked for extension of his staying permit, but was refused. He stayed on all the same, and after a while he received the following letter (I quote from memory):

Dear Sir,

The Under-Secretary of State presents his compliments and regrets that he is unable to reconsider your case, and begs to inform you that unless you kindly leave this country within 24 hours you will be forcibly expelled.

Your Obedient Servant (87)

In lieu of understanding: Imitating nonsense

When describing the “rules” that regulate British social behavior, HTBA suggests that the social, cultural, and linguistic codes of British life do not add up to an elaborate and subtle system of meaningful practices but constitute an obscure world of *sheer nonsense*. This is given explicit formulation with regard to British politics: “A lord becoming a Socialist would be a normal phenomenon in any country; for a Socialist to become a lord would be nonsense anywhere else. It is absolute nonsense in England, too, but absolute nonsense is the normal run of things here” (146).

If the underlying order of things is absurdity, then any effort to *understand* the rules of conduct necessarily fails. Therefore, the task of the newcomer is not to lift the veil of nonsense from the socio-cultural patterns of native life to reveal their underlying logic (as anthropology would do) but to imitate them in their very nonsensicality. As the linguistic examples also set out to demonstrate, aliens should not be

concerned with understanding because, in the proper sense, there is *nothing to be understood* here.

If their practices are inherently absurd, then integration into the native community equals nothing less than joining a group of idiots. This is what HTBA detects in the admittance of aliens, i.e. *naturalization*: “The verb *to naturalize* clearly proves what the British think of you. Before you are admitted to British citizenship you are not even considered a natural human being ... they simply doubt that you are provided by nature. According to the Pocket Oxford Dictionary the word ‘natural’ has a second meaning, too: *Half-witted person*” (92). As reflected in the very linguistic form describing it, when ceasing to be an alien one simply reaches the level of idiocy necessary to join the natives, a group of half-wits. In view of the letter quoted above asking the illegal alien to leave, the stylistic absurdity of expulsion thus mirrors the semantic absurdity of admittance.

All this, of course, serves comical effect. But in doing so Mikes, again, relies on an early modern tradition, dating back to Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters* or *Gulliver’s Travels*, of describing the Other as absurdly fantastic.

Assimilation and contribution

Encouraging newcomers to blend in by the mimicry of local rituals, what HTBA proposes is *passive assimilation*. The imperative that “You must pretend that you are everything you are not and you must look down upon everything you are” (93), however embedded in satire and thus ironic, epitomizes this self-alienating assimilatory strategy. In the socio-cultural history of twentieth-century mass migrations this in fact complies with what host countries expected from newcomers at the time of Mikes’s arrival in Britain: i.e. to abandon their alienness. Today, this might sound retrograde: multiculturalism is more supportive of the idea that immigrants should be appreciated in their very otherness, even if it is a matter of debate whether social cohesion is better served by identity politics or by melting pot strategies.

What remains striking in Mikes’s case, however, is that despite his proposal to assimilate, by becoming a prominent British humorist he had in fact achieved something completely different: actively contributed to the popular self-perception of the culture he urged his readers to imitate. Quotes from HTBA have become conversation pieces in England (Kadbedo). That is, a work eager to highlight the impossibility of any meaningful linguistic intercourse in English came to enrich

its idiomatic repertoire. (An abbreviated version of HTBA has been released as a *Level 3 Penguin Reader* for the students of English; which not only shifted the book intended readership from immigrants to anyone learning English but also turned a critique of the language into a textbook of teaching it.) On the other hand, in doing so Mikes devised himself a style *artificially native*, “so English as to be practically caricature ... of correct usage” (Szirtes). What the peculiar dynamic of a both imitative and creative linguistic assimilation, then, demonstrates is a dialectical encounter changing both the newcomer and the host.⁷

The release of HTBA in 1946, still written by an “alien,” was shortly followed by Mikes’s naturalization as a British subject. Symbolically, as a gesture of admittance responding to a satirical critique, it was an absurdity of tolerance perfectly in line with Mikes’s portrayal of the Brits. (In contrast, during the same period, and later, in the US social and political critique by “aliens” was received more resentfully: cf. Deciu Ritivoi 2014.)

In his autobiography Mikes attributed HTBA’s success to the openness of his hosts to refashion themselves after the war as well as to their tendencies of self-deprecation. These met Mikes’s satire in an unexpected way: “My book *flattered* them, although I never meant it to: it said they were peculiar, they were more inscrutable than any Orientals – in short they were unique and inimitable” (*How to Be Seventy* 164). Again in anthropological terminology (Occident vs. the Orient), Mikes here implicitly suggests that critique is successful only if it can be co-opted; that is, when, however ironically, it reaffirms the feeling of supremacy.

Born an alien, born a Jew: The roots of social mimicry

In the first sequel to HTBA Mikes continues to play with the trope of miming. Whereas HTBA encouraged his readers to imitate practices alien to them, *How to Be Inimitable* reasserts these practices as features of an *unmimable* English exceptionalism which the observer, now in the secure position of an assumed identity, also shares. In an apparent paradox, then, the observer, a newly naturalized Brit, has become *inimitable as a result of imitation*.

Notions of mimicry permeate Mikes’s whole world. HTBA detects imitation within the native community: the “Bloomsbury Intellectual”

⁷ On this mutuality in the contributions of prominent émigrés to host cultures: Timms – Hughes 2003.

achieves “originality” by “copying the habits and sayings of a few thousand other B.I.s” (63). On the other hand, the book’s mock-anthropological perspective is a result of *disciplinary mimicry* imitating social sciences. The anthropology of miming finds its way into Mikes’s travelogues too. It is especially central to his 1970 book on Japan where Mikes detects the salient feature of Japanese culture in their urge for emulating (the West) through imitation: “Today the word ‘imitation’ has a pejorative, almost contemptuous ring in Western ears; in Japanese it is a laudatory term.” In his apologia for the derivative elements in Japanese culture, Mikes presents miming as a universal, cross-cultural device: “all knowledge is imitation.”

The latter remark follows an Aristotelian anthropology, defining the natural love of imitation as characteristically human. However, Mikes’s fondness of mimicry is rooted in personal identity dilemmas he had already had prior to his 1938 expatriation. He was born into a Jewish–Hungarian family following an assimilatory path; yet during the 1920s and 1930s the young Mikes was increasingly exposed to a threatening stigmatization as an *alien* who did not genuinely belong to his native land.

In his autobiography, Mikes recounts the shock of discovering his Jewishness at a young age and that the ensuing insecurity led to the constant denial of his Jewishness when moving to Budapest to study and work (*How to Be Seventy* 29–30, 95–96). (A move which he describes as the first of his “two migrations.”) Ironically, there his social network mainly consisted of other assimilated Hungarian Jews who were surely aware of his background but respected his reluctance to be open about it. His conversion to Christianity was a desperate attempt to overcome this self-denial (*How to Be Seventy* 83), and so was his leaving for Britain in 1938. By fleeing the country Mikes tacitly accepted his hyphenated identity and the fact that it had made him an unacknowledged alien. Once in Britain, these inherent ambiguities of self-fashioning only surfaced in new forms. The urge to adapt, i.e. to integrate through *camouflage*, that HTBA proposes harks back to these previous dilemmas. For Mikes, performing a mimetic integration in Britain was a task familiar from his time in interwar Budapest, also determined by a constant struggle to adapt, to pass as a local. From this angle, what in HTBA appears as poking fun at the English mumbling when saying their names, acquires more ominous connotations: “The aim of introduction is to conceal a person’s identity.” (23)

This dynamic makes the opening passage of HTBA somewhat double edged:

I have certain qualifications to write on 'how to be an alien'. I am an alien myself. What is more, I have been an alien all my life. Only during the first twenty-six years of my life I was not aware of this plain fact. I was living in my own country full of aliens, and I noticed nothing particular or irregular about myself; then I came to England, and you can imagine my painful surprise. (17)

On the one hand, Mikes here simply plays with the notion that from a British perspective he had been an alien even prior to his arrival. (I return to this below.) On the other hand, 1938, the year he references to, was also the time of the introduction of anti-Jewish legislation in Hungary declaring him an alien among, and by, his fellow Hungarians.

A further ironic element in these identity transitions is that when under the pressure of *magyarization* Mikes's father decided to change their family name to *Mikes*, he, if only inadvertently, bestowed an ominous historical name on his son which by then had been an emblem of exilic fate in Hungarian culture: Kelemen Mikes (1690–1761) was a chamberlain in the court of Prince Rákóczi, the exiled head of the 1703–1711 uprising against the Habsburgs, ending his life in Turkey; Kelemen's famed *Letters from Turkey* have become seminal representations of exilic fate in Hungarian literature (cf. Hites 2012). Something to which, albeit in English, his later namesake has also contributed.

British, Imperial

Above I cited HTBA's example about the divergence of sense and meaning in the phrase "England" for the sake of its semantic argument but it also has political implications. When in HTBA the alien asserts his assumed identity ("We Englishmen") he only meets refusal ("Sorry, Sir, I'm a Welshman") (94). The strategy then is to resort to Britishness as a common denominator – "[a foreigner] may become British; he can never become English" (18) – but it only betrays the assumed nature of the alien's new identity: the awkwardness of being reminded of the underlying heterogeneity of Britishness which appears homogeneous only to an outsider repeatedly recurs in Mikes's works (cf. *How to Be Seventy* 204–205).

Yet the confusions in British political geography are even more far-reaching. The tea example, featuring a stereotypical cultural item, also points to this wider context. Mikes emphasizes that tea is an "oriental beverage" which in its place of origin perfectly functions as refreshment; once in Britain, it is ruined both gastronomically (as a beverage) and

semantically (as a word). The absurdity of tea being “national drink” in England, therefore, rests on economic and cultural colonization.

A similar imperial misappropriation of local functions and meanings takes place with regard to the distinction between local and foreigner in the following anecdote:

I spent a lot of time with a young lady who was very proud and conscious of being English. Once she asked me – to my great surprise – whether I would marry her. ‘No,’ I replied, ‘I will not. My mother would never agree to my marrying a foreigner.’ She looked at me a little surprised and irritated, and retorted: ‘I, a foreigner? What a silly thing to say. I am English. You are the foreigner. And your mother, too.’ I did not give in. ‘In Budapest, too?’ I asked her. ‘Everywhere,’ she declared with determination. ‘Truth does not depend on geography. What is true in England is also true in Hungary and in North Borneo and Venezuela and everywhere’. (17–18)

A counterpart to the “never England” example, here the rest of the world is subjected to an absurd political geography. Deeming everyone a “foreigner” even in their native place draws on an imperial perspective in which the exotic peripheries are absorbed by the all-embracing presence of the center. As the center is everywhere, its distinction between “native” and “foreigner” goes global too and overwrites local self-identifications: for imperial Britishness, alienness is universal. This adds another ironic layer to HTBA’s mock-anthropological framework. The conviction that Mikes attributes to the “young lady” is reminiscent of the dilemma of classic anthropology, methodologically informed and given rise to by the Empire, whether “Truth” *does or does not* “depend on geography.”

The awareness of being a newcomer in a global empire is a recurrent thread in HTBA and its sequels. It is a constant target of satire but with changing overtones. While HTBA straightforwardly ridicules the imperial perspective, in the first sequel the newly naturalized observer ironizes over the fact that he was integrating into a colonizing empire just as it was beginning to lose her colonies: “In the past twenty-one years England has gained me and lost an Empire. The net gain was small” (97). The second sequel, *How to Be Decadent*, adopts a more ambivalent stance, “To lose an Empire is a bit of a shock. I personally did not like it at all” (243), and even hints that the colonies were given away too quickly (186).

Along this changing perspective, the sequels also reflect on the socio-cultural transformation that was taking place in the meantime: that of the very Britishness which HTBA had once enjoined to imitate.

The alien as the last Brit

As HTBA stemmed from its postwar context, its sequels also bear the marks of the periods in which they were written. *How to Be Inimitable* (1960) appeared at the time of welfare measures and rising prosperity, *How to Be Decadent* (1977) during deep political, social and economic crises.

HTBA addressed “aliens” but its success relied on native readers. Making this reliance explicit (and abandoning its erstwhile position as an insecure alien), *How to Be Inimitable*, framed as to “revisit England,” speaks for the in-group. The chapters are divided between “New English” and “Old English,” which entails that this time the natives are described not as opposed to an external sense of normality but against the background of their former ways. Written from within, the account of the postwar *metamorphosis Britanniae*, a delicate dynamic of continuity and change induced by commercialization, television, motorization etc., is less for immigrant aliens. The observer is now a part of what he satirizes: asserting his newly obtained authority as “an inhabitant of Britain” (97), now the Brits are given instructions in how to catch up with their own transformation: to be a “a Briton of the sixties – you have to follow an entirely new set of rules” (99). (As written by a now insider, the book anticipates *indigenous anthropology* where “natives” study their own in-group.)⁸ *How to Be Inimitable's* interest in British mass tourism, a postwar social phenomenon and a form of outbound migration replacing colonization, is also informed by the fact that now Mikes himself, as a professional tourist, is part of this movement. (In fact, the “modern disease” (115) to travel provides the market for his travelogues.) The poignant analysis of the English tourist relies on Mikes's usual chiasmic swapping of positions: the English travel “to avoid foreigners” in England and to meet abroad “nice English people from next door” (118).

If HTBA depicted a set of socio-cultural traits and *How to Be Inimitable* their transformation, *How to Be Decadent* documents their abandonment. Framed as Britain becoming “the laughing stock of Europe” (191), now Mikes instructs the members of the “clan” about how to perform their “decay” in an “elegant” way: “I too prefer constructive decay to futile progress. But one has to know how to decay; one must learn how to be decadent” (186). And now the former alien

⁸ On the beginnings of participant-observation studies of modern-day Britain from the 1960-70s, see Rapport 2002, 4-8.

teaches fellow Britons about themselves from a more knowing position: since HTBA “I have become, in a sense, more British than the British while the British have become less British” (188).

Accordingly, *How to Be Decadent* is not only about decay but the very disappearance of true Britishness: the features that HTBA had once observed and its author has assumed are now fading in the natives themselves. In addition to the English breakfast having “disappeared from English homes” (201), the introduction of the decimal system was “our final humiliation.” Mikes is now in the defense of the absurdities that HTBA debunked: as “our most sacred heritage” he praises the old measure system, “completely senseless ... but so supremely English ... No bloody foreigner could understand it ... and that was the glory of it” (259–260). Equally outraged about the decay of language, Mikes once again shifts the perspective: now it is “bloody foreigners” who “speak English too well” while “the English themselves are busy forgetting their beautiful mother-tongue.” (197). Feeling authorized to correct grammatical flaws, this time the former alien is reprimanded for being too correct, “a pedant and a prig” (197). As the natives are *un-learning* their language, imitation is ought to take a new direction: “If you want to sound truly English, you must learn to speak the language really badly. It will not be difficult, there are many language schools where they teach you exactly that” (198).

What HTBA once offered to imitate now has become obsolete; what Mikes identifies as English “virtues” (“patience, tolerance, cool-headedness, wry humour, courtesy” [237]), the results of “power and affluence” now gone, are disappearing: “But they are disappearing very slowly – slowly enough for me. I am disappearing very slowly myself” (261). Confronted with their mutual “disappearance,” Mikes opts to maintain a cultural ideal that paradoxically was valid at the time when he, as an alien, was outside of it, and now, when inside, is no longer relevant. Their shared waning only reaffirms the former alien’s ultimate communion with his adopted country: “I have changed my country once and this is, I feel, enough for any man for a lifetime. Let England and me decay together. We are both decaying in good company” (263).

In addition to the fading of the old praxis of being a Brit, there is also a tension between what HTBA offered, typical of the midcentury (i.e. that newcomers should blend in even at the expense of self-alienation and cultural invisibility), and the social reality of the 1970s. With a large-scale postcolonial immigration, it was not only possible for “aliens” to successfully integrate without blending in but “alien” socio-cultural patterns began to pervade the very fabric of the British society.

Mikes's response to this is somewhat ambivalent. While *How to Be Inimitable* commented on the presence of (fellow Hungarian) immigrants in London – a “great English city” and “a small Hungarian village” (180–181) – with jovial sarcasm: “I, personally, have not seen an Englishman in London for over two years” (179), *How to Be Decadent* betrays some perplexity at the new waves of aliens. Playing with the trope of *being colonized by the former colonies*, Mikes ironically rephrases the post-colonial rhetoric (“The émigrés are old-fashioned Imperialists who want cash and security” [195]), but occasionally, especially regarding the “Arab menace,” walks a very thin line between being ironic and discriminatory: Britain “seem[s] to have become a colony of Saudi Arabia”; “looking at certain districts of London, you would think that there can be no more Arabs left in Riyadh”; “they buy up half of the country” etc. (255). Elsewhere he maintains more of his convivial humor: “I am not sure that the Indians were so pleased when we took over their land but I, personally, am delighted by their turning Fulham into an Indian colony, with my television-repairer as its viceroy” (256). The irony here is all the more complex as the absurdity of “we” taking over India suggests that here Mikes speaks in an assumed voice. The use of first person plural when meaning the English is a recurrent theme in the series. HTBA ridiculed this gesture and reminded his readers of the awkward responses they might get: “ours? ... No – *ours*” (94). In the sequels, however, the appropriation of the collective pronoun becomes routinized.

The colonization trope reappears when tackling the UK's European integration. Here, Mikes sounds, again, ironic though perplexing: “It is our EEC partner who are colonising us. Britain is being invaded ... a large foreign army, broken up into small units, is arriving day after day at Dover ... armed with travellers cheques and foreign currencies ... The new invaders grab their loot and withdraw almost immediately” (258). The idea of being colonized by tourists revokes many of Mikes's usual themes. In contrary to *British* mass tourism, which, as described in *How to Be Inimitable*, succeeds in maintaining English culture abroad in the “insularity” of touristic enclaves (81), here, mass tourism to Britain is an element of the overall decay because, regardless of its economic advantages, it coincides with the disappearance of genuine Britishness. (Here Mikes, again, resonates with anthropology: tourism is seen to threaten the fabric of local cultures as it turns them into simulacra offered for consumption.) Playing out a delicate dialectic – “I have become less European, Britain apparently more European” (188) – what Mikes adds to this would not have been out of place forty

years later in the Brexit campaign: “I hate being a prophet of doom but I must speak up ... Britain as an island will have disappeared and the country will have become a suburb of Brussels” (260).

In his autobiography, written a few years after *How to Be Decadent*, Mikes envisioned all-European unification as his ultimate political dream (233). In view of this, the isolationist rhetoric here seems to be merely *staging*, quoting a political discourse prevalent in Britain at the time, and indeed since: “I do not mind Britain becoming decadent but I very much mind Britain ceasing to be an island” (259).

But is this all ironic? Perhaps not entirely. What seems to be at play here, I would argue, is the process of integration that HTBA envisaged arriving at an inevitable endpoint. As if the mimicry of assimilation could really have become second nature, the persona presented in *How to Be Decadent* clings to a radical, insular version of an identity that he has inhabited and now sticks with even in its demise. The former alien insists on his hard-gained Britishness when everyone else seems to have shed it. When contrasting the growing influx of aliens into Britain with the growing outflow of Brits, now it is him who, with a final irony, comes to exclude everyone else from Britishness. As we read on the last pages: “Many people are leaving this country ... I, on the other hand, am going to stay even if Britain becomes a desert island with me as her Robinson Crusoe” (261).

Mikes thus ends his three-volume examination of being an alien in Britain on a hyperbolic image, a grandiose and hilarious vision of a former alien turning into the *last and only Brit*, an inverted castaway on an island from where everyone else had fled. Assuming an archetypal British figure from the early era of colonization, the embodiment of Britishness, an inverted alien among modern savages, Mikes is to show that ultimate integration into old-school British absurdity is achieved at the cost of producing further absurdities, that is, the idea of a *personal insularity*, now on the part of the assimilated newcomer.

In 1984 HTBA and its sequels were released in a one-volume edition bearing the overall title *How to Be a Brit*. Taking their succession as an unfolding narrative spanning a progress leading from the dilemmas of *being an alien* to those of *becoming* and *being a Brit*, the ending, the appropriation of the role of the quintessential Brit, Robinson Crusoe, is not simply a final joke but an integral part of the vicissitudes of the alien. What the absurd vision of becoming the last Brit captures is the psychological trap that many emigrants in Mikes’s cohort might have fallen into: Clinging to a hard-won identity the more anachronistic it becomes, to a fiction of identity frozen at the time of arrival.

However, Mikes also makes clear his awareness that assumed identities are never to be fully interiorized. On the flip side of the hyperbolic image of being the last Brit, he hints at the ultimate self-alienation that necessarily accompanies even the most successful (that is, successfully absurd) integration: “As a British subject I could always look down on myself as a former bloody foreigner” (263).

HTBA and the philosophy of strangeness

Mikes is more profound an author than he appears at the first sight and should be taken seriously as a social commentator (cf. Friedlander 2003). His preoccupation with the notion of *alien* brings him close to a remarkable tradition in twentieth-century philosophy and social thought. Originating in G. Simmel's 1908 seminal essay *Exkurs über den Fremden*, this tradition culminates in the work of Hannah Arendt and Theodore Adorno in the mid-1940s, just about the time when Mikes published his most memorable work.

Mikes's alien persona seems to share structural features with Simmel's *stranger*. As opposed to the *outsider* who has no relation to a group and the *wanderer* who “comes today and goes tomorrow,” Mikes's alien also “comes today and stays tomorrow.” Occupying a peculiar niche, Simmel's stranger is a member of the group yet remains distant; this lends him “bird's-eye-view” objectivity. In a similar fashion, Mikes's “alien” is also destined to shed new light, albeit through satirical exaggeration, on the life of the community that he is observing.

Arendt turns Simmel's concept of social strangeness into an ethnically determined one. Dealing with the dilemmas of assimilation in modern Jewish political existence, she distinguishes between three main types: the *schlemihl*, the *pariah* and the *parvenu*. Mikes's “alien” shares some features of all three of these. Arendt's main example for the *schlemihl* is the romantic poet Heine, and like him Mikes is also keen to detect “stupidities” as “vulnerable points” in social life; Heine's humor is reflected in Mikes's satire, which, like Heine's, also judges absurdities by “the criterion of what is really natural” (Arendt 104). What is missing from Mikes, however, is what Arendt calls Heine's aloofness: Mikes's alien does not stay remote and detached but strives to imitate what in other respects he debunks as absurd. Mikes's willingness to integrate brings him closer to Kafka and the *pariah*, an outsider longing to become a normal citizen indistinguishable from the in-group. The world of Mikes's alien, however, is not controlled by dark

and secret powers, as it was for Kafka, but, as we have seen, by sheer nonsense. What also distances Mikes from Arendt's interpretation of the Kafkaesque pariah is that Mikes is far from being a revolutionary who would upset the given social order by fighting against his own exclusion. The very opposite is true: he comes close to the third type, the parvenu, scorned by Arendt, that is, the Jew willing to assimilate and assume various national identities with absurd eagerness. Along with Mikes's real life fondness of the requisites of Victorian/Edwardian Englishness, e.g. tennis, cricket, gentlemen's clubs (he was a member of the Garrick Club) (*How to Be Seventy* 182–185, 220–228), his fantasies about a former alien turning into the potentially Last Brit epitomizes everything Arendt despised in the parvenu.

That is why Adorno's imperative on the moral necessity of being "homeless" in the modern world hardly has anything in common with Mikes. The dynamic of integration and alienness that Mikes captured was not an existential drama but an absurd farce. For him, morality rather meant to maintain some irony toward his own parvenu-ship.

Afterlife: The *How to Be* industry and the return to indigeneity

In April 2011 an exhibition was organized in London; a group of expatriate artists under the label *Alien Nation* picked up on themes in Mikes's HTBA to express their own vision of being a newcomer in the UK.⁹ Most of the paintings, photos, and installations reworked the notion of home in cosmopolitan urban environments or focused on the merging of cultural traits. The title of the exhibition, *The Art of Blending In*, grasped the essence of HTBA. Most of the works also seemed to signal that Mikes's dilemma of "how to be an alien" had turned into that of "how to feel comfortable as an expat in multicultural London"; the focus was less on integration into Britishness than on an already multifaceted cultural environment. (To cite a literary reworking of Mikes in a similar vein: the Hungarian chic lit author, Angela Kiss also produced her own pastiche of HTBA; her *How to Be an Alien in England: A Guide to the English* appeared in 2016, based on her experiences as a waitress working in London.)

The celebration of alienness as a universal phenomenon amid globalization, however, represents only one aspect of Mikes's legacy. The other one, that is, the cry in *How to Be Decadent*—"Are there any Brits

⁹ Cf. <http://www.studiotheolin.com/aliennation/>

left?”—was picked up by another group of works. Imitating or tacitly relying on Mikes's trademark genre, a whole publishing industry has arisen to define British or English identity, only this time in order that Brits re-learn what Britishness once was. The focus has shifted from the alien struggling to learn how to be a Brit to teaching Brits how they could remain themselves.

The examples are wide-ranging in purpose and style; some are ironic, some more self-celebratory. The comic cartoon and postcard series *How to Be British*, produced by EFL teachers Martyn Ford and Peter Legon between 2003 and 2014, is intended for learners of English but also hints at a critique of cultural globalization: “With standardising our food, our social customs and even our language, where can the overseas visitor find a truly British experience? The answer lies in The How To Be British Collection.”¹⁰ David Boyle's 2014 book *How to Be English* provides a nostalgic compendium of cult features from the Beatles to Big Ben; its self-characterization is very Mikes-like: “The purpose of this book is to give the reader a complete grounding in the idiosyncrasies of the English and to pin down the absurdities and warmth of Englishness at its best. ... At once fond and irreverent, laudatory and curious, *How to Be English* might just teach us how to be English once again.”¹¹ Tackling the question of Englishness on the level of pop-science, Kate Fox's 2004 book-length study *Watching the English* provides a popular anthropological survey which also argues for a renewed sense of self-identity: “I am convinced that there is such a thing as ‘Englishness,’ and that reports of its demise have been greatly exaggerated ... I set out to discover the hidden, unspoken rules of English behaviour, and what these rules tell us about our national identity” (Fox, 1).

Intending to help the English to re-learn their Englishness, as the relic of something that has nearly gone extinct but preferably recoverable, what these works do is reminiscent of recent trends in cultural anthropology *re-teaching* the indigenous communities their own customs and traditions. In a sense, this generic transformation was already anticipated by Mikes. The first sequel shifted its implied audience from “genuine” aliens to actual Brits; *How to Be Decadent* was explicitly concerned with the fading of Britishness. The 1986 Penguin blurb (quoted above for its anthropology clues, cf. note 5) also signaled that HTBA was becoming more of a self-identity training for Brits than a manual

¹⁰ <http://www.lgpcards.com/collection-one.html>.

¹¹ <https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/1099252/how-to-be-english>.

for foreigners: “[E]ven Brits born and bred may pick up a few unexpected tips.”

In addition to the various *How to Be English* series, the satirical manual format that Mikes devised has also given rise to similar approaches to other European national characters. To mention but one, Adam Fletcher, an English expat living in Berlin, or, “an honorary German,” as he calls himself, in his 2013 *How to Be German* ventures the diametrical opposite of what once Mikes attempted: his satire of Germans teaches English expats how to leave behind their Englishness and adopt the alleged traits of a different national character.

What all these works seem to reflect is the disintegration of the forms of cultural belonging based on national identities. With their allusions to Mikes’s work, they seem to rely on a conceptual and rhetoric exchange between the experiences of a twentieth-century emigrant facing the natives and today’s natives in Western Europe facing mass migration, whether within the EU or coming outside its borders. (In Britain this exchange is strengthened by recent political events, Brexit, seen by some as the resurfacing of British isolationism, a strong secessionist movement in Scotland, the potential disintegration of the UK and so forth.)

The wider reorientation in cultural self-awareness that called forth these works might be labeled, borrowing the anthropologist James Clifford’s phrase, a *return to indigeneity*. Examining first nation communities in their efforts to recover their tribal identities, Clifford traces the prospects of going beyond revivalist ethnic self-stereotyping and the commodification of cultural identity inscribed in neoliberal multiculturalism (13–49).

As the new surge of *How to Be* books seems to document, reconstructed ethnicity persisting as simulacra has become strangely relevant in modern Western national cultures. Simultaneously reaffirming national identities, assumed or born into, and hinting at their dissolution, these gestures of cultural self-reservation unexpectedly resonate with indigenous becoming in areas of decolonization. Their ideas, in their ultimate irony, were perhaps not all that far from what Mikes came to embrace after all.

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Kako biti tujec: antropologija emigracije Georgea Mikesa

Ključne besede: angleška književnost / satira / intelektualci / emigracija / Vzhodna Evropa / Madžarska / Mikes, George: *How to Be an Alien* / nacionalni stereotipi / tujost

Članek obravnava satirično uspešnico *How to Be an Alien* (1946), ki jo je napisal madžarski emigrantski novinar in prominenten britanski humorist George Mikes (1912–1987). Izkaže se, da Mikes pri obravnavi vprašanj emigracije, integracije in pripadanja uporabi karikiran antropološki pristop. S tem, ko ironično predela koncepte opazovanja in imitiranja (domorodcev) kot preživetvene strategije, imenitno opozori na absurdnost tako britanskega življenja kot tudi prizadevanj prišleka, da bi se stopil z okoljem. Nadaljevanji uspešnice, ki ju je Mikes napisal desetletja pozneje, razkrivata, da tudi ko je »tujec« enkrat uspešno integriran, občutek pridobljene britanskosti proizvaja le še nadaljnje absurdnosti. Podrobnejši pogled pokaže, da je Mikesevo satiro mogoče videti tudi kot doslej neopažen prispevek k moderni filozofski tradiciji »tujosti« (npr. pri avtorjih, kot so G. Simmel, H. Arendt, Th. Adorno in Z. Bauman). Mikeseva zapuščina še vedno navdihuje izseljence v Londonu, pa tudi drugje. Toda to emblematično delo je navdihnili tudi vrsto knjig z diametralno nasprotnim namenom – namreč takšnih, ki opogumljajo (domače) bralce, naj se vnovič oprimejo dozdevno pešajoče socio-kulturne dediščine. V transformira-

nju Mikeševе satire o tujcih, ki se prilagajajo novemu okolju, v opogumljanje »domačinov«, naj se vendar oklenejo lastne tradicije, se obenem zrcalita tako dezintegracija tradicionalne kulturne pripadnosti kot tudi nova privlačnost »domorodnosti«.

1.01 Izvirni znanstveni članek / Original scientific article

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