

Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

No 8 (2015)

History and Contemporary Literature



Maria Koundoura. Transnational Culture, Transnational Identity: The Politics and Ethics of Global Culture Exchange

Vivek Freitas

doi: [10.12681/syn.16218](https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.16218)

Copyright © 2015, Vivek Freitas



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Maria Koundoura. *Transnational Culture, Transnational Identity: The Politics and Ethics of Global Culture Exchange*. New York: I.B.Taurus, 2012. Pp. 224 . £ 58.00 (Hd.)

Maria Koundoura's book is one of the more wide-ranging studies on transnational culture to come out in recent years. Encompassing the fields of critical theory, postcolonial studies, translation studies, and cultural studies, the book demonstrates a composed fluency and clarity on the ethical question looming large in the methodologies of all these fields: what constitutes a realistic, as opposed to realist, portrayal of people and cultures in a globalised world? Her approach to this question is centred on the issue of aesthetics and prioritises Benjaminian allegory as a foundational way to access meaning in a transnational world. The book, composed as a series of standalone essays, is a work of historicist analysis that takes the intellectual and personal journey of the author across the world as the aegis under which to explore transnational culture. The outcome is a work which successfully achieves its professed goal: "to create a model of reading transnational culture by example"(3).

The book's transnational journey stretches from Australia and the Philippines, to Turkey, Greece, and Cuba. A few of the impressive range of authors Koundoura engages are Mario Pontika, Orhan Pamuk, J.M. Coetzee, Mario Vargas Llosa, Pablo Medina, and Dimitris Kalokyris. The largest part of the book is, however, devoted to working through the use of critical theory in reading these authors, and Walter Benjamin and Henri Lefebvre are the two most important thinkers in her work.

Arguably the most distinctive quality of Koundoura's book is her willingness to place her own personal experience at the centre of this book. Able to claim — officially, linguistically, and culturally— at least three national identities as her own —Greek, Australian, and American— Koundoura repeatedly, and especially in chapter 3, describes the difficulties of travelling across national boundaries and her own existence as an embodied example of Benjaminian allegory. She describes functioning as representative of the new transnational and global citizenry and the discomfort of that position. This is a very brave move on Koundoura's part, because it runs the risk of fetishising the cosmopolitan intellectual, and her work descending into a solipsistic reckoning of the world. However, it is also an essential move for her argument. History, for Koundoura, via Benjamin, is "a collection of disarticulated fragments, set in relation to a totality that is...in the hands of capital" (11). Literature, our "archive of modernity," is the space where a reader might perform the task of "exposing the congealed patterns of our daily life" (38). Consequently, as she argues in Chapter 5 in relation to Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*,

if one is to have an ethical reading practice which attends to various and differentiated fragments of transnational history, the reader's personal experience must be directly implicated by the author in a "shared responsibility, for the process of the production of meaning" (95). A reader of her work might well demand the acknowledgement of a similar responsibility of Koundoura, hence making her personal experience essential to the task of providing "a model of reading transnational culture." In so doing, Koundoura follows Jacques Derrida in *Monolingualism of the Other* (another important critical text for the book) and Theodore Adorno in *Minima Moralia* by reclaiming "the attempt to represent the moments of a common philosophy from the standpoint of subjective experience" (Adorno, "Dedication").

A direct result of such a focus on the subjective is that all the literary texts and authors dealt with in her book are overtly concerned with representing and reading transnational experiences. From Pamuk's memoir *Istanbul: Memories and the City* in chapter 1, to Yiorgos Chouliaras and other contemporary Greek poets multilingual and multi-cultural (not 'multicultural') writings of 'home' in Chapter 6, to Pablo Medina's novel *The Cigar Roller* in chapter 7—all the texts are presented as having an individual subjectivity engaged in the task of allegorizing a 'multi-' or 'trans-' belonging in the face of a homogenising and programmatic national aesthetic which disavows its always already present "difference within" (82). Given that this is a study of transnational culture and transnational *identity*, and that Koundoura spends much of chapter 2 laying the groundwork (via Freud, Marx, and Ranci re) for how the individual voice is a foundational concept for western notions of humanity, such a selection is astute and demonstrates quite markedly the global concern and significance of seeking to write the transnational individual across a range of genres and cultural practices.

One objection to the book is that all the authors under consideration are unmarked as male. Gender, 'the difference within,' is arguably one of the most important ways in which national and transnational experience is mediated and represented. To not include female authored texts in a study of transnational identity—a study done through the lens of her personal experience—Koundoura risks implicitly re-inscribing male as the problematic universal (even while she's explicitly affirming the validity of individual experience). When, in chapter 3, Koundoura does bring up a personal experience and discusses her position as a female Greek-Australian translator (for a Greek-Australian male worker) held in contempt of an Australian court by a male Greek-Australian lawyer, she reads the experience through her (trans)nationality, and leaves unacknowledged her position as a woman in an all male courtroom. Similarly, in *Elizabeth Costello*, Koundoura never addresses the possibility that a transnational female novelist winning awards

Book reviews

in the twenty-first century might have something to do with gender politics in the literary academy, and not just because she is from "the far edges" of the world (95). One would like to have seen Koundoura's book address, even if only as another short essay, subjectivities that while denying affiliation to a particular nation, seek to adhere to a firm and overtly political transnational identity politics of gender, race, environmental concerns, or class.

Transnational Culture, Transnational Identity's greatest strength is in its seamless and creatively generated readings of theory and literature. By modelling a practice of gaining fluency in the aesthetics and theoretical framings of contemporary literature from across the world, this book makes compelling reading for anyone interested in engaging concepts of nation and transnationality in the globalised world.

Vivek Freitas
Colby College