

FRAN MARTIN

mapping the  
**minor**

FRANÇOISE LIONNET AND SHU-MEI SHIH  
(EDS)

*Minor Transnationalism*

Duke University Press, Durham, 2005

ISBN 0-8223-3490-9

RRP US\$23.95 (pb)

In transnational cultural studies, a decisive shift has occurred over the past several years away from analytic frameworks that hinge on the familiar binary and hierarchical structures of West/Rest, coloniser/colonised, dominant culture/subordinated culture and so on toward an emergent paradigm that emphasises instead horizontal flows between and among non-metropolitan cultures.<sup>1</sup> Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih's edited collection, *Minor Transnationalism*, exemplifies this shift. The collection aims to challenge the assumption that the most meaningful relation to consider vis-a-vis 'minor cultures' is that between minor and major, advocating instead looking at lateral interactions *between* minor cultures, or what the editors call 'cultural transversalism'. (8) They define the transnational, as distinct from the more centripetal global, as 'a space of exchange and participation wherever processes of hybridisation occur and where it is still possible for cultures to be produced and performed without necessary mediation by the center', (5) and frame the collection as principally interested in 'networks of minoritized cultures ... within and across national boundaries'. (7) The book is divided into four thematic sections: Theorizing; Historicizing; Reading, Writing, Performing; and Spatializing. With the exception of Suzanne Gearhart's opening meditation on psychoanalytic theories of minoritisation in relation to identity formation, each of the book's fourteen chapters examines a specific site or sites of 'minor culture'. The range of examples represented is refreshingly broad, from Moradewun Adejunmobi's historicising discussion of the intricate politics of English

versus African 'vernacular' languages in African literatures to Elizabeth A Marchant's study of the representation of Afro-Brazilian ethnicity in the redevelopment of the Pelhourinho neighbourhood in Salvador, Bahia, to Seiji Lippit's erudite study of the cultural valence of the category of minor literature in modern Japan. The collection's critical starting point is a promising one, and the rich selection of work gathered here is nothing if not thought provoking.

While reading the collection, I found that my thoughts were most frequently provoked with regard to the meaning of the two words in its deceptively simple title: in this collection, both the minor and the transnational turn out to have multiple and at times ambiguous significance. Given the disciplinary backgrounds of the two editors, the project grows first and foremost out of a north American 'ethnic studies' frame. Ethnic studies furnishes one possible definition of 'minor': as used to refer to subordinated ethnic minor-ities within the confines of the US nation-state. This is the framework that dominates Abdul JanMohammed and David Lloyd's earlier collection, *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* (originally published in 1987), a book whose project this work at once extends and re-inflects.<sup>2</sup> The editors of *Minor Transnationalism* rightly note the limits of the ethnic studies/minority discourse approach: 'Ethnic studies remain an American domestic paradigm' (4) and '[w]hen non-US forms of transnationalism and trans-colonialism are brought into play, the 'minority discourse' model is helpful only to a limited extent'. (10) The other definition of the minor implicit throughout *Minor Transnationalism* is

Deleuze and Guattari's conception of minor literature as oppositional, political, collective writing by a subordinated people (*Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*).<sup>3</sup> According to this definition, 'the minor', as distinct from the numerical minority, is conceived as those subordinated and oppositional elements within any given cultural structure.

Although most of the contributors to *Minor Transnationalism* outline quite carefully which sense of 'minor' they intend in their essays, at times one senses a kind of uneasy stand-off between these two senses of the term, with the latter, more general and transnationally translatable definition threatening to be recuperated into the former, US-domestic definition at moments when the precise framework within which a given people is defined as 'minor' remains unspecified. This happens, for example, in Kathleen McHugh's essay, which takes up JanMohammed and Lloyd's theory of minority discourse to analyse 'transnational cinematic autobiography' in the work of Japanese-American filmmaker Rea Tajiri and Chicano filmmakers Ramiro Puerta and Guillermo Verdecchia. On the first page of her essay, McHugh refers to filmmakers—presumably those she goes on to discuss—as belonging to something called a 'transnational minority group'. (155) This is an uncomfortable moment. Japanese Americans may be considered a 'minor' group within the USA, but ethnically Japanese people can hardly be considered a 'transnational minority group'—they obviously constitute a major grouping in Japan itself, and transnational Japanese popular and commercial cultures are broadly dominant, not minoritised,

within the Asia–Pacific region. Similarly, while Chicanos become minor in the USA, Mexican men are hardly minor in Mexico (a distinction that is explored to excellent effect in Rafael Pérez-Torres’s essay on Chicano/a graphic art).

When Lionnet and Shih observe the limits of precisely that inherently nation-state-centric minority discourse model against which McHugh’s essay stumbles, they are attempting to distinguish their collection from JanMohammed and Lloyd’s earlier work. And a critique of *Minority Discourse*’s management of the relations between the national US context and the rest of the world is certainly in order, because, to a far greater degree than *Minor Transnationalism*, JanMohammed and Lloyd’s volume tends problematically to conflate ‘ethnic minorities’ within the USA and ‘Third World peoples’ across the entire remainder of the planet. In the introduction to that influential volume, these two broad groupings are collectively characterised as a ‘minority culture’ that is defined as such by virtue of its subordination to a ‘centre’ or ‘dominant culture’ that is variously defined as white, masculinist culture within the confines of the US nation-state and as simply ‘the West’ in general. In Ali Behdad’s chapter on how best to approach the conceptualisation and teaching of minor literatures, he makes a pithy critique of the inherently generalising tendency of JanMohammed and Lloyd’s framework:

[I wish to call] into question the critical value of *general* and *generalising* theories of colonial oppression and postcolonial resistance in reading and teaching ‘minority’ literature. [...] I wish to draw attention to

the problematic tendency to lump together a broad range of aesthetic and cultural practices under the rubric of ‘minority’ that, as ‘product of damage,’ connotes automatic resistance to ‘pathos of hegemony.’ (224)

And yet, reviewing the stated projects, methods and contents of *Minority Discourse* alongside those of *Minor Transnationalism* reveals that, despite the intentions of the latter’s editors, there do exist significant continuities between the two volumes. For, like Lionnet and Shih, JanMohammed and Lloyd stressed the need to highlight transverse linkages among minority cultures and discourses (‘various minority discourses and their theoretical exegesis continue to flourish, but the relations between them remain to be articulated. Such articulation is precisely the task of minority discourse, in the singular: to describe and define the common denominators that link various minority cultures’).<sup>4</sup> And like Lionnet and Shih, JanMohammed and Lloyd included chapters dealing with minor cultures beyond the borders of the US nation state (see those by Josaphat B Kubayanda, Hanan Hever, Arlene A Teraoka, Lata Mani and Lloyd in that volume). The pertinent question, then, is: if the editors of *Minor Transnationalism* feel that *Minority Discourse* failed, despite all this, to ‘bring postcolonial minor cultural formations across national boundaries into productive comparisons’, (11) then what would the editors of this volume need to do differently in order to achieve that aim? In other words, what is the significance of the new term ‘transnationalism’ in the volume’s title?

Clearly enough, the transnationalism striven for here was not meant to result from any broad diversity of the contributors' national positionings: the book grows out of a multicampus research group on transnational and trans-colonial studies at the University of California and all contributors are based in the USA, thirteen out of fourteen within the UC system and the fourteenth at Stanford. Perhaps, then, the transnationally comparative element was to have resulted from transnational comparisons among minor cultures elaborated within the book's individual chapters. Yet transnational comparisons are present only unevenly in the essays collected here. Many chapters deal with just a single culture and tend to spend more time discussing the details of that culture's minoritisation—in other words, its relation with its locally dominant culture—than exploring relations between minor cultures across national boundaries. Françoise Lionnet's essay furnishes an interesting example here. Focusing on Mauritian playwright Dev Virahsawmy's play *Toufann*, Lionnet stumbles up against the problem that the somewhat unavoidable framework for critical consideration of this play is vis-a-vis its intertextual relation with Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, which it playfully and critically re-scripts. At the end of the chapter, Lionnet makes a thought-provoking attempt to uncover an 'implicit dialogue' (217) between *Toufann* and the preoccupations of other post-colonial writers like Chinua Achebe and Aimé Césaire, yet unfortunately, suggestive though it is, this connection feels more wishful than convincing. Several of the other essays (notably Marchant's and Lippit's) also gesture interest-

ingly toward the possibility of implicit transnational dialogue in their closing pages, but in these instances, too, such musings do tend to remain gestural.

The overarching rubric of 'minor culture' works more effectively for some of the essays than for others. One example of a chapter where the 'minor' focus feels not quite right is Michael K Bourdaghs's otherwise fabulous essay on the Japanese singer Sakamoto Kyu's translations of American rockabilly in postwar Japan, and the reception and reframing of his music in the USA. Bourdaghs locates the minor element in this example in the Orientalising reception of Sakamoto's music in the USA, and perhaps a Japanese artist in 1960s north America could indeed, in one sense, be considered 'minor' (although I'm less sure that such a remarkable pop sensation from the economically prosperous Japan of the 1960s—however Orientalised—can really be called 'subaltern' as Bourdaghs does on page 253). Granting that point, we have a minor (Sakamoto-in-America) to major (American audiences) interaction. Yet Bourdaghs also hints at another minor cultural form, tracing a 'minor' part of rockabilly music itself back through its indirect and partial parentage by the blues and the provenance of *that* music via African slavery in the USA (in particular in relation to Sakamoto's version of Elvis's 'GI Blues', 244). Taking this into account, we arguably have a 'minor' artist performing a 'minor-gone-major' genre in double translation in a transnational context; thus *minor* (African American music culture) going *major* (Elvis), then modulating into a different *major* key (Sakamoto doing Elvis in Japan), then going

*minor*—differently—once again (Sakamoto performing in the USA). Yet at this point, one wonders exactly when this stretched and strained interpretive framework reaches the point of critical fatigue. Somehow, a lot of the inherent complexity and interest of the material seems to escape us, in this instance, if we insist on major/minor (or indeed minor/minor) as the central analytic framework. As with the musical specificity of blues music itself, maybe in the case of this fascinatingly complex and singular phenomenon, the question ‘is it major or minor?’ rather misses the point.

Some of the essays, however, demonstrate very effective ways of tackling the difficult project of tracing truly minor cultures in transnational interactions. Shu-mei Shih’s excellent essay on the complexly entangled, and sometimes directly oppositional, relations between Chinese-American feminisms and feminisms being forged by Chinese women intellectuals in China itself is a case in point. Another is Susan Koshy’s critical study of the forced transnational movement of a group of trafficked young women who were transported by a racketeer real estate mogul from the town of Velvadam in South India to Berkeley, California, during the late 1990s. Here, the refreshing specificity of Koshy’s attention to this particular Velvadam ↔ Berkeley micro-vector takes the place of more predictable and generalising coordinates like periphery ↔ center, east ↔ west, or even India ↔ USA. Jenny Sharpe’s essay, which like Shih’s and Koshy’s assumes gender as one axis of minoritisation, explores the dub poetry of diasporic Jamaican female performer Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze. Criticising Paul Gilroy in *The Black*

*Atlantic* for focusing on the major metropolitan cultures of Europe and the USA, Sharpe effectively frames Breeze as giving transnational voice to the minor cultures of Jamaican women’s subjectivities, including those of rural and working-class Jamaican women.<sup>5</sup> Rafael Pérez-Torres’s closing essay on representations of land in Chicano and Chicana graphic art is an excellent example of a critical use of transnationalism. Pérez-Torres proposes that Chicano/a culture itself constitutes a critique of the imposition of the national boundary between Mexico and the south-west USA, and traces this critique in the artworks he analyses, outlining very persuasively the minor transnationalism of the geographical and cultural trans-border movements of Chicano/a people.

Another possibility regarding the meaning of the volume’s claimed transnationalism is that the editors intend the volume as a whole to be seen as a transnationally comparative work on minor cultures; in that case, the transnationally comparative element would lie in the juxtaposition between the chapters rather than within the individual chapters themselves. However, minimal cross-referencing between chapters means that despite the real interest and quality of all of the individual essays on their own terms, the overall effect of the volume sometimes feels a bit scattergun, and the promised trans-minor dialogues remain, with notable exceptions, implicit rather than concrete.

One response to these reservations would be to observe that since the work of tracing minor-to-minor transnational interactions has only just begun, and minor cultures are, by defi-

dition, difficult to map, therefore as a first step, this volume can hardly help but appear at times tentative and provisional. And indeed, overall this rich and wide-ranging collection is probably best understood as an exciting first step—the promise of trans-minor routes and flows yet to be fully charted.

---

FRAN MARTIN lectures in cultural studies at the University of Melbourne. Her publications include *Situating Sexualities: Queer Narratives in Taiwanese Fiction, Film, and Public Culture* (Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong, 2003) and *Embodied Modernities: Corporeality, Representation and Chinese Cultures* (co-edited with Larissa Heinrich, Hawaii University Press, forthcoming, 2006).

- 
1. Symptomatic of this shift, to take some examples close at hand, is ongoing work in cultural studies in Asia as seen both in the journal *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* and in Koichi Iwabuchi's 2002 book, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Duke University Press), which examines the regional circuits of Japanese pop-cultural flow as an alternative to viewing cultural globalisation as simply Americanisation.
  2. Abdul R JanMohammed and David Lloyd, *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990.
  3. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1986.
  4. JanMohammed and Lloyd, p. 1.
  5. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Verso, London and New York, 1993.