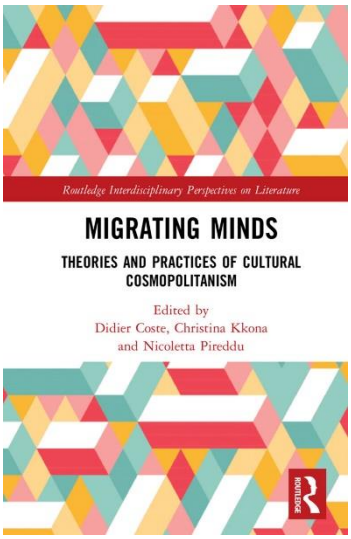
Didier Coste, Christina Kkona and Nicoletta Pireddu, eds.

# Migrating Minds

## Theories and Practices of Cultural Cosmopolitanism

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Review by Serena Fusco

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*Migrating Minds* is a gift of a book. Its outstanding quality has been publicly recognized when, this year, it has been awarded the prestigious René Wellek Prize, conferred by the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA). A paperback May 2023 edition has just come out after the 2022 hardcover one; 2023 has also seen the launch of *Migrating Minds: Journal of Cultural Cosmopolitanism*, hosted by Georgetown University as a continuation and expansion of the project. The twenty essays in this exciting collection engage the controversial category of cosmopolitanism, rethinking it in depth and eventually broadening its scope and range for the present time. I see the volume as a brilliant effort at engaging totality, the *tout-monde*, chaotic as it is, acknowledging chaos and attempting to orient oneself in it. Édouard Glissant is one of the voices inhabiting the book and subtending the moves of its authors, together with other classical thinkers of cosmopolitanism and several theoreticians and practitioners of literature, art, and culture, as things of the world. Among these, mentioned or directly discussed, are Jean Amrouche, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Erich Auerbach, Elias Canetti, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Confucius and his school, Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, Jacques Derrida, Diogenes of Sinope, Mahatma Gandhi, Immanuel Kant, Ursula Le Guin, Liao Yiwu, Arundhati Roy, Rabindranath Tagore, and Virginia Woolf. But the list could—and should—be much longer. Longer not only in the sense of comprising all the figures mentioned or discussed in the volume; longer, because the very structure of the book evokes possible new (and old) participants to the

conversation, potentially widening the scope of its outreach both in space and time. Moreover, perhaps—and this is one of the book's provocations—expanding the conversation cannot but involve some names we would not completely like to see there, thus forcing us to acknowledge (as Lampropoulos suggests in his essay) that the attempt to engage totality involves taking into account the unconceivable and, sometimes, the (historically) unforgivable.

*Migrating Minds* comprises the work of Hena Ahmad, Maya Boutaghou, Gautam Chakrabarti, Ying Chen, Didier Coste, Sébastien Doubinsky, Jean-Pierre Dubost, Bertrand Guest, Christina Kkona, Apostolos Lampropoulos, Ignacio López-Calvo, Christine Lorre-Johnston, Angélica Montes-Montoya, Rukmini Bhaya Nair, Alexis Nouss, Nicoletta Pireddu, Garima Singh Panwar, Robert T. Tally Jr., Tintin Wulia, Mihaela Ursa, Huiwen (Helen) Zhang, and Zhang Longxi. Next to a prevalence of essays by academics based in the US and France, several other locations are involved, including Romania, India, Canada, Hong Kong, Sweden, and Norway. Moreover, while the contributors are mostly academics, the volume includes the work of 'not fully academic' figures, like artists and creative writers.

What is striking at first reading is the sheer range of topics covered, and how despite—or perhaps *because of*—this breadth, the essays manage to speak to each other, evoking or subtending currents of dialogue and scattered commonalities of intents. The issues range from the topical (like the impact of technology and virtualization on education, or climate change) to 'deep-time' (like migrancy, humanity, hospitality). However, as these very few examples reveal, topicality and *longue durée* are two sides of the same coin. Virtually all the essays are top-notch—simultaneously daring and sound, some more evocative, others more concrete, some both lyrical and prosaic.

In terms of disciplinary positioning, the editors stake their claim: "One of the main goals of this collection is, if not to build, at least to sketch out transdisciplinary bridges from currently underrepresented cosmopolitan studies (in literature, the arts, and general education) to the more established fields of the sociology and moral and political philosophies of cosmopolitanism rather than the other way around. We wish to amplify the emerging voices of literary, art, and cultural theorists who can bring fresh views in dialogue with contemporary sociologists, philosophers, political theorists, and postcolonial scholars […]" (2). In the Introduction, the editors observe that "[e]ver since the Enlightenment, and today more than ever, cosmopolitan systems of thought (ideologies) seem to be torn between two opposite attitudes with regard to cultural difference, equality, and inclusion" (5). They retrace

> [a]n unresolved tension between two values: unity and diversity. Unity guarantees the means of action, but diversity affords interactive creativity. These values are not simply opposites that must be balanced; each one is a precondition for the exercise and promotion of the other. However, at the spatiotemporal scale of today's world, the tensions are exacerbated. Negotiation becomes more difficult and an abyss seems to open between the sanctification of cultural difference for its own sake and its reviling for the sake of peace and order enforcement. The first, relativist position considers that the values, rites, and laws of each cultural community are equal by definition to those of any other and must be preserved at all costs for individual members, while the second, monist position (wrongly called "universalist") […] aims to standardize human expression and performance so that the fusion of all communities into one block can prevent any conflict. At the scale of (still) particular nation-states and regional societies, the first position corresponds to the type of "multiculturalism" in which multiple ghettos try hard to ignore each other in order to avoid civil war, while the second corresponds to centralist authoritarianism and the forced assimilation of minorities. The first position entails an endless repetition of history, the second its (impossible) end. (5-6)

The editors—and virtually all the contributors—historically situate their efforts at trying times: times of increased militarization, barriers against migration, and intolerance masked as necessary closure against invasion and chaos, accompanied by a neglect of the serious environmental emergencies that threaten the very sustainability of the human presence on the planet. "This is why we feel it is urgent to reinvent cosmopolitanism based on reciprocal comparison and the negotiation of performable values founded upon the potential improvement of human well-being and the sustainability of human life in accordance with its natural milieu. Migrating minds are those that seek alternatives in the study of speculative and pragmatic models and countermodels of cross-cultural performance" (6).

The collection is divided in four parts. Parts 1 to 3 are of comparable length—six, seven, and six essays respectively. Part 4 comprises only 'one' text—not an essay *stricto sensu*, but instead an exchange of letters (through the mail) sent and received between late July and early September 2019.

The essays in Part 1 ("Cosmopolitan Theories, Contemporary Debates") engage and elaborate on various theories of cosmopolitanism from different parts of the world. Dubost's "The Paradox of the Cosmopolitan" explores the linguistic dimension of non-coincidence that is part and parcel with the unitary thrust of cosmopolitanism, from Diogene of Sinope's *kosmopolites* to linguistically plural articulations of citizenship and ideas of being "in the world." Recontextualizing Derrida, Dubost suggests that cosmopolitan ethics implies the ability to jostle between presence and absence; if the world is present to us, it is also absent in the sense that it is not always 'there,' at our disposal. Tally Jr.'s "A Postmodern Mappa Mundi" fruitfully uses the categories of utopia, dystopia, and heterotopia with relation to the cosmopolitan ideal.

Grounding his discourse in the Mediterranean yet literalizing/expanding the meaning of "Mediterranean" as "the middle" of the (medieval) world, Tally Jr. suggests that "the role of the cosmopolitan vision in an age of globalization [is] to establish for all the gnawing and clawing sense of our fundamentally medial position in this world. […] [T]he medieval *mappae mundi*, with their densely symbolic content and their resolutely unrealistic forms, serve as models for the inevitably vexed efforts to make sense of and give form to this global system" (41). With specific reference to European and especially French migration policies that deal with the massive arrivals of recent times, Nouss' "Exilic and Refugee Cosmopolitanism" discusses the political subjectivity of the migrant by regarding territoriality and asylum as derivative of exile, and not the other way around. "Internationally recognized but applied with more or less conviction, or even completely set aside when European borders are arbitrarily closed to potential refugees, the right of asylum can regain its power if it is redefined as a *right to exile* belonging to the subject in migration" (43, emphasis added). "By welcoming exiles, Europe would welcome Europe" (52). Montes-Montoya's "Édouard Glissant and Creole Cosmpolitanization" reframes Glissant—recently re-discovered as a major theorist of decoloniality—from the perspective of cosmopolitanism. "Contrary to Kantian cosmopolitan rationality, creolization does not aspire to embody a normative ontology of 'living together;' on the contrary, it aspires to a hopelessly open world" (63), "hopeless openness" referring to the very inevitability of the creolization process. Guest's "For an Earthly and Cosmic Justice" is a powerful discussion of/around selected texts that—rarely read next to each other—here come together as "voices raised against climatic walls," a literature that "cosmicizes." "Because they have turned their backs on the sadly predictable world of plantations, control, and utilitarianism, the truly cosmic texts—as numerous as they are varied and absolutely impossible to list—are written for us to join in, and welcome in our turn newcomers passing through. […] [They] encourage us to care for the unknown, to opt for a poetics of hospitality in the chorus of chaos" (77). Finally, in "Reaching Out to the World Against the Grain," Zhang L. pleads for a "cosmopolitan comparativism." He observes that, although "[t]he present is […] not a propitious time for cosmopolitans" (79), the humanities especially find themselves in the position of promoting cosmopolitanism in the sense of "human values and the cultivation of the human mind and human emotions toward the love of all human beings" (83). A comparative cosmopolitan perspective should oppose any tendency to absolutize or dichotomize cultural differences, an attitude that can only lead to isolationism and conflict.

The essays in Part 2 discern/construct a "Cosmopolitics in [and through] Literature." Coste contextualizes and discusses the work of Lev Nussimbaum, aka Essad Bey/Kurban Said (1905-

1942), whose novelistic characters impersonate different identities in colonial situations: the lengths that Nussimbaum's characters go to "go native" highlight the paradox that "no one is native by birth" (103). Boutaghou subsequently introduces Jean Amrouche (1906-1962), reading in his position as Algerian colonial/diasporic writer a tension between a native Berber cultural identity and a cosmopolitan mask worn in France: "The writings of Amrouche show the tentative resolution of the fragmented self as enforced by an internalized political, historical border implemented by colonial culture. In the colonial context and in France, the cosmopolitan, as a projected ideal space, becomes a camouflage that will allow the emotional and social existence of the minorized subjectivity" (114-115). In their co-authored essay, López-Calvo and Singh Panwar compare instances of a cosmopolitan "'aesthetics of anxiety' regarding nation, self-identity, and family" (117) in the works of two writers of the Global South, Horacio Castellanos Moya and Arundhati Roy. Chakrabarti discusses "Be/Longing" and "E/Migration" in the work of Chinese dissident Liao Yiwu, a PRC citizen and since 2011 a resident of Germany. Liao "comes across as a rare cultural icon who, while being appreciative of and thankful for the personal and professional freedoms offered by the 'West,' yearns for a possible, even if tentative, reconfiguration of the Chinese societal-political landscape" (139); however, his "avowed rootedness in Chinese literary-cultural traditions and noetic heritage seems to pose no challenge to his equally passionate espousal of internationalist perspectives of human rights and transcultural solidarity" (133). In the following essay, Doubinsky juxtaposes two sci-fi novels, Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* (1961), as depictions of a "breakthrough" and/or "breakdown" in transcultural, transplanetary communication. Ahmad tackles Kamila Shamsie's novel *Home Fire*, a rewriting of Sophocles' *Antigone* for times of terrorism, Islamophobia, and loyalties divided among family, nation, religion, and supra-identitarian justice. Closing Part 2, Kkona undertakes a comparative reading of Reinaldo Arenas' *El mundo alucinante* (1969) and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928). In both texts, "xenophilic queerness" emerges in completely non-linear treatments of time, which open up historical dimensions alternative to canonical narratives of modernity, highlighting "the precariousness of our condition and the unforeseeability of our encounters" (166).

Part 3 especially focuses on linguistic and pedagogical aspects. Lampropoulos discusses *The documenta 14 Reader*, a book accompanying and to an extent theoretically framing, the art exhibit *documenta 14*, which took place in 2017 between Kassel and Athens. This multilayered essay casts the *Reader* as "itself a case of cosmopolitan hospitality" (182), pointing out both the openings and limits thereof. Quoting Derrida, Lampropoulos stresses a circularity between the

"revenant" (the ghost of the past, including past "unforgivable" historical aberrations) and the "arrivant" (the unexpected, which demands hospitality). He references David Coughlan's idea of "ghostpitality": "By adding a 'g' to hospitality, he calls on us to welcome the 'ghost,' our well-known or totally unknown predecessor, some notorious or neglected parts of history, and our debt of predilection" (186). "Making Worlds with Things" is a theoretical companion to the art of its author, Tintin Wulia, who in this essay stresses the presence of the "border"—something that, she claims, is too often imagined as a definite yet distant line in space—in her artistic practice. Tintin involves people in collective performances, so that things themselves become the protagonists of "affective translations" from person to person, location to location. Pireddu discusses the work of European allophone, translingual writers (Brooke-Rose, Sebald, Özdamar, and others), who provide the opportunity "to explore a specifically European relational identity neither simply inward-looking nor unrecognizably diluted into the open world. Europe can be seen as the incubator of a bounded cosmopolitanism, not just 'rooted' […] but, rather, defined by its cultural and geographic collective situatedness, which establishes a dynamic interaction within its internal components and with the rest of the world" (217). In the following essay, Ursa makes comparative literature and its history 'react' with some cosmopolitan configurations. Moving from the 'traveling intellectuals' who founded the discipline to local and paradoxically nationalistic forms of literary cosmopolitanism, she suggests that nowadays "it becomes increasingly important to analyze the particular, rather than the universal content of cosmopolitanism, understanding that it is precisely one's situatedness in the world and within cultures that forges our relational imagination and our allegiances" (230). The final two essays of this part, by H. Zhang and Nair, discuss teaching/pedagogical experiments. H. Zhang reports about the practice of "transreading" texts with her students, moving among originals, multiple translations, and creative experiments. Describing the tools employed in a survey on education made in India—yet in her opinion expandable elsewhere—answered by children themselves, Nair reinstates children as key actors of/in cosmopolitanism, making a crucial point about the importance of education both as a colonial tool and as an indispensable moment in the 'growth' of a humanity beyond borders.

The book is beautifully closed by the 'dual' text of Part 4, an exchange of letters between Chinese Canadian French-language writer Ying Chen and Paris-based academic Christine Lorre-Johnston, whose writings emotionally span many of the topics already tackled in the 'essays' proper. In accordance with one of the most widespread expectations, or prejudices, around cosmopolitanism, one might ask: is there a utopian horizon to *Migrating Minds*? Tally Jr. writes: "Utopias, almost by definition, are otherworldly, whereas the cosmopolitan must be thoroughly

worldly" (35). There is, perhaps, a recognition of a "utopian" value to cosmopolitanism—in the sense of not being scared of imagining alternatives to the present crises. In other words, *if* there is a "utopia" evoked by/through the essays, it is much less some ahistorical idealization than an intermittently resurfacing imaginative space that is grounded in real, material conditions. The volume powerfully suggests that the present 'makes sense' only if we reconnect it to the ghosts of the past and the visions of the future. To me, another striking feature of the collection is that it is itself structured as an attempt—here freely taking my cue from Doubinsky's essay—at coming together in failure, *via* common failure, as dramatized in the novels by Le Guin and Lem. The book passionately defends the importance of being open to whom and to what may come (as suggested by Lampropoulos [182]). The essays (especially Montes-Montoya's, Guest's, and Lampropoulos') brilliantly work out this necessity in the direction of a *temporal* openness, looking ahead towards the emergence of what cannot be named yet, a work that will need to be assisted by imagination, as well as by others who join in.

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