

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Paul Allatson & Jo McCormack, *Exile Cultures, Misplaced Identities* (Rodopi, 2008)

The notion of exile, as developed by Edward Said in numerous works, has intrigued scholars, writers, artists and activists for the last quarter of a century. Its impact was most profound in the emerging area of post-colonial studies, but the influence of Said's idea of exile has now stretched throughout other disciplines and importantly, outside the walls of academia to more popular forms of discourse. An example of how the interdisciplinary nature of the notion of exile has expanded and transformed through different academic disciplines and filtered into writing, art and politics is the recently published edited collection, *Exile Cultures, Misplaced Identities*. Having organised an earlier symposium and workshop on the topic of 'Exile and Social Change', the editors, Paul Allatson and Jo McCormack, both from the University of Technology, Sydney, have produced a book that develops the notion of exile, taking Said as a starting point, but also tracks how it has become a much more diffuse and heterogenic idea.

The notion of exile rises from feelings of disconnection and alienation, not just of a minority within a majority, but more so from feelings of being caught between two societies – divided by geography, culture, language or politics, amongst other factors. Said discussed the notion of exile as a condition of separation experienced in the process of trans-national migration, the feeling of leaving one's homeland, voluntarily or by force, but also feeling displaced within the migrant's destination country. This notion of exile was often characterized by feelings of nostalgia for 'home' and marginalisation, and thus inaction – often caught suspended by geography and time. For Said, as Allatson and McCormack state, the feeling of exile was primarily a negative one, which 'engender[ed] sadness and ontological estrangement' (9). However, this liminal space, caught between two societies, has been developed by others as not necessarily the negative experience spoken of by Said. For a number of scholars and writers, this marginal status has liberating aspects that have the possibility to open up avenues to overcome these feelings of displacement. While exile arose from people escaping the cataclysmic events of the twentieth century, such as war, imperialism, massacres, revolution, dictatorships, economic and environmental crisis (to name a few), exile, as developed by Homi Bhabha, Paul Gilroy, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, could provide a platform from which to challenge these problems. So the notion of exile has become a concept that is contested and debated, in academia, in politics and in art, amongst other places.

Exile Cultures, Misplaced Identities investigates this debate over the notion of exile, asking, 'Are there other means of living in, and imagining, exile? What can exile and its critical uses tell us about the complex imbrication of processes of identification with a particular place or multiple places? Does exile continue to have a critical use value as a descriptor for how certain communities and individuals perceive and make sense of their worldly locations?' (9). The book's fourteen chapters analyse a wide range of interpretations of the notion of exile, demonstrating that the experience of exile is a much more varied phenomenon than the one first outlined by

1

Book Reviews: *Exile Cultures, Misplaced Identities* by Paul Allatson & Jo McCormack. Evan Smith.

Transnational Literature Volume 2 No 1 November 2009.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

Said. While the notion of exile is undoubtedly linked to transnationalism, the book consciously attempts to avoid 'a western European or North American bias', including accounts of exile in numerous countries outside these regions, such as China, India, New Caledonia and Australia, as well as the USA, France, Germany, and from numerous regions around the world, including Japan, Algeria, Vietnam, Hungary, Italy, Colombia and Cuba. The volume also portrays the multitude of ways in which feelings of exile can manifest themselves, through politics, literature, art and cultural rituals, as discussed in Marivic Wyndham's chapter on grappling with the concept of death by Cuban exiles in Florida.

The most intriguing accounts within the volume are the ones that most challenge the preconception of what exile means. The two opening chapters deal with the notion of exile *within* the boundaries of the state, rather than as a result of crossing borders, looking at the stories of two ethnic minorities inside the Han-dominated People's Republic of China. Susette Cooke's chapter 'Becoming and Unbecoming Tu' discusses the notion of exile for the Mongour, an ethnic minority in northwest China, labeled by the Chinese Government as the 'Tu nationality' and their struggle against this categorization, described by Cooke as 'the historical operation of Han Chinese cultural imperialism' (55). David S.G. Goodman, in his chapter 'Exile as Nationality', details a different ethnic minority in China, the Salar. Unlike the Mongour, the Salar are recognized by the Chinese Government, but are a Muslim minority, whose exile is 'a premodern notion of banishment' (59), as the Salar have had a long fraught history with the centralizing powers in China, rather than just the Communist Government since 1949. These chapters demonstrate that the same conflicting pressures of integration and exile, which many minorities experience in the global West, also exist in other regions, such as China.

This collection of diverse accounts on how exile is experienced and expressed across the globe promotes interdisciplinary discussion, which should be of interest to scholars in history, sociology, cultural and literary studies, as well as artists, writers and activists outside the academic sphere. Some readers may be apprehensive by the theoretical language used in some chapters, but Allatson and McCormack's introduction and Devleena Ghosh's summarizing chapter do a good job of demystifying some of the post-colonial/post-modern terminology. The field of cultural and migration studies in Australia is growing, especially amongst scholars looking at studies outside the Australian sphere, and this edited collection is appreciated as a decent contribution to the literature.

Evan Smith