Minor Transnationalism

By Sarah Rabke | August 17, 2017

‘Minor Transnationalism’ offers us a conceptual framework for aggregating numerous movements, groups, and discourses that, whether local, regional, or multinational in organizational structure, are fighting a guerilla war against the colossal forces of the major transnationalism represented by an unleashed global capitalism. –Susan Koshy (2005, 116)

Looking Sideways

Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih (2005) coined the term “Minor Transnationalism” in order to move beyond the limitations of postcolonialism, globalization theory, ethnic studies, and transnationalism for the study of minority communities. In putting forward the concept, they argued that transnational studies and its counterparts emphasize the interactions and relationships between the minor culture and mainstream society and that by exclusively analyzing these vertical connections, “We forget to look sideways to lateral networks that are not readily apparent” (1). With this focus, minority groups often form their identities based on this vertical relationship, “in opposition to a dominant discourse rather than vis-à-vis each other and other minority groups” (2). This process frequently divides minority communities, pitting them against one another. The lens of minor transnationalism, Lionnet and Shih hoped, would help scholars to analyze the horizontal relationships among diverse minority groups and simultaneously allow room for more creolized identities—a concept informed by the work of Édouard Glissant ([1990] 1997).

Although Lionnet and Shih criticized Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guatarri for placing too much emphasis on the binary relationships that minorities have with mainstream culture, they share a common goal of generating a discourse that is “acentered and nonhierarchical” (Deleuze and Guatarri 1987, 21). In order to accomplish this goal, a minor transnational perspective promotes the study of the transversal movements, or the “hybrid and relational” interactions that one minor network has with other minor networks (Lionnet and Shih 2005, 9), examining and making room for “the minor’s inherent complexity and multiplicity” (8). By highlighting horizontal over vertical relationships, minor transnationalism helps scholars move away from characterizing global capitalism as the dominant norm and toward identifying oppositional movements to this mainstream culture.

Ali Behdad (2005) also supports the minor transnational perspective, criticizing postcolonialism and its important figures such as Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi for homogenizing minority cultures and experiences. Scholars must instead look at the more specific backgrounds and positions of each of these networks in order to understand them better (Behdad 2005, 234). Each minority community should not be grouped together as the “other” culture, defined only by its differences from the majority, as they have arisen out of unique backgrounds. In regard to diaspora studies or the displacement narrative, for

example, Behdad expands on John Armstrong's (1976) concepts of "proletarian and mobilized diasporas" (393), defining them as exiled intellectuals and disempowered migrants, respectively, in order to demonstrate that both of these groups have very different experiences concerning their minority status (Behdad 2005, 227). These individuals' identities cannot and should not be generalized by a broad postcolonial perspective.

Local, Regional, and Multinational Minor Transnationalism in Literature and Film

As seen in the quote above by Susan Koshy, the framework of minor transnationalism gives priority to the "minor" groups and their discourses at local, regional, and multinational levels, making the theory very flexible and allowing scholars to apply it to a variety of contexts.

For example, Camilla Stevens (2016) analyzes dramaturges from the Dominican Republic to attempt to illustrate the "lateral linkages" that the plays of Frank Disla "make with other nomadic, border crossing cultures," illustrating both a local and multinational focus (190). Because Latin American societies are composed of complicated mixes of identities and cultures, including the culture of migration that Stevens examines, the minor transnational lens can help scholars avoid generalizing these communities in order to position them in their appropriate social and historical contexts. The characters in Disla's plays come from many different communities, such as Chile, Cuba, Puerto Rico, or Mexico, and belong, at least partially, to even more. Each character is in constant negotiation over his or her identity and citizenship in relation to both the mainstream culture of the Dominican Republic and to other migrant communities. Furthermore, because of the content of the plays and the identities of transnational playwrights, Stevens argues that the work of writers like Disla passes by unnoticed, unable to fit into one fixed category or the other, neither "a minority U.S. Latino [n]or a national Dominican theater paradigm" (187). Minor transnationalism provides a framework for understanding the literary production that emerges from a heterogeneous identity or culture.

Minor transnationalism has also become very popular in studies of Asian cultures. Thomas Chen (2014), for example, takes a multinational approach to examine the "transnational sensibility" forged through the translation and dubbing of foreign films in China (102). However, Asian film and queer studies have developed into a common area of minor transnational research in the past several years. Using a more regional focus, scholars such as Sue-Anne Yeo (2017), Olivia Khoo (2014), and Howard Chiang (2014) cite connections between the film production of various Sinophone communities. Yeo demonstrates how globalization has incited the growth in popularity of film festivals and how these film festivals, in turn, "facilitate cross-border links between minor screen cultures that are non-mainstream or alternative" (301). Participation in these festivals helps cultivate new identities for transnational alliances across borders and overseas, connecting communities that were not previously engaged in this type of cultural contact. One of the positive results of this connection is the promotion of "equity and solidarity rather than hierarchy and competition" among these periphery communities (316).

In her own research on Asian cinema, Khoo calls attention to the lack of scholarly work concerning the study of queer Asian films that has obscured the importance of minor queer networks in the area. Employing Deleuze and Guatarri's concept of minor literature and Tom Gunning's concept of minor cinema, Khoo emphasizes how women filmmakers from across

the region and their filmmaking techniques come together to create a dialogue full of minor-to-minor "articulations" (2014, 41). Similarly, Chiang studies queer populations from Hong Kong, Malaysia, Taiwan and Singapore, focusing on the lateral relationships between the cultural and political production across these areas. In analyzing these horizontal connections, Chiang hopes to create new vocabularies for describing sexual and gender identities and that these new terms transcend traditional geographic and cultural borders. Chiang describes minor transnationalism as a way to access a "grid of knowledge and experience that exceeds, decenters, and, indeed, replaces the familiar analytical framework of colonial modernity," which allows space for critical analysis (43). By drawing connections across the various Sinophone minor communities, Yeo, Khoo, and Chiang expose new discourses that previously have been silenced.

Beyond the Books: Minor Transnationalism in other contexts

The minor transnational approach transcends literary and film criticism. Koshy (2005), for instance, uses minor transnationalism and the "strategic sites for analysis" it creates to study legal regimes and the illegal global economy of sex-trafficking (116). Some of the individuals involved in the trade are doubly victimized because they belong to several different "minor" groups and are thrust onto the transnational stage by the organizers of the sex trade. Even in these negative situations of minor-to-minor oppression and complete lack of solidarity, minor transnationalism is an invaluable tool that exposes what happens when transnational networks go unchecked and opens up discussion on the ethical and legal steps that should be taken to manage this exploitation and abuse.

In a very different vein, scholars have utilized minor transnationalism for exploring Central and Eastern European identity and even the study of Phoenicians and Cretans in the Early Iron Age. Adam Kola (2014) discusses "minor Europes" and navigating complex European roots, focusing on the multiplicities of Europe and its peripheries throughout history. These themes are relevant today, as the European Union continues to grow or as the influx of immigrants increases, because "'Minor Europe' can offer courageous solutions in the process of building a European community, not as an exclusive model but, on the contrary, as an inclusive one" (Kola 2014, 69).

Catherine Pratt (2009), meanwhile, draws on the concept in her work on the interactions among communities of Cretans and Phoenicians, two minority groups in the larger Mediterranean culture. Studying these groups' lateral linkages and hybrid relationships allows us to "understand the transnational spaces generated by interactions between two (or more) liminal peoples" (Pratt 2009, 308). The minor transnational approach encourages insightful commentary across temporal and geographic borders and academic fields that can help us redefine the way we view the world.

Ultimately, by bringing to light the importance of lateral, rhizomatic networks and the horizontal relationships that arise from them, scholars can avoid homogenizing the minority experience and allow for more nuanced, creolized identities of both communities and individuals, following the advice of Deleuze and Guatarri (1987): "Don't be one or multiple, be multiplicities!" (25). A minor transnational approach examines the economic, social, political, and cultural practices or interactions through which members of liminal communities form new social fields and networks that transcend the typical limitations of

nationality or ethnicity. The application of this theory to literature, social sciences, and other areas contributes to the "extending and opening-up" of both minority and majority culture (Kola 2014, 55), encourages the emergence of literacies in less commonly studied languages, and leads to more productive conversations about both allegiances and abuse among minor communities and the changes in ethical or legal standards that should be pursued in the face of both vertical and horizontal oppression (Lionnet and Shih 2005, 8). In this way, minor transnationalism provides a space in which "the traumas of colonial, imperial, and global hegemonies" can be seen, recognized, and, hopefully, resolved (21).

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