

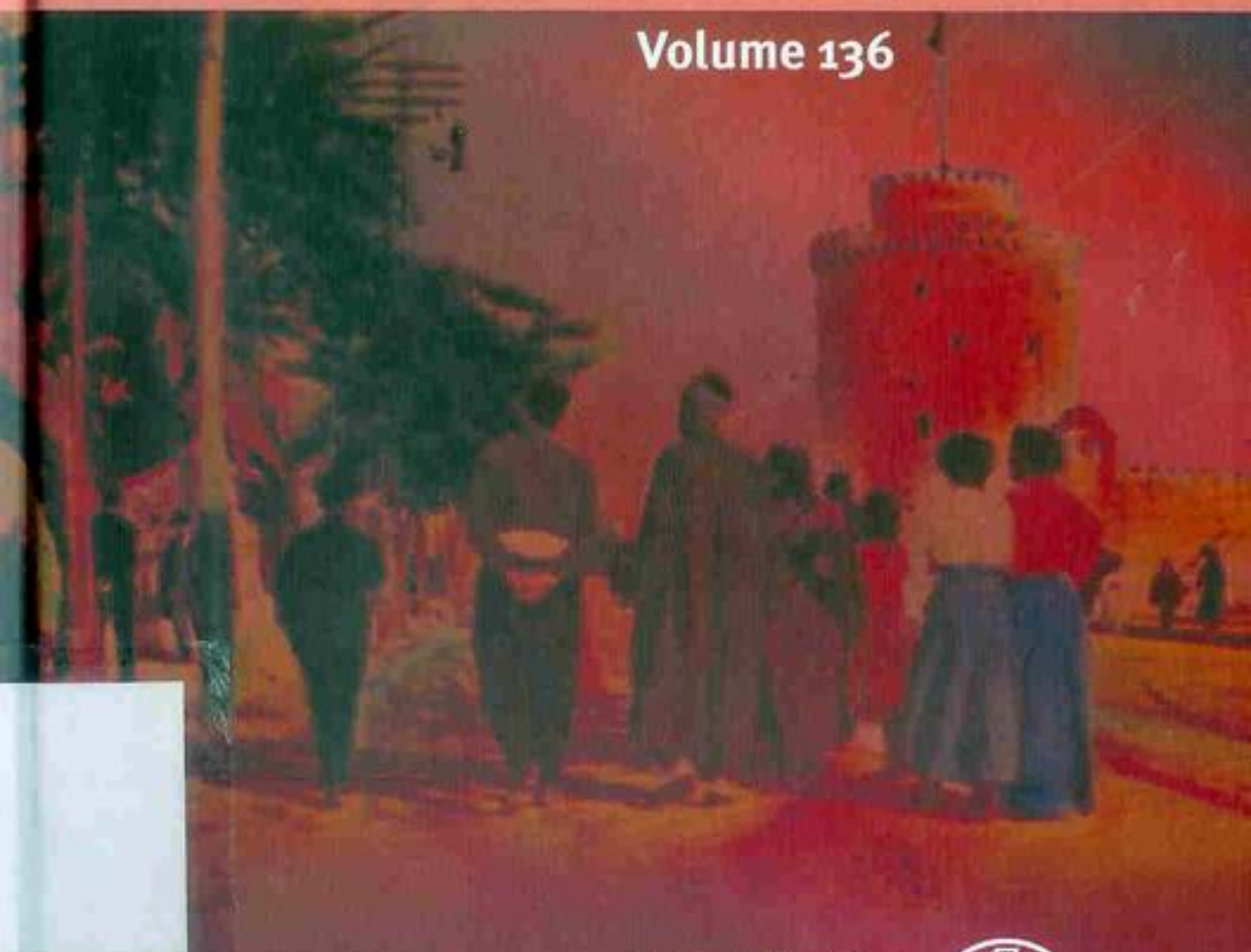
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Editors

Transcultural Localisms

Responding
to Ethnicity
in a Globalized
World

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Transcultural Localisms

This volume presents original research from the 4th MESEA conference, "Ethnic Communities in Democratic Societies," May 2004, Thessaloniki, Greece. The original title was replaced by the current one as the present volume took shape. The new title, "Transcultural Localisms," focuses on the common thread running through the sixteen essays of the volume: in the twenty-first century, flows of culture, capital and labor cannot curb the resurgence of local resistances that contest global dynamics. Today's global culture cannot integrate everything; rather, its terrain is open to challenge and its borders are constantly in flux. If anything, local resistances appropriate elements they find useful from that same global culture which they are forced to accept. As a result, their own projects of cultural, economic and political survival are expedited. The essays collected in this volume emphasize the potential of the local to challenge rather than submit, and to defy those discourses which protect the interests of institutional control, thereby creating possibilities for alternative discourses.

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YIORGOS KALOGERAS, ELEFThERIA ARAPOGLOU, LINDA MANNEY

Introduction

The present volume collects sixteen papers originally presented at the 4th MESEA conference sponsored and organized by the Department of American Literature and Culture, Aristotle University in Thessaloniki, Greece, in May 2004. The original title of the conference was "Ethnic Communities in Democratic Societies." The title was decided upon to emphasize MESEA's growing preoccupation with interdisciplinary studies; at the same time, however, it foregrounded the association's commitment not only to text, but also to context. MESEA's call for papers brought together approximately one hundred and thirty impressive presentations, all of which covered issues with a global relevance. Furthermore, the conference participants made reality the MESEA founders' original wish: namely, that the last letter of the association's acronym would refer to the Americas, Africa, as well as Asia. Ultimately, all of these continents were represented at the Thessaloniki conference.

Submissions for a collection of essays that would represent the spirit of the conference as well as MESEA's growing commitment to academic excellence were enthusiastic and generous. Subsequently, the editors felt responsible to create a scholarly volume that would not only reflect the essence of the conference's original title, but also venture into the socio-political and literary realities of the twenty-first century. Hence, our choice of a different title for the volume: "Transcultural Localisms." This alternative title occurred to the editors because, in collecting and editing the papers, Fredric Barth's pace-setting idea of the relevance of the boundary in discussions of ethnicity surfaced as a recurring motif among all contributions. Indeed, even if we accept that ethnicity and locality are especially beleaguered nowadays, this does not imply a cosmos in which all boundaries have dissolved. In today's increasingly globalized world, the cultural, economic and political hegemony of the West provides the veneer of common referents for diverse communities around the globe. At the same time, however, and notwithstanding globalization, boundaries remain distinct, or are constantly redrawn so that we can still talk vociferously of Greek, Jewish, Brazilian, Cambodian, or Indonesian ethnicities, albeit in a globalized world. Ultimately, as Saskia Sassen admits, globalization is a "contradictory space," characterized as it is by contestation, internal differentiation, and continuous border crossings (143).

In the twenty-first century, flows of culture, capital, and labor do not manage to curb the resurgence of local resistances that resist global dynamics. This is because today's global culture cannot integrate "everything," thus it remains a terrain open to contestation so that its edges are constantly in flux. If anything, these local resistances appropriate elements they find useful in that same global culture they are forced to accept, and, as a result, expedite their own projects of cultural, economic and political survival. Considering this realization, the word "localism" in the title does not allude to the established connotations of the word—that of the parochial, the provincial, the isolated. Rather, "localism" should be considered in conjunction with the adjective "transcultural," because, although it signifies the distinct, it also draws its distinction and asserts its difference in the context of a globalized world.

The essays collected in this volume approach critically the term "transcultural localism" as defined in the previous paragraph. In other words, they may foreground its liberating potential, but they also underline the problems it might engender. As the perceptive reader will understand, these problems are the result of reconfiguring the cross-fertilization of the local by the global, by introducing the local as part of the mainstream. More explicitly, the local figures both as acceptable and as accepted, an indispensable part of the multicultural nature of the global. Furthermore, the local becomes simply an exotic aspect of the global, soon to be sanitized of its uncompromizing elements. Far from suggesting a depoliticization of the local, the essays collected in this volume emphasize the potential of the local to challenge—rather than to be appropriated by—a discourse that caters to the interests of institutional control.

The volume in hand is divided into five sections. The first one entitled "Anti-essentialist Configurations" begins with an essay on Maryse Condé. Pin-chia Feng maintains that Maryse Condé's Afro-Caribbean novels differ from conventional Third World allegorizations of the local in that their plots move towards a vision of "transcendental cosmopolitanism." This is a vision that significantly reconfigures the politics of home for the nomadic Afro-Caribbean peoples. More particularly, in *The Last of the African Kings* Condé deploys a meta-fictional perspective that re-examines the construction and writing of family romance. According to Feng, in this novel, Condé critically reviews what constitutes "family" and "home" in a post-colonial condition.

This anti-essentialist and relational reconfiguration is the focus of **Gary Okihiro's** article. Okihiro criticizes the concept of an Atlantic culture with its bias of valorizing its constituent parts; that is, the Blacks and the Whites. Such Eurocentric theorizations, although they zero in on racism and hybridity, exclude, nevertheless, Native Americans and Asians, while they embed the Africans within a European modernity. Okihiro foregrounds the issue of a Pacific Civilization that, like its Atlantic counterpart, has been

and still is a system of flows of capital, labor, and culture that has produced transnational and hybrid identities and legitimized their counterclaims for homogeneity, nationalism, and racial purity.

On her part, **Elke Sturm Trigonakis** articulates her personal version of anti-essentialism, by grounding her discussion on Goethe's idea of *Weltliteratur* and re-evaluating it. Goethe's proposition, although Eurocentric in its conception, suggests a turning away from national canons and nationalisms and argues for a more inclusive, albeit infra-European, new approach to literary production. Sturm analyzes the contemporary relevance such a term has acquired and its unexpected extensions within a post-colonial and post-modern era. More specifically, she focuses on the poetry of the Chicano writer Juan Felipe Herrera and the Spanish German poet José F. A. Oliver, while the parameters she proposes suggest a literature that functions as a continuous performance of alterity. Furthermore, Sturm maintains that this present-day attempt at a world literature lays claims to a new radical poetic and transcultural subjectivity.

The second section is entitled "Western Political Unilateralism and Local Literary Responses." In it, **Chris LaLonde** discusses Blaesser's poetry, his own commentary on it, as well as Gerald Vizenor's and N. Scott Momaday's occasional poetic and political statements contrapuntally in a creative inter-text. According to LaLonde, Kimberly Blaesser produces a poetry that valorizes N. Scott Momaday's idea that words warrant survival—both individual and collective. LaLonde contends that the focus of Blaesser's poetry on place and displacement constitutes a creative answer and a critical intervention to U.S.A. politics that have misrepresented and overdetermined the existence and gradual extermination of Native American tribes.

The question of how language reflects institutional power is taken up by **Linda Manney**. Manney points out how everyday language can construct selfhood and identity. Critical feminists, educators, and linguists explain that language texts serve as vehicles for expressing structures of power and ideology and implicitly inform all levels of linguistic interaction. In her argument, she foregrounds the institutional basis of popular discourse which misrepresents the politically and socially disempowered. Concluding, Manney demonstrates how groups use language to resist and transform unjust representations of themselves, which are externally imposed by members of the power elite.

Kaeko Mochizuki's paper focuses on the work of Marguerite Duras, Masuji Ibuse, and Leslie Marmon Silko. Mochizuki's chosen texts allow us to hear the voices of the disempowered, those who do not face a local but a global disaster. In her unrelentingly politicized argument, Mochizuki maintains that the three authors bring together the local and the global. In other words, they demonstrate the familiar contours and local relevance of what appears to be happening "elsewhere." More particularly, Mochizuki

argues convincingly that, in the nuclear age, obsolete nationalism and arrogant unilateralism, approving of and even producing wars, neither protect "home" nor control "the Other," but bring about the simultaneous destruction of both.

John Purdy provides further evidence on how the disempowered raise their voice against unjust representations. He begins by showing how the legal establishment of the border between Canada and the U.S.A. has complicated the relations between the two nation-states, but more importantly between these states and the Native Americans of the area. With time, the latter perceived this area as a field where they could challenge dominant forms and laws that circumscribed them within parameters familiar to the nation state. The indigenous response to this realization eventually led to a reversal: Native American writers used the border imaginatively as a correlative for the empowerment of indigenous nationhood and identity.

The third section is on "Auto-ethnography and Self-Invention." In it, **Mita Banerjee** critiques Denise Chong's work as that of an ethnic subject who employed auto-ethnography to confirm the allegations of the mainstream against the community out of which she (Denise Chong) came. Chong's work focuses on the fact that, early in the twentieth century, the San Francisco Chinese community had been accused of being a health menace to the mainstream. However, and employing the form of auto-ethnography, Chong internalizes the accusation and insists on a process which traces the "whitening" of her community from a health menace to model minority over the course of two generations. Inadvertently, Chong describes the rise of her family, but essentially of herself, from disempowered medicalized subjects to the position of power-brokers within Anglophone Canada, but without challenging the misrepresentations of the Chinese community by the power elite.

Sophia Emmanouilidou turns to a different type of self-invention: that of the self-conscious codification of popular mythology which goes beyond a useless "nativism" and becomes a political statement. According to the scholar, Rudolfo Anaya, the most popularly recognized Chicano writer of his generation, employs the myth of La Llorona in order to call into being a Chicano collective unconscious. Emmanouilidou illustrates how Anaya posits himself in the role of a writer who asserts his position as a social agent in order to expedite a collective mobilization.

In focusing her attention on self-invention, **Sidonie Smith** turns to a very popular children's book, *Zlata's Diary*, in order to analyze narratives of ethnic suffering and the violation of human rights. Smith draws our attention to the constructed nature of such narratives and their dependence on an interethnic appeal, most obviously in this case on *The Diary of Anne Frank*. For Smith, it is important to be aware, as middle-class readers in the West, of the dangers of "flattening history through an appeal to empathetic,

de-politicized sentimentality." On another level, she also maintains that such narratives call into definition a dispersed ethnic audience, in the text before us—that of Bosnian Croat refugees—and she argues that *Zlata's Diary* could become "a story of the type that ethnic nationalism is both founded and sustained."

The fourth section entitled "Cultural Incommensurability and Hybridity" begins with **Pirjo Ahokas'** essay on Bharati Mukherjee and Monica Ali. Ahokas' discussion of Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* (2002) and Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) probes into the processes through which transnational, post-modern female identities are constructed and enacted. Framing her essay within the recent theories of transnational feminism and performativity, Ahokas illustrates the ways in which Mukherjee's and Ali's female protagonists employ cultural hybridity to challenge gender as well as racial oppression. The author argues that the female transnational identities enacted in Mukherjee's and Ali's novels undermine the monolithic binary of "home" and "abroad" and prove conducive to the emergence of liberating post-modern subjectivities, characterized by fluidity, multiplicity, and heterogeneity.

The subject of the emergence of alternative subject positions within a global context is also raised by **Anjoom Mukadam** and **Sharmina Mawani**. The two authors present their current research into the identification processes of two contemporary groups of Nizari Ismailis: one which resides in Toronto, and another which resides in London. Mukadam and Mawani agree with Ahokas that, in today's multicultural societies, the process of self-definition is ongoing and associated with cultural hybridization—a historically open ended process shaped not only by diasporic experience, but also by the political mobilization of difference. Ultimately, the two authors conclude that second-generation Ismailis are nowadays asserting a positive ethnic identity by opting for an acculturative strategy which builds upon shared cultural preferences, while simultaneously maintaining integral aspects of Indian culture.

Similarly to Ahokas, and Mukadam / Mawani, **Ilana Xinos**, in her discussion of Christophorus Çastanis' *The Greek Exile*, challenges the notion of a fixed identity construct and engages with recent critical approaches to identity politics and transnational identity formation. Xinos' reading is not only culturally but also historically informed. Therefore, the critic is careful not to build her discussion on the premise of hybridity, but to argue that Castanis' approach to identity construction does not suggest the formation of a new identity as hybridity does, but emphasizes similarities between nations. Xinos asserts that, by engaging in such an ambivalent process of identification, Castanis strives to create an imagined community between himself, Greece, and America—one that is not territorially grounded, but culturally induced and ideologically determined.

The three essays in the section entitled "The Challenges of Ethnic Incorporation" can all be considered case studies of public history, because they mainly focus on the ideological implications of historical analysis in view of the challenge of ethnic incorporation. On the one hand, **Stefano Luconi** outlines the history of the struggle on the part of Italian Americans for inclusion in affirmative action programs in the United States. Luconi reveals that such efforts have relied on a selective interpretation of the Italian-American experience as that of a minority group whose plight has been shaped by ethnic prejudice and discrimination on the part of the U.S. establishment. Luconi's criticism of those endeavors, while it acknowledges the development of Italian-American studies as an academic discipline, it, nonetheless, questions their validity, given the recent improvement in the social and economic standing of Italian Americans. Luconi concludes by stressing the serious socio-political implications of such a selective use of the past, and doubting whether such use can, in fact, contribute to the empowering of Italian Americans today.

On the other hand, the essay by **Stepanka Korytova-Magstadt** is a historical investigation into the struggle that led to independent Czechoslovakia. Magstadt contradicts historical accounts that credit Woodrow Wilson with the initiative behind uniting the Czechs and Slovaks. Instead, she offers an alternative interpretation, one that acknowledges the significant role played by the Czech and Slovak immigrants in the United States. The critic utilizes James Olson's study of the ethnic dimension in American history, only to expose its inadequacy to account for the role played by the Czech and Slovak elite in the development of a national conscience. Interestingly, Magstadt's investigation into the elite's involvement in the politics of Slovakia also raises questions as to the enactment of an American-Slovak identity, thus pointing to the problematics of ethnic incorporation.

Last, the essay by **Hale Yilmaz** discusses the Laz cultural movement in Turkey and in the diaspora community in Germany since the 1980s. Yilmaz provides a useful demographic and historical context to the analysis of the movement's emergence as a response to perceived threats against Laz language and culture. The critic problematizes the movement's function with respect to the preservation and revitalization of Laz culture, by revealing that the Laz movement has, essentially, been defining and re-defining Laz culture and identity by drawing on Laz language, history and folklore. Similarly to Luconi, Yilmaz is not blind to the socio-political implications of the movement and, therefore, questions its future within the broader context of nationalism, the democratization of Turkey, and its inclusion in the European Union.

As the brief discussion of the essays collected in this volume reveals, the overarching theme among all contributions is the complex, multi-layered and constantly evolving inter-relations between ethnic communities and the

global context. The invention of a transnational global sphere has not made the concepts of ethnic communities and bounded localities obsolete; rather, it has necessitated a reconceptualization of the politics of community, identity, and cultural difference that sanctions new dynamics in a trans-local world. Hence, adopting a trans-ethnic and transnational perspective, the contributors to this volume offer keen insights into the processes of self- and community-transformation, processes that result not only from trans-national contacts, alliances, and influences, but also conflicts. Indeed, as Michael Watts has revealed, transnationalization has, on the one hand, contributed to local revitalization, while on the other it has triggered new modes of resistance. Echoing Watt's argument, all sixteen essays problematize the notion that every individual and, by extension, every community is a representative of a globalized totality; furthermore, these essays question whether such constituencies can, or need to, exist in the twenty-first century.

By attempting to contextualize this fluid concept of "transcultural localisms," the essays (by no means exhaustive in scope) examine historical encounters and clashes, political affiliations and cultural exchanges, as well as social and economic influences on a global scale. The volume's contributors acknowledge that, in a world of cultural and economic globalization and fast communication, ethnic communities are increasingly becoming trans-national, hence cutting across diverse boundaries: geographical, social, and political. Following the recent investigations of the constitution and politics of identity, the authors of these sixteen essays question the concept of static, originary, singular and authentic identities and communities. Nevertheless, they also recognize that the centrifugal force of globalization is counteracted by the centripetal pull to an ethnic identity that can be defined by either a common origin, or a common structure of experience, or both. Ultimately, to paraphrase bell hooks, the trans-national global spaces that emerge from this volume, on the one hand, offer a context in which ties are severed, while on the other they provide the occasion for new and varied forms of bonding (31).

In closing, the editors of this volume would like to acknowledge all those whose assistance made both the conference and the publication of this volume possible. In particular, we extend our thanks to the Greek Ministry of Education, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, The Prefecture of Thessaloniki, The United States of America Embassy in Athens, and the Canadian Embassy in Athens. We would like also to express our gratitude to the anonymous reviewers in Greece and abroad who helped in the final selection of the sixteen essays of this volume.

Yiorgos Kalogeras, Eleftheria
Arapoglou, Linda Manney

Thessaloniki, November 2005

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