

Imagining Rooted Cosmopolitanism

Nabokov, Rushdie and the Transnational Imagination: Novels of Exile and Alternate Worlds

by Rachel Trousdale

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Theorists and critics of cosmopolitanism agree on one thing: in the wake of Kant's original formulation of the concept there have arisen multifarious, competing versions of cosmopolitanism, each with its own approach to the balance of locale and world. The belief that there is no single definitive version of cosmopolitan thinking, or even a consensus about what constitutes a cosmopolitan ethics, has spawned an explosion of studies, especially since 1983, about the cosmopolitan exile. The predicament of the exiled individual has become a kind of standard position in transnational studies, and scholars like Pheng Cheah and James Clifford subsequently suggest treading with caution.¹

Into this situation comes Rachel Trousdale's book *Nabokov, Rushdie and the Transnational Imagination*, which shifts the conversation about the condition of exile into a discussion of its ability to access and activate a fluid understanding of the transnational condition. From a wide range of authors, Trousdale singles out Vladimir Nabokov and Salman Rushdie as exemplars of transnational literature. While she does not directly cite Stanley Fish's notion of an interpretive reader,² she posits a reconfigured version of this notion in order to examine the transnational experience as a primarily fictional and imaginative enterprise. What is at stake in transnational fiction, she argues, is the dislocated locatedness of author and reader alike.

Other theorists influence Trousdale's reading of transnational literature more explicitly. She draws upon Kwame Anthony Appiah's contention, in his account of what he calls rooted cosmopolitanism, that "anywhere you travel in the world . . . you can find ceremonies . . . rooted in centuries-old traditions. [At the same time] you will also find everywhere . . . many intimate connections with places far away: Washington, Moscow, Mexico City, Beijing" (89). Rooted cosmopolitanism licenses Trousdale's own

argumentative movement between the local and the global in her readings of transnational fiction. And in her opening move she recasts Homi Bhabha's notion of the hybrid with the help of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the dialogic, highlighting Bhabha's attention to the importance of "participatory" discussion in textual interpretation (qtd in Trousdale 3). She constructs her argument for the imaginative potential of fiction by extending Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined communities to posit that the imagined worlds of transnational literature fashion a reader who gleans participatory ethics from an alternate world. Finally, she recasts Arjun Appadurai's theory of the postnational³ to enunciate a perennially unstable transnationalism evading categorization. This "transnationalism . . . tries to have it both ways: to cross borders and to acknowledge them, to fuse separate places and recognize their separation" (12). Crucially, "transnationality is the process by which new identity categories are created and not the means by which they are maintained—the missing piece in Appiah's rooted cosmopolitanism" (13); her examination of Nabokov and Rushdie pays minute attention to such a refusal to hypostatize fixed identities.

Transnational fiction, in Trousdale's account, creates a readerly space that enables the reader to improvise a creative, communitarian response to a politically fraught world. She emphasizes that the reader "learns" (27) to refashion the real world through the imaginative potential made accessible by such mobile writing. As she contends in her first chapter, this has not always been the case. Early transnational writing, beginning with Conrad and continuing with Naipaul, found it implausible to think about a transnational condition in terms of group identity. They remained preoccupied with the predicament of the individual caught helplessly in the nets of overlapping cultures. An explicit and intentional connection between community and imaginative transformation comes to the fore only with Nabokov and Rushdie, the former influencing the latter with far-reaching implications, she argues—hence her focus on these two writers.

Trousdale devotes two full chapters to Nabokov, meticulously considering his prestidigitation with place and imagination. "Nabokov's Invented Worlds" examines the writer's juxtaposition of geographical and readerly locations, teasing out the interplay between imaginative readers and physical places. For example, she notes that Humbert's exhortations to the reader to judge his partly imagined America bring an important

clarification: “the physical world does not respond directly to imaginative reinterpretation” (45). Instead the physical world intrudes into the imagination: the American landscape provides a steadily mounting “resistance” (39) to Humbert’s desire for “mastery” (41) over Lolita. It prevents him from imaginatively converting a harsh and gritty American landscape into a pliant and titillating Arcadia. Trousdale’s reading charts a double movement in both imagination and space, one that she argues is emblematic of transnational fiction: while the wild landscape of America will not allow Humbert to possess Lolita outdoors, it is his projection of America that allows him to emerge from solipsism. Instead of a purely imaginative America, Humbert stumbles upon a synthesized realm containing both desire and resistance.

Trousdale finds a similar “synthesis of idealism and realism” (45) in *Pale Fire*. She stresses that the novel’s protagonist Charles Kinbote pays minute attention to the demands of the real upon the imagination: “America not only offers a way to import Kinbote’s private, aristocratic imaginings into a democratically accessible landscape, it also provides a literal space for literary realms” (53). Trousdale’s most lucid and far-reaching statement in the chapter comes when she notes that “the transnational must find a compromise: either a metaphysical meeting ground . . . or a fusion he cannot control” (55). Thereby, he must effectively find a “compromise” in the reality he wishes to inhabit and the imagination he wishes to activate. This strategy activates a simultaneous readerly appraisal of the stakes involved in both an imaginary space and the real world, exposing again the double bind of desire and resistance. The double bind extends itself to the readers as well. While “Kinbote hopes to undergo [a] transformation . . . to become assimilated into another person—who appears to be Nabokov himself” (56), he finds that he has indeed lost “control” (55) and commits suicide. However, “his last vision of an alternate future [shifts] the novel’s epistemological ground” to an external, non-textual reality. Consequently, the readers become “Kinbotes,” mutating into “a community of rival partisans” (57).

In “Realism, Relativism and Frames of Reference,” her second chapter on Nabokov, Trousdale examines the author’s use of physics in *Ada*, considering both his hostility to Einstein’s theory of relativity and his deployment of a deliberately flawed “special relativity” (71) through Van Veen. Trousdale dexterously incorporates scientific ideas into her discussion, never losing sight of her larger argument about simultane-

ous spatiotemporal realities. She minutely examines the twin paradox in relativity theory and draws our attention to a “traveling frame of reference” (83) that is essential to interpret Van’s obstinate refusal “to believe that he and Ada may be in separate frames of reference” (84). The fluidity of “physical space and time” (89) is the crux of this chapter, where Trousdale argues that Nabokov makes apparent how “real-world surroundings already fuse past and present.” In this condition, it becomes the reader’s task to “assimilate the various time frames . . . into a unified and interdependent whole” (88). However, Trousdale’s stress on the reader finds itself on wobbly ground here, especially when she contends that “the third space of literature provides a place from which to move the world” (89). One of the book’s continuing problems is that Trousdale does not offer sufficient clarification of her deployment of and distinction between the words “real” and “fiction.” While it remains clear that transnational fiction enables a fluid understanding of “our mental geographies” (19), her observations about the power of literature to build communities in the real world occasionally seem to be in danger of assuming a very literal, one-to-one correspondence. This slippage threatens to flatten the potency attributed to fictional world-making.

Turning to Rushdie, Trousdale pays minute attention to “the incompleteness of Indian cosmopolitanism” (91) and the dire consequences of such an imperfect vision. Her first chapter on Rushdie, titled “Cosmopolitanism and the Shiv Sena in *Midnight’s Children* and *The Moor’s Last Sigh*,” unpacks Rushdie’s extensive critique of “pluralist intellectuals who claim to be inclusive but do not include the poor, and Hindu nationals, who intend to include almost exclusively the Hindu poor but unwittingly embrace Western practices.” Trousdale goes into meticulous historical and political detail about India’s complicated trysts with communalism and nationalism, sifting through the renaming of Bombay to Mumbai and the rise of the Hindu right-wing organization, the Shiv Sena. Much as Nabokov prods his readers into providing an interpretive framework for his world-making, Indian politics (and Rushdie’s novels, Trousdale’s argument goes) demand the same kind of interpretive work to assess one’s allegiances, both on the national and the communal scales. Noting Rushdie’s fascination with hybridity, Trousdale returns to her opening appropriation of Appiah’s rooted cosmopolitanism, finding Rushdie’s politics to be simultaneously local and global in its scope. Rushdie’s contribution to the concept of cosmopolitanism lies in his insistence on self-creation.

This does not of course constitute a startlingly new claim about either Indian politics or Rushdie's novels, but Trousdale valuably underscores the simultaneous, competing allegiances that the transnational reader-citizen must negotiate. Read against Nabokov's politics, it becomes clear that Rushdie's transnationalism has a "counterintuitive" (92) charge, constantly doubling back on itself.

Trousdale ultimately argues, however, that Rushdie's cosmopolitanism fails in the Bombay novels because the individual can never supersede the group. For example, Saleem's suppression of Gandhi throughout *Midnight's Children* signals an aversion to heroic figures in the theater of nation-building: "National heroes, no matter how inclusive they wish to be, cannot include everyone" (110), a problem that also underlies the "immense real-world repercussions of nationalist imaginings of community" (114). What Trousdale makes clear at the end of this chapter is that the Bombay novels "appear to leave readers without a way to reconcile the competing demands of cosmopolitans and communalists" providing instead "a vision of the absorption of the narrator into the surrounding crowds" (115). Her stress here and elsewhere in the chapter is on the "shifty 'I' [that] arises from the tension between the individual at the moment of action . . . and the polyvocal speaker at the moment of narration" (116). This tenuous "I" limns what one might call the limits of multiculturalism, with *Midnight's Children* perpetually failing to enunciate a pluralistic individuality.

Trousdale's penultimate chapter on *The Satanic Verses*, meanwhile, calls attention to the anti-authoritarian character of transnational fiction, but struggles to make new claims amidst a sea of criticism. Her sub-headings seem a little dated, announcing discussions for instance of "Indeterminacy and the Narrator" (127) and "The Multiplicity of the Individual" (129). The chapter is on more compelling ground when tackling uneasy categories of identity that enter an either/or subject position and abandons a both/and paradigm. For example, Trousdale uses the *hamza nama* cloths commissioned by the Mughal Emperor Akbar in the sixteenth century to illustrate how in the novel "foreign imports . . . become the new Indian citizens" (135). Though manufactured elsewhere, the synthesis of styles in the *hamza nama* cloths emphasize that "art is a *process* rather than a product" (134), clarifying that the "Indian" has long been formed out of transnational networks. This confluence of "the imported and the regional [creates] an imaginary-yet-real intermediate space between the local and the global" (132), a space cognate with what Trousdale earlier theorizes

as “the third space of literature” (89). She contends that it is through such conflict-driven experiences of nationality, with their competing visions and flawed constructions of national identity, that a “new diaspora of transnational literati” is formed (139).

In her final chapter on Rushdie, Trousdale argues that he puts this “transnational literati” to the test in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, a book in which competing realities emerge in far more seditious and suspicious terms. Trousdale seeks to rescue this novel from its many detractors, concentrating on its attention to musical mixing, particularly the “bouncing down” (154) of tracks. What Ormus, Rushdie’s half-Greek, half-Zarathustrian genius, achieves is a musical synthesis akin to Appiah’s rooted cosmopolitanism: “he shows how ‘many selves can be, in song, a single multitude.’”⁴ Ormus, unlike Saleem and Gibreel, finds a way to present competing realities without discrediting any of them, while simultaneously producing “a single unified whole” (151). The central achievement of this chapter is Trousdale’s adapting of “bouncing down” to illustrate “a community of shared displacement” (144) able to encompass simultaneous, seemingly discordant realities. Unsurprisingly, she argues that the reader becomes essential in parsing out the import of these realities. Arguing that the reader is surprised by the experience of being smoothly transitioned into an alternate world, the world of Jesse Aaron Parker and JFK’s botched assassination, she demonstrates the necessity for imagining an implied, outside reader who can integrate the colliding worlds of the novel. Trousdale here reaffirms her focus on fictional framing strategies, showcasing the primacy of an implied reader in transnational outsidership in which an “outsider . . . becomes an insider through nothing more than a shift of the frame” (145). As she does throughout the book, Trousdale insists that the acknowledgement of frames fosters recognition of “the extent to which our framings are partial,” arguing that we must “see that there are aspects of our realities that cannot be fully informed from within” (162).

In her expansive concluding remarks, Trousdale champions the power of fiction’s imaginative capacity to rewrite “filiation” and “affiliation” alike, a dichotomy that she takes from Edward Said’s taxonomy of modernist writers (qtd in Trousdale 165). She argues that such an essential migrant reader who reads between the lines, so to speak, functions much more productively when staking a claim for a space between nationalities. This is not a position that is the exclusive capital of diaspora, something that Trousdale repeatedly notes. And yet, she does in fact seem to insist on the

primacy of the exile as the ideal (if not the only) advocate of this hybrid position. When discussing Michael Chabon, geographically American but affiliated through his writing to the Jewish diaspora, she stresses his willingness to identify himself as “doubly exiled . . . not only [as] an American novelist but also a member of the Jewish diaspora” (182).

What remains unclear, sometimes productively, in Trousdale’s argumentative framework is how transnational fiction “teaches” (194) its readers to build communities without falling into an authoritarian circuit of master and pupil. The solution Trousdale seems to gravitate towards is one we might understand with reference to Jacques Rancière’s “ignorant schoolmaster” paradigm,⁵ where the instructive quality of transnational literature is not deliberate but suggestive. The ignorant schoolmaster, unlike his pedantic counterpart, imparts knowledge not by measuring and refurbishing the ignorance of his pupil, but by imparting knowledge that he himself cannot know. Even if Nabokov does plot a deliberately difficult chess puzzle in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, the premise of its literariness does not hinge on the successful solution of the problem. But Trousdale never makes this formulation explicit, and so the problem of authority remains surprisingly unresolved in her otherwise nuanced argument. The authoritative overtones of instructive fiction linger uncomfortably at times, and the scope of the book might have been more expansive had it emphasized the suggestive rather than the prescriptive quality of transnational writing.

Furthermore, a paradox arises from Trousdale’s effort to imagine a community of transnational readers who willingly enter a condition of migrancy. She acknowledges that Nabokov and Rushdie produce difficult writing, with their works constituting, among other things, latter-day deployments of the deliberately alienating tactics of modernism. She notes, for instance, that readers often find themselves out of the loop with references and must put in a considerable degree of work to gain access to the worlds their fictions straddle. The difficulty with such an argument is that Trousdale must perpetually postulate an elite readership while simultaneously theorizing a universally participative audience. As a result, her model of the migrant reader is not always sustainable. For example, Trousdale argues that Nabokov “requires readers to cocreate an implied ideal country, one that combines the best of exile and of a lost homeland” (39). But she does not attempt to tease out the validity of this best of both worlds philosophy and thus leaves some of the ethical implications of such a winnowing process unexplored. What exactly is “the best of exile and

of a lost homeland” (39)? How do we arrive at such an approximation? In steadfastly arguing for an ideal implied reader that both Nabokov and Rushdie privilege in different ways, Trousdale comes very close to privileging the migrant condition as a demiauthorial position.

Many critics have noted transnationalism’s fixation on the migrant. Pheng Cheah, for instance, remains troubled by the hybridity theorist’s “metropolitan” gaze and objects that “everything happens [in considering hybridity] as if there were no postcolonials left in decolonized space” (92). He goes on to argue that “Bhabha’s [and the general hybridity theorist’s] picture of contemporary globalization is virulently postnational because he pays scant attention to those postcolonials for whom postnationalism through mobility is not an alternative” (93). It is not so much that Trousdale does not consider the immobile, rooted postcolonial, but that the universally accessible position of the migrant reader unintentionally comes close to casting transnational experience as impossible from other locations.

Finally, Trousdale’s selection of texts remains squarely canonical—especially in her chapters on Rushdie, which are limited to the three Bombay novels. This excludes his highly imaginative children’s novel written under the Fatwa, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, as well as the wide-ranging battle among cosmopolitanism, nationalism, and terrorism played out in *Shalimar the Clown*. Both these texts merit some space in a project like Trousdale’s. *Shalimar the Clown* in particular could illustrate the dangerous explosion of ethnic nationalism coupled with terrorism that the Sena in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* represent on a much smaller scale. And the place of imaginative fiction and its instructive qualities in the real world, subjects essential to understanding Rushdie’s notion of displacement, are in fact the central themes of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*.

Overall, *Nabokov, Rushdie and the Transnational Imagination* makes a strong, insightful case for transnational literature’s preoccupation with affiliation, remaining continually alert to the self-conscious ways that transnational writers seek to recast socially and politically ossified communitarian beliefs. Decoupling identity from physicality, Trousdale gives us a nuanced account of how readers become “rooted cosmopolitans” (13) with “awareness of [the process of reinterpretation], rather than simple ethnic or national affiliations, as a key part of their own identities” (194). And she makes a convincing case for her literary historical claim that in works by transnational authors like Nabokov and Rushdie a new genre has been created, one “that relocates and redefines the meaning of home” (193).

Notes

1. Cheah notes in *Inhuman Conditions: On Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights* that “the pain and suffering of migrants, political refugees and exiles . . . do not represent the whole picture of contemporary globalization” (92). Similarly, Clifford in his essay “Mixed Feelings” finds that

the term cosmopolitan, separated from its (European) universalist moorings, quickly become[s] a traveling signifier, a term always in danger of breaking up into partial equivalences: exile, immigration, migrancy, diaspora, border-crossing, pilgrimage, tourism. Thus, before we even begin to speak of ‘cosmopolitanisms’ we are caught up in the unmanageable, risky work of translation. (363)

2. See Stanley Fish. *Is There A Text In This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities*.

3. In Trousdale’s words,

Appadurai argues that between the increasing cosmopolitanism of both the elite and the labor force and the increased globalization of corporations, we are living in a ‘postnational’ era in which national borders present bureaucratic technicalities rather than real demarcations of linguistic, cultural, or economic difference.” (10)

4. Trousdale notes that while “Saleem cracks under the strains of millions of Indias, Ormus ‘bounces down’ the entire world. Ormus does for artistic pluralism what characters in the previous novels do for personal identity: he shows how ‘many selves can be, in song, a single multitude’” (155).

5. See Jacques Rancière. *The Ignorant School Master. Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*.

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