

***MIGRATION, MODERNITY AND TRANSNATIONALISM IN THE WORK OF
JOSEPH CONRAD* EDITED BY KIM SALMONS AND TANIA ZULLI**

AND

***EXILE AS A CONTINUUM IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S FICTION: LIVING IN
TRANSLATION* BY LUDMILLA VOITKOVSKA**

Migration, Modernity and Transnationalism in the Work of Joseph Conrad, ed. by Kim Salmons and Tania Zulli, London: Bloomsbury, 2021. Hardback: £90.00. ISBN 9781350168923

Exile as a Continuum in Joseph Conrad's Fiction: Living in Translation, Ludmilla Voitkovska, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2022. Hardback: £97.50. ISBN 9781032258768

Review by Ola Sidorkiewicz, University of Oxford

The transnational turn in the study of Joseph Conrad can be traced back to an issue of *Studia Neophilologica* titled *Transnational Conrad* (2013), which brought together leading scholars to reflect on the diverse forms that transnational relations took in Conrad's life and work. *Migration, Modernity and Transnationalism in the Work of Joseph Conrad* (Bloomsbury, 2021), edited by Kim Salmons and Tania Zulli, and Ludmilla Voitkovska's *Exile as a Continuum in Joseph Conrad's Fiction: Living in Translation* (Routledge, 2022) both contribute to the study of the transnational Conrad, drawing upon his migratory experiences to illuminate his engagement with and representation of national, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic variety in his fiction. By considering migration as Conrad's foundational experience, both publications read his works outside of the constructed boundaries of national literature, be it English, Polish, or even 'European', and show their potential to capture and comment on transnational concerns. Of the two works, the former does not further any single overarching argument and relies more on what 'each contributor has perceived and expressed [as] their own interpretation of migration and transnationalism' (Salmons and Zulli 2). The latter, on the other hand, argues for a connection between Conrad's 'exilic condition and his choice of literary form and thematic patterns' (Voitkovska 1). While interested in similar phenomena, the two publications are radically different, and their comparative analysis shows us the promises and the limits of reading Conrad's fiction through the lens of migration and transnationalism.

The strength of *Migration* (2021) lies in highlighting the difference that can be generated by migration and transnationalism as critical frameworks. The volume does not offer a coherent narrative of or conclusion to what the two concepts might accomplish when faced with Conrad's fiction. Read together, all the contributions draw attention to the complexity of his work, and, perhaps most crucially, its relevance to the contemporary experiences of dislocation and globalisation, opening new avenues for inquiry into an oeuvre as renowned and debated as that of Conrad. Divided into three parts, 'Crossing borders', 'Empire, movement, and migration', and 'Modernity and the transnational', the contributions are grouped thematically, but retain their individual methodologies, entering into productive dialogue with each other.

In the first section, Robert Hampson and William Atkinson focus on the subject of rites. Atkinson argues that a rite of entry does not necessarily turn into a rite of passage and can instead place the subject in a liminal space, instead of integrating them into a new

cultural milieu. Throughout the essay, he employs the term ‘ukraine’ to denote that space, Atkinson’s neologism in English inspired by the word’s disputed etymology and its alleged meaning—‘undefined borderland’. Despite Atkinson’s perceptive analysis of Conrad’s works, his decision to employ the term ‘ukraine’ instead of ‘borderland’ verges on exoticism, reducing Poland and Ukraine to metaphors, and does not strengthen his overall argument. Richard Capoferro’s concluding essay in the section provides a useful postscript to the discussion of cross-cultural identity, arguing that Conrad’s *Personal Record* (1912) allows him to present himself as a ‘writer who brings transnational concerns to an English audience’, and his fiction as a ‘tool to establish an emotional and intellectual bond between worlds’ (74).

In the second section, Salmons’ is a brilliant contribution to the study of alterity in Conrad’s fiction through the lens of food. Providing examples from *Almayer’s Folly* (1895) and *The Secret Agent* (1907), she argues that foods in Conrad’s fiction represent an opportunity for transnational engagement but can at the same time serve as ‘barriers to belonging’ (111). Equally engaging is the final essay in the section, exploring the limits of transnationalism through an analysis of Conrad’s ‘Malay fiction’. Andrew Francis provides a compelling reading of Almayer’s status as a ‘settled resident’, arguing that the very nature of the status recalls ‘the inevitable earlier place of residence of a migrant’ (145). The protagonist’s failure to ‘live transnationally’ (156) is evidenced by his houses in Sambir, styled after a European house and intended for European guests.

The final part of the volume opens with Katherine Isobel Baxter’s contribution which focuses on the question of mobility between East Asia and Middle East in Conrad’s fiction and argues that his depiction of characters of Arab origins ‘highlights the divergent forms of transnational colonial, non-colonial, and anti-colonial activity’ (163). This is followed by Yael Levin’s comparative reading of Conrad’s ‘Amy Foster’, Franz Kafka’s *Amerika* (1927), and Henryk Sienkiewicz’s *After Bread* (1880), teasing out the tensions at the heart of the modernist debate surrounding the construction of the modern subject. The three sections are followed by Chris Gogwilt’s important afterword to the volume’s discussion of migration and transnationalism in the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter demonstrations in June 2020. The author engages in a perceptive and nuanced reading of all the contributions, and poses the question of whether, and how, Black Lives matter for Conrad and his fiction by drawing attention to three selected figures, and especially James Wait from *The Nigger of Narcissus* (1897).

In *Exile as a Continuum* Voitkovska explores the ways in which Conrad’s experience of migration manifests in the formal and narrative structures across his novels, focusing on *Lord Jim* (1900), *The Secret Agent* (1907), *Nostramo* (1904), *Under Western Eyes* (1911), as well as the short story ‘The Secret Sharer’ (1910). The first chapter develops the theoretical framework of her book, drawing upon a selection of works on migration, such as Joseph Brodsky’s writings, Viney Kirpal’s *The Third World Novel of Expatriation* (1989), as well as Edward Said’s *Out of Place* (2000) and *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (2000). This is complemented by a discussion of Conrad’s complex cultural background, as evidenced by Gustav Morf in his *Polish Shades and Ghosts of Joseph Conrad* (1976). What is immediately noticeable about these works, forming the vast majority of the author’s theoretical corpus, are their distant publication dates. In fact, the bibliography of the book indicates that the most recent publications cited by Voitkovska come from 2001 (Homi Bhabha and Leigh Gilmore). This is an unusual choice for a book published in 2022, given that the past two decades have witnessed a significant growth in studies of migration and transnationalism.

The reason for Voitkovska’s choice to frame her argument without reference to recent scholarship is not articulated clearly in the book and therefore presents some shortcomings. The author lists political unrest as the major reason for Eastern European

migration to the West. Whereas this was true until the early 1990s, contemporary emigration is prompted predominantly by economic factors. Moreover, in arguing that the experience of migration is ‘of course, more acutely felt by men, given women’s habituation, whatever the paradigm, to second-class status’ (3), Voitkovska disregards intersectional scholarship on gender and migration (Donato and Gabaccia 2015; Zaborowska 1995). Voitkovska often refers to the alleged colonisation of Polish lands by Russia in the nineteenth century without acknowledging the complexity of the issue as evidenced by scholars of postcolonialism (Kołodziejczyk 2010; Skórczewski 2013). Finally, the author is highly selective in her use of scholarship relating to the reception of Conrad in Poland, which gained momentum in the past two decades (Adamowicz-Pośpiech 2022; Zabierowski 2008). The introductory chapter concludes with a set of ‘generic patterns’ to which ‘Conrad, or, in fact, any other expatriate cross-cultural liminal author, adheres to reflexively’ (27). This is a bold statement, which is not backed sufficiently with evidence given the variety of contemporary migratory experiences. Much of Voitkovska’s argument presumes that a migrant will not maintain any significant relation with their home country, which, more often than not, is no longer the case.

In the following chapters, Voitkovska illustrates her argument through close readings of Conrad’s works. While generally convincing, they are not situated against existing scholarship on Conrad (with the exception of a few footnotes), which renders it difficult for the reader to comprehend the extent of her contribution or the originality of her line of argumentation. *Lord Jim*, explored in chapters 2 and 7, is presented in the former as Conrad’s reckoning with his choice to emigrate, as well as with the trauma that this decision generated, and in the latter as his exploration of the relationship between the émigré author and their varied readerships through the motif of homecoming. *The Secret Agent* is discussed in Chapter 3 in relation to Victor Turner’s concept of liminality, shedding light on Conrad’s representation of people and places in his novel. In Chapter 4, *Nostramo* becomes a springboard for Voitkovska to probe the relationship between the writer and their native culture, once again focusing on the motif of homecoming. In Chapter 6, *Under Western Eyes* and *Nostramo* provide evidence for the author’s reading of romantic love in Conradian fiction as symbolic of the expatriate’s attitude towards their parent and adopted cultures. In Chapter 8, on the other hand, the former novel becomes the expression of Conrad’s anxiety regarding the reception of his works by his adopted reader. Finally, in Chapter 5, Conrad’s use of the doubles in his short story ‘The Secret Sharer’ is viewed by Voitkovska as a narrative tool to explore the relationship between the expatriate and their native culture. Voitkovska’s book lacks a conclusion, with her argument ending rather abruptly.

While the close readings proposed by Voitkovska are compelling, they are somewhat repetitive and oscillate around a narrow understanding of the experience of migration. Voitkovska’s argument in the book does not develop at all, with every chapter restating the purpose of the book which is to show the impact of Conrad’s migratory experiences on his fiction. Unlike the contributors to *Migration* (2021), Voitkovska attempts to establish an authoritative voice on the impact of migration on Conrad’s fiction, concluding the debate rather than encouraging new insights. She proposes to read Conrad as a writer of exile rather than a Polish or English writer, but in a gesture that is similarly reductive, as it seeks to pinpoint one interpretative strategy. Voitkovska does not make full use of the potential that the frameworks of migration and transnationalism carry—instead of putting Conrad’s works in motion, she brings them to a standstill. However, a comparable focus on ‘constant movement, dislocation and instability’ as ‘*conditio humana*’ (51) in Conrad’s fiction maintained by Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech in her contribution to *Migration* (2021) serves as a reminder of the potential that this framework might generate, presenting Conrad

as thoroughly shaped by migration, and his fiction as highly relevant to our contemporary era of mass movement.