

---

Christian Moraru. *Cosmodernism: American Narrative, Late Globalization, and the New Cultural Imaginary*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2011. Pp. 428. \$35.

Sensitive to the geopolitical realignments and cultural reconfigurations triggered by the fall of the Berlin Wall and of related walls, barriers, and divisions, Christian Moraru sets out to show that the post-Cold War era is defined by the so-called “cosmodern turn,” “a particular way of seeing the world and ourselves in it” (2), namely, a relational mode of being that fosters a “solidarity across political, ethnic, racial, religious, and other boundaries” (5). Not only is “being-in-relation, with an other” deemed essential for America’s (self)-perception in literature, the arts, and the humanities (2), but the “ethics of difference” at play in this relationality is upheld as an antidote to modernity’s “rejection of the other” (30).

Moraru’s textual and contextual argument is positioned theoretically at the intersection of a Levinas-inspired ethics of selfhood, identity studies, post-modern intertextuality, and globalization studies. He concedes that global interconnectivity is not something new but adds that the cosmoderns are the first to tackle it “systematically and programmatically” (7) in response to “late-global ecology” (8). Thus, over and against the latter—seen as “narcissis-

tic, self-reproductive, [and] standardizing” (8)—Moraru pits the cosmodern cultural imaginary grounded in the self’s “vital links” to an other that remains “unique, unassimilated, different” (31). Each of the book’s five parts focuses on a different “regime of relatedness”: the “idiomatic,” the “onomastic,” the “translational,” the “readerly,” and the “metabolic.”

Before he explores these facets of the cosmodern imaginary, Moraru maps out the links and disjunctions among cosmodernism, cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, postmodernism, and globalization so as to situate cosmodernism historically. He traces the term *cosmodernity* back to Basarab Nicolescu, a mathematician, physicist, and philosopher whose writings, particularly *Théorèmes poétiques* (1994), re-conceptualize the world as cosmos (Moraru 18). Whereas, according to Nicolescu, modernity is “characterized by the binary separation subject-object,” cosmodernity seeks to overcome the “binary thought” that is behind “the annihilation of the other” (qtd. in Moraru 20). Following Levinas and Jean-Luc Nancy, Moraru argues that the ethics of caring for—indeed, the duty we owe to—others stems from the “a priori inscription of alterity into the self’s existential-cognitive script” (5). As he stresses throughout the book, cosmodern writers call upon us to re-think the other as constitutive of the authentic self and instrumental in self-knowledge: “The self turns to an other not to convert that other, or him- or herself for that matter, but *in order to be*” (49; emphasis in original). By the same token, the cosmoderns rise up to the ethical challenge of *facing* the other in its radical difference, rather than effacing it according to pre-existing representations reflecting a dominant, U.S./Western ideological script.

Both at the macro- and the micro-level, the fall of the Berlin Wall heralded the world’s “fall into relation” (36). The new world order is as fraught with risks—“global-scale threats” (43)—as with unprecedented possibilities. Aware that “cultural diversity, and ultimately culture itself, is at risk” (46), the cosmoderns envision a relation-grounded culture, identity, and human fellowship. Within the cosmodern imaginary, the self is a “container of multitudes” (92), bound up with the alterity that language inscribes and articulates. Hence Moraru’s focus, in Part 1, on cosmoderns like Chang-Rae Lee and Raymond Federman who voice the “discontinuities of language, nationhood, and culture inside one language, nation, and culture” (Moraru 79).

The onomastic imaginary that Moraru explores in Part 2 rests on the cosmodern assumption that, just as the voice “convokes, bears with-ness” (119), so does the name: a “signifier of otherness,” a “marker of affinity” with that which the self is not, the name is nonetheless “woven” into the self (127). Moraru examines three stories that revolve around the “foundational name of the other” (128): Jhumpa Lahiri’s 2003 novel *The Namesake* and two other

novels by Lee, *A Gesture Life* (1999) and *Aloft* (2004). As Moraru contends, these narratives reflect a cosmodern shift in our understanding of patrimony—a shift away from the “root” model of heritage to the “route” model (121). Whereas the former implies a commonality of blood and ethnicity, the latter entails a connection with an “unfamiliar and unfamiliar other” (129). In cosmodernism, Moraru explains, “*lateral ancestry*” is playing an increasingly decisive part in how we conceptualize America and its identity (121; emphasis in original).

The relational ethics at play in cosmonomastics also undergirds the cosmodern logic of translation, as Moraru shows in Part 3, which looks closely at Nicole Mones’ and Suki Kim’s translational narratives that showcase “the self-translating dimension of translation” (200). More specifically, by dramatizing the translator’s self-involvement and self-scrutiny, *Lost in Translation* and *The Interpreter* illustrate a core tenet of cosmodernism: self-knowledge comes about “translationally” (169), as we “bring another’s language into our surroundings” (172).

In Part 4, Moraru proposes that the interpretive community notion and reader-response theory must be rethought in the post-Cold War environment along the lines of cosmodern reading, which emphasizes “the universalism of difference—or differences,” as opposed to the “universalism plus difference” underpinning Kwame Anthony Appiah’s model of cosmopolitan reading (211). Whereas the latter emphasizes “what we must share in order to read each other,” the former “does not found a community of sameness, based on sameness” but rather one in which the reader imagines himself or herself “from a position of otherness” (231). For, Moraru reminds us, “the whole point of cosmodernism . . . is to work out relations in which self and other do not become interchangeable” (211–12). To illustrate this distinction, Moraru pinpoints the similarities and differences between Constantin Noica’s “Paltinis Group” and Azar Nafisi’s clandestine reading group in *Reading Lolita in Tebran* (2003), both seen as venues of political dissent against totalitarian regimes—Communism and Islamic theocracy, respectively. Taking issue with those critics who have denounced Nafisi’s reading method as formalist-individualist, Moraru argues for a “situational” reading that takes into account the historical context (i.e., the Islamic Revolution) from which her “Memoir in Books,” *Reading Lolita in Tebran*, sprang (Moraru 223). In a cosmodern reading modeled on Martin Buber’s philosophy of reading, Nabokov represents the “living center” of Nafisi’s “communal politics of gender,” which emerges “transactionally, *in between*” *Lolita* and its readers (225; emphasis in original). Next, Moraru shows that Pico Iyer’s *Abandon* illuminates a key cosmodern tenet: we must abandon “whatever inside us prevents us from seeing

more than ourselves in the world and *thus from seeing ourselves completely, authentically*" (241; emphasis in original).

*Cosmodernism's* last part, "Metabolics," focuses on the role of bodily relationality in both human and cultural growth. As Moraru notes, the cosmoderns picture the world as *mundus*, a "whole where, while touching, mingling, and turning into one another, bodies nevertheless preserve their differential identities" (257). This paradigm underwrites the cosmodern vision of culture as a complex, relational, and cross-referential "body of texts, images, and sounds" that is "productive of knowledge, of new understandings" (256, 257). In this section, Moraru explores Don DeLillo's somatopoetics—his intimate embodiments of others, of their strangeness and mystery—in novels like *The Body Artist* (2001) and *Cosmopolis* (2003). Moraru sees Lauren Hartke's body as typical of the cosmodern body in that it inscribes not only radically different possibilities of being but different forms of temporality and historicity as well.

In the book's epilogue, Moraru proposes that cosmodernism is better prepared than postmodernism to handle the crisis of globalization for several reasons having to do with the fact that postmodernism remains "a cultural model largely Western, and especially American, in its origin" (307) and that it carries on "modernity's utmost egological project" (309). Postmodernism has laid only the groundwork for yet another incomplete project—cosmodernism—whose initial stage we are now witnessing. The cosmoderns extend the postmoderns' intranational and intracultural model of representation cross-culturally and transnationally by "thinking and writing in the margins of the other's thoughts and texts" (244). In so doing, they explore the problematic of otherness "beyond the thematic and the formal, ethically" (313). Finally, Moraru proposes that we "revise the modern-postmodern sequence as a *modern-cosmodern narrative* with World War I and the late 1980s (rather than, say, 1960s) as the main turning moments in recent cultural history" (315; emphasis in original).

A keen observer of the global cultural landscape, Moraru offers provocative insights into the cosmodern togetherness that arises through naming, translating, reading, touching, and speaking the language of the cultural other. The scope, depth, and rigor with which he approaches his topic make *Cosmodernism* an original and extremely valuable contribution to contemporary American studies. For Moraru, self-other relatedness is at once "a historical reality, a practical necessity, and an ethical imperative" (315). So should it be for the rest of us.

Laura E. Savu