



## Transculturalism and Translation

New approaches to cultural contact zones

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### Abstract

Transculturalism is an approach to studying cultures that pays particular attention to how cultures interact. Because it aspires to be a new way of studying cultural intermingling, transculturalism is still searching for concepts and vocabulary to define a unique approach to history. In their advice for aspiring transculturalists, the three books examined here stress the usefulness of the metaphor of translation for viewing how cultures interact. A product of and a response to increased interest in the global, the empirical case studies in these books open a new view of the construction of global imaginaries and how we might more usefully study them, but seem to add little to existing approaches to intercultural interaction.

**Keywords:** contact zone, globalization, hybrid, transculturalism, translation

**Review of:** Doris Bachmann-Medick (ed.), *The Trans/National Study of Culture. A Translational Perspective* (Berlin, 2014, part IV of the series Concepts for the Study for Culture, edited by Doris Bachmann-Medick, Horst Carl, Wolfgang Hallet and Ansgar Nünning, ISBN 978-3-1103-3380-0, 279 pp.); Christiane Brosius and Roland Wenzlhuemer (eds), *Transcultural turbulences: towards a multi-sited reading of image flows* (Heidelberg, 2011; ISBN 978-3-6421-8393-5, 308 pp.); Daniel T. Rodgers, Bhavani Rama, and Helmut Reimitz (eds), *Cultures In Motion* (Princeton, 2014, ISBN 978-1-4008-4989-5, 384 pp.).

## Introduction: Transculturalism

A product of and a response to globalization, transculturalism builds on the fact that cultures often use elements from other cultures. The three books reviewed here were chosen because they all promote transculturalism as a new way to do history. The books share a vocabulary and offer reminders to historians about how to write good history, especially when studying cultural interactions, although it is less clear after reading them whether introducing yet more words to the historian's tool box is really necessary. All three books emphasize, albeit to differing extents, the use of the term 'translation' as a metaphor for cultural interchange. Translation emphasizes the fact that cultures take on parts of foreign cultures and transform these parts in the process; a process that can be both creative and destructive. Translation is active and ongoing, and the metaphor is particularly useful because it suggests that some parts of a culture will be translated for use by others but some will not be. Unlike the translation of say literary works, there are no rules that shape how this borrowing and reforming takes place.

All three books understand cultures as well as interactions between cultures as flows, unstable and continually changing things.<sup>1</sup> The idea of flows is proposed especially to counter the tendency to view cultures as easily identifiable, sealed containers. Instead, we might understand cultures as sorts of fluxing boxes that actors choose parts from (or add to) for their own ends. The second point deserves emphasis, I think, because too often cultural studies seems content to just describe. Throughout these books too, there is a lack of agency among the actors who are mentioned; cultures simply mix. Surely cultures can be carried by inanimate things, images or ideas but are created and translated by people who make active choices. More attention could usefully be paid to the ideas laid out by some contributors of 'asymmetrical relations' between cultures and about the 'grooves' along which cultural interactions tend to take place. Indeed, Peter Burke's notion of 'cultural hybridity', which predates these books, emphasizes the role of actors, for 'when cultures meet, some individuals and groups participate in the process more than others'.<sup>2</sup> It is the interests of actors who drive translation that should be the focus of historians studying cultural interactions.

Metaphors are important because they tell researchers what to look for, so one can understand the wrestling of all three books with the

question of which metaphor best describes the collisions or interactions of cultures; it is part of the sometimes contradictory behaviour of scholars trying to define an emerging field – as these authors say that they are doing – looking for ‘models, analytical tools, and frameworks’.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, to make transculturalism the centre of historical research is a recent idea. So is it remarkable that all three books identify translation, motion, and flow as key concepts. They stress the fluctuation of cultural interchange, the constant negotiation and appropriation that characterizes transcultural interactions. What the case studies could have usefully reflected more on, however, is the connection between cultural interactions and notions of ‘the other’. How are differences or similarities between cultures reinforced in the process? How should historians understand the changing nature of culture given the apparent stability of ‘the other’? How do places where cultures rub together contribute to notions of otherness?

Useful reminders, yes, but after reading these three books, I am still not entirely sure how this approach to studying culture is different from existing approaches that have found new favour in the past couple of decades, such as the concepts of entangled histories, transnational history and *histoire croisée*, hybrids and contact zones. Indeed, the originator of the notion of ‘contact zones’, Mary Louise Pratt, suggested the term in 1990 ‘to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today’.<sup>4</sup> What is transculturalism if not what occurs in these places? It is certainly useful to draw attention to the surprising places where cultures interact, but these exchanges have long been a focus of historians.

What any new term needs to do to justify its use is to do something new or better than existing methods, yet the view of culture and cultural interaction held up by these accounts as outdated – viewing cultures as sealed boxes – and which they react against was given up by good scholars a long time ago. Indeed, as Wolfgang Iser already laid out in 1999, citing German philosophers including Wittgenstein, the notion that cultures are unchanging and distinct things has long been seen as naive.<sup>5</sup> Iser emphasizes the interconnections between cultures as a way to recognize the foreign elements in one’s own sense of self. In Germany, the notion of transculturalism still influences debates about

education. The interaction between cultures has become such a point of concern for citizens that it has spawned popular books on the subject.<sup>6</sup> (Transculturality is defined as the interactions between cultures as compared to interculturality or multiculturalism which emphasize the co-existence of cultures as independent units, the conception that transculturalism seeks to combat.) Of course one can always argue about what 'culture' is, but few historians would object to the notion that cultures are constantly changing and borrow items from each other. It is worth emphasizing the difference between transcultural values, or things that different cultures share, and transculturalism, the study of where different cultures interact and the hybrids that emerge, often under the flag of one or other of these cultures.

In what follows, four sections explain the possibilities offered by transculturalism as a new approach to history and explore whether it offers genuinely new insights for historians. The first discusses the books reviewed. The second section outlines the book's contribution to discussions of globalization, reflecting on the fact that transculturalism is itself a product of globalization and what it might usefully tell historians on this broad topic. The third section explores the failure of all the studies reviewed here to discuss the actors who are responsible for cultural translations, which opens up questions about their motives and agendas. The last section turns to the future laid out by the three books for the study of culture and asks whether it is desirable to lump these approaches under the name of transculturalism or if the books are really just a call to study cultures in a more aware way.

## The Books

The three books reviewed here were chosen for their shared vocabulary, but do they present a compelling picture of how historians should study culture? Transculturalism is tackled by them on two different levels: firstly, by looking at how we should do cultural history and secondly, by empirically studying interactions between cultures. *The Trans/National Study of Culture* offers a meta-study of how we study cultures, whereas *Transcultural Turbulences* and *Cultures In Motion* are collections of case studies that apply some of the insights laid out in the books' introductions. The books are less effective than they might

have been at creating a new agenda for the study of culture because all three are edited volumes. All three have their origins in either conferences or centres of excellence, and suffer from the well-known problem of heterogeneity. As is frequently the case in collected volumes, the fascinating cases and questions raised by these books are unfortunately not realized in any conclusion or connection made to the introduction – although *Cultures In Motion* must be mentioned for its two afterwords, which both attempt to draw together the book's rather disparate case studies.

The most coherent of the three books, perhaps because it did not come out of a conference, is *The Trans/National Study of Culture* because many of its papers directly broach the questions laid out in the book's introduction. Although heavily theoretical, the volume's chapters are mostly easy to follow. The contributing authors are largely part of the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture of the Justus-Liebig-Universität Giessen. But the book is somewhat led astray by its fairly transparent agenda, using a new approach to the transnational study of culture as a way to dislodge the authoritativeness of English-language historical work. This is as good a premise as any, when it contributes to a way of doing better history, but reflexive English language scholars are often well aware of the ways that their language and their upbringing blind them. The book's suggested vision for the future of the field is discussed more below.

The other two books, *Transcultural Turbulences: Towards a Multi-Sited Reading of Image Flows* and the more recent *Cultures in Motion*, are both rich collections of case studies that illustrate what happens where and when cultures interact. Creating any sort of unity in an edited volume (especially when it comes out of a conference) is commendable, but one cannot help but think that the chapters in both books were collected to justify a new term rather than because of any commitment by the authors to the editors' project. Unlike *The Trans/National Study of Culture*, the historical case studies of these two volumes generally do not address the theoretical points made in their respective introductions (*Transcultural Turbulences*, which is supposedly about images, even includes an essay that has nothing to do with images – except perhaps as metaphors); they do not apply all of the introductions' prescriptions for good history.<sup>7</sup>

Many of the books' case studies, while well demonstrating empirical applications of historical study to the places where or when cultures

interact, lack a central argument, let alone a shared one. Yet the varied subjects of these books' studies do give us a view into all sorts of different places where different cultures have come into contact, places of cultural translation as it were: whether a card shop in India selling Valentines' day cards, the amusement parks of Shanghai, a courtroom in California where an immigrant Chinaman is put on trial and the transcript is in pidgin English (as well as in an English translation), or the peace conference of Paris in 1919. All of the case studies are well written, although they are unsurprisingly uneven in their interests. The two collections of case studies differ in their focus, geography and chronology. The heterogeneity of these books, while sometimes distracting, contributes to giving the reader a feel for the potential – but also some of the limitations – of transculturalism (or its alternates) as an approach both to case selection and analysis. Overall, the great value of these books is that they are collections of excellent examples where cultures can be found rubbing together and can thus be empirically studied.

*Transcultural Turbulences* is focused particularly on the flow of images and on exchange between Asia and Europe, reflecting the expertise of the Cluster of Excellence at Heidelberg University: 'Asia and Europe in a Global Context: Shifting Asymmetries in Cultural Flows'. The book is the product of a conference on 'Flows and Images and Media' hosted at Heidelberg University in October 2009. It is published as part of the series 'Transcultural Research – Heidelberg Studies on Asia and Europe in a Global Context'.

Images, the subject of *Transcultural Turbulences*, are a nice focus because images give the impression of being easy to understand, but as the many authors in this book demonstrate, scratching below the surface of such composite images quickly reveals the complexity underneath. It is when a cultural product is understood as one that is accessible to everyone that it seems to be most easily incorporated into another context and given new meanings. The focus on things that can be appropriated without language is particularly interesting in light of the use of the word 'translation' to describe cultural intermingling rather than, say, appropriation. Here it very obviously departs from what one would normally understand under translation, as of a language, to be about the translation of what I will call cultural products – which as these collections so richly point out, can be about much

more than language or material things, including dance steps or greeting cards.<sup>8</sup> Of course material things reflect ideas (such as Valentine's day greeting cards carrying with them the social mores that go with a western ideal of romantic love), and I wish that some of the contributions had given more explicit attention to how material things are deployed as carriers of ideas. In Smith's and Cooks's contributions to *Cultures in Motion* matter is specifically studied as an important carrier of knowledge.

*Cultures in Motion* is the product of a seminar series at Princeton University and includes case studies drawn from around the world including the United States. Indeed, while the geographical coverage of the book refreshingly juxtaposes many areas around the globe, the similar broadness of its chronological coverage feels a bit awkward. The book's earliest, i.e. pre-modern and ancient, case studies are a bit jarring; they are perhaps illustrative of cultural exchanges but because they depart in style and source material from more contemporary history, they contribute additionally to a feeling of unevenness – also because the category of 'nations', which is a particular focus of criticism in these books, does not really apply.

## The Key to a Bigger World?

Unsurprisingly, given the increased historical interest in global phenomena, the question of globalization lies just below the surface of all these studies. This is not globalization as in interactions across borders, for the existence of such connections is well known from many studies, but rather what globalization means for different cultures.<sup>9</sup> These studies do not challenge our chronological notion of when globalization occurred, but give a good idea of how we should look at cultures in the light of globalization (globalization here meaning a historical process that affects how we write history).

Transculturalism is itself (as a way of studying culture) a part of the globalization of culture, seriously looking, as it does, at interactions between all cultures, but this does not mean that it is necessarily about global things. Indeed, the subjects of transculturalism, the interactions of cultures, are not necessarily global,<sup>10</sup> nor are they necessarily even transnational. The transnationalism called for by Bachmann-Medick

and the contributors to the volume *The Trans/National Study of Culture* is of the study of culture, not of culture itself.

Yet the books make a good, if not entirely novel point, about the relationship of the global to the local as often through the selection of subjects as in the nature of their study. Nationalism, in this sense, can be seen as a lens through which ideas of globalization are formed, a point made by all the books that bears repeating. All of the empirical case studies in these books underline the importance of the local in creating (experiences of) the global, but most stay confined to local detail and lack connections to the larger picture. Echoing critiques of some microhistory, without a connection to what we know or what is being critiqued, the reader is a bit lost about what these studies offer beyond empirical detail.

Most useful for readers is the emphasis in several studies included in these volumes on ‘the global’ as a concept constructed by actors. Indeed, the effort to move beyond the western-centricity of much existing literature leads the contributors to these books (whether or not English speaking) to show exactly how the West reinforced its power by constructing and exporting visions of global truths, of universality. It is unavoidably clear that there certainly is ‘epistemological added value’ in the notion that ‘there were competing global imaginaries’, that universal claims were contested.<sup>11</sup> Yet this is surely something transculturalism could take from the history of knowledge and history of science. For example, Herren’s study of the universalist claims of metaphors for diplomacy using new technologies is frustratingly unaware of the existing literature on the subject, while these studies would serve to enrich and deepen her work. Such enhancement would make even more compelling her juxtaposition of universalist claims with the nationalist claims for art restitution after the First World War. Herren’s focus illustrates well the use of nationalist categories by actors, despite themselves being employed as ‘members of a transnational expert community’.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout, all the studies demonstrate once again how important it is that we do not treat globalization as an unstoppable (and impersonal) force. Indeed, when reading the empirical detail offered, the reader sees how globalization is promoted by some and resisted by others – although the case studies seem to be much stronger on the former than the latter. Yet as Christine Brosius points out, historians can often see



the edges, the limitations to globalization, ironically, by looking at ‘the most globalized aspect of its “material culture”: images and media’.<sup>13</sup> The assertion of the local over the global is just as interesting a phenomenon as adopting or changing products of other cultures and deserves to be emphasized. At the same time, we need to know how the global itself, far from a universal category, was created and promulgated.

## Who Dunit

Central to any study of translation should be the actors. Although all three books make clear that translation is a contested activity, the reader generally does not get a feeling for what is at stake for different actors when they make a given translation or choose not to make one. Yet, as the article on ‘Creative Misunderstandings’ makes clear in the context of a seventeenth-century Chinese medical text, different translations can be made to support different agendas.<sup>14</sup> If we accept that translation in a broader cultural sense should be understood as an ongoing process, we see a process that above all is not neutral. Yet almost none of the studies in these books gives us a good feeling for actors’ agency. The ‘asymmetrical flows’ described in the introduction of *Transcultural Turbulences*,<sup>15</sup> for example, would be a very interesting topic to hear more about, acknowledging as it does that cultures are not equally powerful, that cultures rarely seem equally desirable to actors. Indeed, it is valuable to decentre historians’ pictures, but the reader still wants to learn why the cultures exported from some places are seen as desirable, not just write this off reflexively as a product of colonialism.

Consider for example the essay on ‘Goddesses in an Age of Mass Reproduction’. The statue of liberty may, as we are informed, have been based on models from Egypt, and may have been associated by its creators with conservative values but surely there are important reasons that it is associated with the United States and has taken on meanings to do with the ‘universal’ values that that nation-state promotes.<sup>16</sup> It is not enough to show the non-western roots of western iconography; historians need to find out how and why these icons became associated with the west. As Christiane Brosius acknowledges in her introduction, a more complete history will only be provided by studying the ‘agents and agency that lie behind’ the flow of cultural goods.<sup>17</sup>

Further, the assumption that all of the papers in *Transcultural Turbulences* share, that ‘flows of images are part of different ecologies of circulation and communication’,<sup>18</sup> opens a whole vista onto the connections between different cultures, the paths that cultural artifacts and knowledge move along. This is a very interesting explanandum, but not one that any of the papers takes up, with the exceptions of Pamela Smith’s and Cross’s papers in *Cultures in Motion*, which detail how early-modern ‘knowledge followed trade routes’.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps this theme is not dealt with more because many of these papers represent the beginning rather than the end of the research on the cultural intersections that they describe.

The juxtaposition of these case studies makes the reader wonder to what extent the form of the cultural transfer influences not only the translation but also its reception. What is the difference between ideas and say images, cultural forms that the public believes they can interpret themselves without expert mediation? Is there any difference, then, that arises from the apparent accessibility of the cultural product in question? Does this influence what is translated when and where? Media technologies may, as the introduction to *Transcultural Turbulences* tells us, have a sort of agency,<sup>20</sup> but – even if we accept this sort of flimsy appeal to the universalism of media flows – this is not enough to explain why images are re-used or translated. Yes, historians need to be aware of borrowing, of translating – of ideas, images, expert knowledge, material objects – but this should be in all directions along the asymmetries that we identify. In presenting different cultures as being on the same level, these studies offer a perhaps democratic view but provoke more questions than they answer. Still, undoubtedly the start of such a study lies in the empirical detail of cases like those contained in these books.

## How Culture Should Be Studied

Apart from showing the potential of studying cultural interactions to overcome some of the categories that bedevil many other works, none of these books seem to point the way forwards for the study of culture. Certainly, all contribute to the more explicit formulation of transculturalism as an approach to doing history that focuses on cultural interactions,

but none gives a workable agenda for all scholars of culture in the future. Even *The Trans/National Study of Culture*, which calls for a new transnational method for studying culture (hence the very intentional avoidance of ‘cultural studies’ in the book’s title), fails to give the reader a practical way forward. The book’s call for ‘global knowledge production’ seems problematic. Certainly the central point of the book – that our studies of culture are themselves locally determined (often within national boxes) and thus that any study requires a large measure of self-reflection – is a valid and a good one. But the suggested solution – the creation of a truly transnational study of culture with ‘universal shared points of reference’<sup>21</sup> – is surely calling for the same universality in cultural studies that has never been achieved by the actors in history. I remain unconvinced that such a project is even feasible. Osterhammel declares that an elite ‘thinks and acts globally’; does this include historians?<sup>22</sup> Is it really possible to forgo the (local) things that have shaped us in order to create a truly transnational enterprise? While it seems uncontroversial that we should attempt to internationalize scholarship and attempt to enrich the field through interdisciplinarity (moving beyond the notion of transfers between fields towards an ideal of the global production of knowledge), it is not clear that we should promote the formation of a truly rootless global elite, even if we could.

Ultimately, these collections contribute the most by giving readers a new perspective on cultural interactions, by highlighting the pervasiveness of cultural translation and by pointing out the fact that the ongoing process of accumulation in different cultures is not neutral. However transculturalism, if it is really such a self-reflective venture as Bachmann-Medick’s book wants it to be, needs to avoid pointing the attention of historians to new questions while causing them to ignore questions that were thought important before. Power relations, for example, should not define our studies of cultures, but surely any study of culture needs to take them into account. Many of the traditional questions that historical studies of culture excelled at answering can be incorporated into transculturalism, but only if scholars do not let themselves get too distracted from their core competence by the ostensibly new – new terms, new approaches. It seems that these books are mostly calls for a more aware study of culture that pays heed to cultural translation; they are pleas for good history rather than a recipe for a radical new way of doing it.

## Notes

- 1 Christina Lutter, 'What Do We Translate When We Translate?', in Doris Bachmann-Medick (ed.), *The Trans/National Study of Culture. A Translational Perspective* (Berlin, 2014) 161.
- 2 Peter Burke, *Cultural Hybridity* (Cambridge, 2013).
- 3 Daniel Rodgers, 'Cultures in Motion: An Introduction', in Daniel T. Rodgers, Bhavani Rama, and Helmut Reimitz (eds), *Cultures In Motion* (Princeton, 2014) 3.
- 4 Mary Louise Pratt, 'Arts of the Contact Zone', *Profession* 33–40 (1991), 34.
- 5 Cf. [http://www2.uni-jena.de/welsch/papers/W\\_Wlensch\\_Transculturality.html](http://www2.uni-jena.de/welsch/papers/W_Wlensch_Transculturality.html).
- 6 Arata Takeda, *Wir sind wie Baumstämme im Schnee. Ein Plädoyer für transkulturelle Erziehung* (Münster, 2012).
- 7 Madeleine Herren, 'Shifting Identities and Cosmopolitan Machineries: A New World Imagined at the 1919 Peace Conference in Paris', in Christiane Brosius and Roland Wenzlhuemer (eds), *Transcultural Turbulences: towards a multi-sited reading of image flows* (Heidelberg, 2011) 67–82.
- 8 April Masten, 'The Challenge Dance: Black-Irish Exchange in Antebellum America', in Rodgers et al., *Cultures In Motion*, 23–59; Sumathi Ramaswamy, 'The Work of Goddesses in the Age of Mass Reproduction', in Christiane Brosius and Roland Wenzlhuemer (eds), *Transcultural Turbulences: towards a multi-sited reading of image flows* (Heidelberg, 2011) 191–220.
- 9 Jürgen Osterhammel and Dr Niels P. Petersson, *Globalization: A Short History* (Princeton, 2005).
- 10 Christiane Brosius and Roland Wenzelheumer, 'Introduction – Transcultural Turbulences: towards a Multi-sited Reading of Image Flows,' in Brosius and Wenzlhuemer, *Transcultural Turbulences*, 10.
- 11 Herren, 'Shifting Identities and Cosmopolitan Machineries', 82.
- 12 Ibid., 80.
- 13 Christiane Brosius, 'Love in the Age of Valentine and Pink Underwear: Media and Politics of Intimacy in South Asia', in Brosius and Wenzlhuemer, *Transcultural Turbulences*, 64.
- 14 Harold Cook, 'Creative Misunderstandings: Chinese Medicine in Seventeenth-Century Europe', in Rodgers et al. (eds), *Cultures In Motion*, 215–240.
- 15 Brosius and Wenzelheumer, 'Introduction', 9.

- 16 Ramaswamy, 'The Work of Goddesses', 191–220.
- 17 Brosius, 'Love in the Age of Valentine', 64.
- 18 Brosius and Wenzelheumer, 'Introduction', 14.
- 19 Pamela Smith, 'Knowledge in Motion: Following Itineraries of Matter in the Early Modern World', in Rodgers et al. (eds), *Cultures In Motion*, 109–133, 123.
- 20 Brosius and Wenzelhuemer, 'Introduction', 13.
- 21 Bachmann-Medick, 'Trans/National Study of Culture' in Doris Bachmann-Medick (ed.) *The Trans/National Study of Culture* (Berlin, 2014) 13.
- 22 Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 2014).

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