

The Trans/National Study of Culture

Concepts for the Study of Culture



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The Trans/National Study of Culture

A Translational Perspective

Edited by
Doris Bachmann-Medick

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Contents

Doris Bachmann-Medick

The Trans/National Study of Culture: A Translational Perspective — 1

Ansgar Nünning

Towards Transnational Approaches to the Study of Culture: From Cultural Studies and *Kulturwissenschaften* to a Transnational Study of Culture — 23

I. Conceptualizations and Histories

Dipesh Chakrabarty

Place and Displaced Categories, or How We Translate Ourselves into Global Histories of the Modern — 53

Jon Solomon

The Transnational Study of Culture and the Indeterminacy of People(s) and Language(s) — 69

Andreas Langenohl

Scenes of Encounter: A Translational Approach to Travelling Concepts in the Study of Culture — 93

Doris Bachmann-Medick

From Hybridity to Translation: Reflections on Travelling Concepts — 119

Matthias Middell

Is there a Timetable when Concepts Travel? On Synchronicity in the Emergence of New Concepts Dealing with Border-Crossing Phenomena — 137

Christina Lutter

What Do We Translate when We Translate? Context, Process, and Practice as Categories of Cultural Analysis — 155

II. Knowledge Systems and Discursive Fields

Boris Buden

Translation and the East: There is No Such Thing as an ‘Eastern European Study of Culture’ — 171

Christa Knellwolf King

Australian Cultural Studies: Intellectual Traditions and Critical Perspectives — 181

Rainer Winter

Cultural Studies: Critical Methodologies and the Transnational Challenge — 201

Thomas Weber

Translating ‘Media’ and ‘Communication’: National Assignment and Transnational Misunderstanding — 223

Birgit Mersmann

D/Rifts between Visual Culture and Image Culture: Relocations of the Transnational Study of the Visual — 237

Notes on Contributors — 261

Index — 267

Doris Bachmann-Medick

The Trans/National Study of Culture

A Translational Perspective

We need new sets of translations across different philosophical cultures so as to rearrange the present segregation of discourses. Transpositions of ideas, norms, practices, communities and theoretical genealogies have to be allowed and even encouraged. (Braidotti 2006: 33)



Fig. 1: Huang Yong Ping, *The History of Chinese Painting and the History of Modern Western Art Washed in the Washing Machine for Two Minutes*, 1987–1993 (Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, T. B. Walker Acquisition Fund, 2001); © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2013.

The installation by the Chinese Dadaist Huang Yong Ping from 1987, *The History of Chinese Painting and the History of Modern Western Art Washed in the Washing Machine for Two Minutes*, immediately evokes the thematic scope of this book. In the front, on top of a Chinese tea caddy, lies the end product of a post-modern *mélange* of long-standing east-western art histories: a little heap of shredded, disintegrated texts. These were once two classical art history books – Wang Bomin’s *History of Chinese Painting* (1982) and Herbert Read’s *A Concise History of Modern Painting* (1959) (the first history of modern Western art to be translated into Chinese).¹ This kind of ironic critique challenges the idea of a purity of art history and cultural history as well as hierarchies of knowledge. It can be extended into a critical reflection of national traditions of knowledge, their hegemonies and the lack of entanglement in intercultural scholarly research in general.

Following up on the message of these shreds, one could ask: Does the transnationalization of the study of culture under globalized conditions lead to these kinds of hybridization of different academic histories? Does it result – in the course of going through the western laundry – only in diffuse lumps of knowledge? The danger is real. Because – as the comparatists Wang Ning and Sun Yifeng highlight from their point of view – even cultural studies is in the process of internationalizing and hybridizing itself. Yet it has, up to now, not been able to break out of its monolingual mode: “At present cultural studies is also a crisis of a monolingual mode” (Ning and Yifeng 2008: 12). Obviously, language and translation come into play at this point. Do they function as media of reproduction and dissemination for transnational studies of culture that will lead, in the end, to a common academic language? Or do they function, rather, as media of productive differentiation and separation that call for permanent negotiation, interlocution, and mediation? Perhaps we can make some progress on this question in this volume – provided, however, we neither use the washing machine (i.e. merely hybridize) nor fill up neat tea caddies (i.e. simply localize or even essentialize). Perhaps what is needed, instead, is a type

¹ Cf. Koslow Miller 2006; and esp. the artist’s own statement: “Book washing is somewhat similar to Wittgenstein’s view of language. He once said: ‘Now and then, some wordings should be removed from language and be sent to be washed—and after that, they can be brought back into communication.’ What I do can be summed up as the following: ‘washing’ is both the method and the goal, because I don’t believe that language can be brought back into communication after having been washed. In other words, communication is in reality a ‘dirty form.’ In addition, ‘book washing’ is not about making culture cleaner; rather, it tries to make its dirtiness more evident to the eye” (“To Beat the West with the East and to Beat the East with the West,” cited in Hanru 2005).

of centrifuge in order to recapture the indispensable claims of difference and historicization from the general dynamics of a global circulation of theory.

The “crisis of a monolingual mode,” to which Ning and Yifeng allude, refers to two recent developments: a crisis in American cultural studies, which remains caught up in its hegemonic position through the Anglocentric monolingualism of global English, and a crisis of the monolingual mode itself. This is a crisis, because in the framework of an established dominating language, a transnational study of culture can never be developed beyond being an Anglo-American expansionist project. However, this book hardly declares itself satisfied with the pessimistic diagnosis of the Australian Jon Stratton and the Indonesian-Australian cultural researcher Ien Ang that truly transnational studies of culture are impossible (cf. Stratton and Ang 1996). It asks, instead, a more constructive question: How can we counteract monolingualism in the study of culture?

One suggestion is to position the study of culture, in its continuing commitment to transnationalization, explicitly as a project of translation (cf. Bachmann-Medick 2011). But, then again, one could ask: Does this not just move the problem elsewhere? Do the conditions of a global circulation of knowledge really change when they are understood as relations of translation? Here I say: Yes – but on the condition that we do not get caught up in such relations of translation, in the issues of translatability and untranslatability; on the condition that we do not let ourselves be satisfied with specific local cultural translations along the lines of inventing an Arab Ramadan Burger, which, in fact, is just an American Big Mac in disguise.

All this is not about working out a menu for a transnational study of culture, with Anglo-American cultural studies as the main course offering different flavours in different places. A more fundamental approach would be to work towards truly pluralizing cultural studies itself into multi-sited courses and discourses, and thus “provincializing” it at the same time – in the sense of Dipesh Chakrabarty, who in his pathbreaking work suggested a “provincializing” of Europe, meaning that the claim that European analytical categories are universally applicable and meant to be spread over the whole world should be critically re-localized, massively questioned, and undermined (Chakrabarty 2000; see also Dipesh Chakrabarty’s contribution to this volume). Thus, on the one hand, the thematic scope of a transnational study of culture should definitely be widespread.

But, on the other hand, in pursuing this goal, case studies remain a conscious starting point in this volume and we will ask: Where is concrete engagement actually possible – even when bearing in mind the more comprehensive aims to 1) break open the monolingual system of cultural studies as a whole

and, in addition, 2) to “provincialize” Anglo-American cultural studies in particular.

1 The Transnational Study of Culture – A Localizing Perspective

This volume’s subtitle already points towards a first starting point: The study of culture is to be pluralized and, in each case, to be analyzed for the social conditions of its emergence and the historicity of its theoretical traditions. To begin with, therefore, this means starting at the level of knowledge *production*. The different studies of culture may well be anchored in their respective Anglo-American, German, French, Eastern European, Australian or Asian academic systems. But it seems questionable whether such localizations really *precede* their transnationalization. After all, these academic systems have themselves already become internally multi-local due to translations back and forth, overlapping, friction, and transformations. The understanding of these national knowledge systems should in no way be subjugated to assumptions of a “methodological nationalism” (Beck 2000: 21–24) that takes the nation-state as a standard for academic research and analysis. Despite their assumed national location, they rather could be considered in the way that Robert Stam and Ella Shohat claim to be adequate: as being caught in a web of “a translational relationality” (Stam and Shohat 2012: 298), as a stepping stone “to perform an analytical dislocation by constructing and deconstructing, threading and unraveling the tangled webs of ideas and practices that constitute complicated national and regional formations” (Stam and Shohat 2012: 299).

A little semi-fictitious dialogue ‘invented’ by me here is meant to show how necessary it is to open the debate to this kind of “translational relationality:”

“Do the ‘cultural turns’ suggested in the context of German *Kulturwissenschaften* (cf. Bachmann-Medick 2014) really only embody a ‘one-way street’ from the USA to Europe” (as Hartmut Böhme has claimed in a 2008 review essay on *Cultural Turns*)?

“Not at all, because in the USA an explicit and cross-disciplinary discourse on ‘cultural turns’ has not yet been established.”

“Then what is specifically American about the ‘turns’?”

“Perhaps it is simply a projection of the idea of a superficial orientation of American cultural studies towards new trends and of the short-livedness of their concepts – which is

quite the opposite to the German idea of ‘disciplines working in the *longue duree*’ (cf. Böhme 2008).”

“So what then is specifically German about the ‘turns’?”

“The tendency to do basic research on theoretical and conceptual developments in the study of culture seems characteristic for the German scene. Within this frame ‘cultural turns’ are being conceived and discussed systematically as theoretical (re)orientations – and, on top of that, they are being argued about in a historical mode.”

“So the ‘turns’ seem to be rather a specific product of German *Kulturwissenschaften*?”

“Etc., etc.”

One could ask: Does this kind of conversation really lead to fruitful insights? The answer would be: Amazingly yes, but only if it does not just result in reassertions of national ascriptions, origins and originals, if it provides new insights into entanglements and also stimulates debates “beyond the international binary” (Stratton and Ang 1996: 361), as hopefully this book will do. At any rate, this kind of dialogue points to a discursive field of highly complex interconnections. These arise precisely not just from manifest transfers of theory and corresponding processes of reception. They also imply generalized images of research attitudes as well as theoretical projections. They consist of misunderstandings, stereotyped narratives of theories and their genealogies, which feed into the self-understandings and legitimations of academic traditions, even into the developments of theory itself – not to mention the anxieties, narcissisms and competitions or even the essentializations of certain points of view (as in the ‘purity’ argument expressed in the widespread sceptical questions: Do the German *Kulturwissenschaften* actually need American cultural studies? Shouldn’t they, after all, better concentrate on revitalizing the research approaches of their own academic tradition more strongly?).

A transnational game of ping-pong has already been going on for some time in the study of culture. And it does not just apply to the *production* of knowledge, but also to the *distribution* of knowledge: Transfers and travelling concepts have been and are the transport tracks of theory-translation. Yet here, too, one should not be overly hasty about going down the cultural mobility route. One needs to ask: How is knowledge itself gained in the first place – *before* or *through* its dissemination around the world? How one answers these questions depends on whether a “singular origin” (Abbas and Erni 2005: 5) can still be claimed for western scholarship as an assumed homogenous and hegemonic site of the production of knowledge and theories, which are then consumed in export markets outside of Europe through travelling concepts. We can expect

some answers when greater attention than heretofore is directed towards internal differences – towards the slippages in transfer and breaks in translation that are already in operation between and within different European approaches themselves. By doing this, intersections might come to light from which the assumption of a European or American monolingualism could be broken-up:

The *first* point to ask then should be: What are the main sources, institutions, movements, and debates from which theories actually develop in different intellectual traditions – are these only academic practices at universities or other academic establishments? Aren't they also developed by public intellectuals, critical journalists, and the media (cf. Thomas Weber's contribution in this volume), or by the specific institutional constellations of academic systems (cf. Matthias Middell's article in this volume)? Or are social movements themselves even decisive for the development of cultural concepts and theories (as is the case with postcolonial cultural studies in Australia in its affinity towards Aboriginal people, Critical Whiteness, and "New Australian Feminism" – see Christa Knellwolf King's contribution to this volume)?

The issue, therefore, is not just about the transfers between nationally specific academic forms of cultural analysis. Focussing merely on these has the effect of diverting attention from an awareness of other, quite different, but very influential relations of exchange – such as those taking place among disciplines, intellectual spheres, practices, and even social and political movements. To name one example: In a fundamental essay, the German historian Reinhard Blänkner highlighted the far-reaching importance of this new kind of 'shift in form' ("Formwandel") through translation of one form of knowledge into another (Blänkner 2008: 366). Thus, as he states, the current post-colonially informed form of global history does not feed primarily on the questionable (European) forms of historical knowledge and history writing, but, surprisingly, rather on literary models (in particular those that originated in the context of postcolonial movements). Because – according to Blänkner's thesis – "it was only through the symbolic mode of literature that the so-called 'people without history' could finally enter the stage of world-history" (Blänkner 2008: 365, 362).

A *second* point to ask would be: Which discourses have been and are actually decisive in forming the main directions in the studies of culture? Have they developed out of historical or literary studies, or rather from the social sciences? In these specific settings, different conditions may have been created for further transnational developments, for the receptivity to or defence against specific theoretical understandings in one place as compared to those in another.

A *third* question could be posed, asking not only which theories and concepts are transferred, reviewed and transformed in each case, but also which are or have been selected by the authority and "interest" of intellectual gate-

keepers (cf. Bourdieu 1999: 222–224), which are possibly denied or explicitly suppressed. Research into transfers concentrates all too easily on cases where transfer processes are or have been successful, but not on express non-transfers, on refusals of transfers or even on failures.

But how, in fact, can the complex insights into differences, breaks, and translational gains and losses between the different traditions in the studies of culture be interpreted? There is a danger of stopping short at cultural interpretation and thereby separating off the cultural sphere – for example, by making culture an “unreflectedly and thoughtlessly over-integrated” concept (Beck 2006: 71), or reducing it to just the production of meaning. How transfers and relations of transformation between studies of culture are judged also depends on the extent to which culture as a field of research itself is put under the translational x-ray: sociologically, economically, politically, and institutionally. Just by doing this, significant differences between academic traditions and systems of the study of culture become visible: the relationship between culture and power is moulded differently in each case. These kinds of translational fracture could point to how and where, *within* individual academic cultures, a ‘shift in form’ is taking place, as a translation between different forms of knowledge.

To what extent are social and societal relations (including social conflicts) translated into a cultural mode and to what extent, on the other hand, does the study of culture have to be translated back into other forms of knowledge, into fields of practice and spheres of analysis (cf. Bachmann-Medick 2011)? In any case, it seems no longer sufficient simply to reduce translation, transfer and travelling concepts to transmissions of meanings. What needs to be elucidated much more clearly is their involvement in institutional networks like university structures, in intellectual practices up to and including publishing, in the ways the translation market is composed, and in political-cultural fields of power (see Andreas Langenohl’s contribution to this volume and new approaches to a sociology of translation, esp. Wolf and Fukari 2007). A further important differential criterion for the analysis of (uneven) transnational intellectual exchanges could be pursued with the question regarding to what extent studies of culture receive conceptual stimuli through debates outside of the university.

If we understand studies of culture as this kind of very complex intellectual, scholarly, and scientific practice, then approaches from the history of science are explicitly called for. Under these auspices, for example, British cultural studies would no longer appear as a homogeneous block. Rather, it could be

seen as a succession of theory generations working with a sequence of “key concepts” from the 1960s to the 1990s.²

Analyses in the history of science, the question of a generation-specific approach to theory formation, to ‘turns’ and their historical-political contextualizations are in fact fruitful starting points for a localization of theories and concepts. Thirty years ago in his already classic essay “Traveling Theory,” Edward Said took a clear stance on this. He called for theories to be inserted back into the contexts in which they arose, despite their later ‘journeys.’ Why this call for contextual specificity? Is this at all still necessary in times of global hybridization and migration? Should we still be searching for origins or unified theories at all, since it seems that these can no longer legitimately be claimed, and since theories develop whilst travelling and during the course of their transformations? As Johannes Angermüller recently said, theories always take shape when and where they are applied, where they operate; a telling example is the “French poststructuralism” that emerged not in France but rather later in the USA, which was then re-imported into the French “intellectual field” (cf. Angermüller 2007). Another example could be the different understandings of the concept ‘*transferts culturels*.’ This concept was coined in France, but then travelled in shifting ‘timetables’ or rather met with simultaneous developments of similar concepts – in the U.S., for instance, with ‘cultural encounter’ in the context of new forms of writing world history and, in Germany, with ‘comparative historiography’ (cf. Middell’s contribution in this book).

So, should we position a re-location or lack of origin of theories and concepts versus their emergence through their application (in other places)? Certainly, we should not get caught up with these binaries. Rather, we should be working out how both standpoints call for specific understandings of localization, contextualization, and translation as well as for a social and political grounding for the metaphor of ‘travelling concepts.’ Thus, several contributions to this volume (Nünning, Middell, as well as Langenohl and Bachmann-Medick) ask how specific frames of reference are activated in this process, how speaking positions are taken up, and to what extent theories are linked to social agency and to a cultural and social “field of production” – to formulate it in the terms of Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of social and discursive fields (Bourdieu 1999: 221). To make a final point regarding the question of the necessity of localization: Even

² A further example for these complex academic/institutional/political/generation-specific conditions for the different ways of developing national specific research traditions – in the field of anthropology – is offered by the volume *One Discipline, Four Ways* (Barth et al. 2005); on the question of German studies as cultural studies (USA versus Germany), see Lützeler 2013.

in times of global overlapping and mixing, processes of localization seem more important than ever – in order to stem hegemonic tendencies, in order to emphasize diversity, and in order to allow a multi-local production of theory.

What does this all mean for us as researchers in the field of a possibly transnational and transcultural study of culture? In the first instance, it calls on us to be more attentive to the close connection that already exists between theories and the particular fields of force in which they emerged and are being applied. On the level of localization itself, our task is to separate out the often interwoven threads of theory formation into translation scenarios so as to follow them as concretely as possible. These threads should be differentiated with an eye for brokers, mediations, processes of dissemination, and (often productive) misunderstanding. Only in this way can we arrive at a precise awareness of knowledge asymmetries as well as the entangled histories of knowledge formation, not least at the level of a discontinuous unfolding and elaboration of theories.

Certainly advocating a translational approach is understood here in a much broader sense than we are used to know from philological and linguistic contexts. The critical point of departure here is precisely in not taking recourse to the assumption of an ‘original’ or a conceptual ‘origin point,’ usually situated in the West. There is no ‘origin point’ of (western) theory. Theories are always already translated or translate themselves into new contexts. It is remarkable how dependent the concept of modernism was, for example, on African and Asian art before it, in turn, became a tremendous challenge for societies outside of Europe as an explicit European concept. In this sense, translation – as Stuart Hall emphasizes – is “a continuous process of re-articulation and re-contextualisation, without any notion of a primary origin” (Hall 1996: 393).

Translation as re-contextualization demands an endeavor to first localize cultural analyses and engage intensively with different approaches, by no means all European – something that is certainly an aim of this book. However, it is not enough to simply circulate back and forth between nationally or regionally influenced cultures of knowledge and systems in the study of culture – from the CCCS in Birmingham through to, perhaps, the GCSC in Gießen. We also should not stop at mainstream classifications. Instead, we should be asking: What are the causes and consequences, actually, of characterizing Anglophone cultural studies as more strongly politicized than German *Kulturwissenschaften*, as more strongly connected to ethnic groups and civil rights movements, as focused more on questions of power and oriented towards the analysis of popular culture (cf. Ansgar Nünning’s and Rainer Winter’s contributions; cf. also Musner 1999, 2001)? In contrast, to what extent and why are German *Kulturwissenschaften* characterized as interdisciplinary and systematic research efforts that, whilst less politically oriented, tend towards more fundamental

kinds of research and historical reflection? And what does it mean for the study of culture if the French *Sciences Humaines* are located in a close interface with the *Sciences Sociales* and are thus closer to social analysis (Chalard-Fillaudeau 2009, 2010; Laberge 2009)? At all events, the spectrum outlined here would have to be opened up further by tracing Eastern European, Asian, and African variants, which are themselves highly complex (for cultural studies in Africa, cf. Tomaselli and Wright 2011, and Japan, cf. Schäfer 2009), as well as the Latin American *Estudios Culturales*. For their part, most of these re-articulations outside of Europe critically position “cultural studies as part of a global decolonization movement” (as Kuan-Hsing Chen put it with regard to *Trajectories: Towards a New Internationalist Cultural Studies*, a series of conferences and a key project within cultural studies in Asia; Chen 1998: 4). They understand transnationally oriented cultural studies as “attempts at decolonizing cultural studies” (Shome 2012: 6), or in general as a postcolonial-inspired, counter-hegemonic project (Berry et al. 2009; Shome 2012; Keim 2008).

Can this spectrum of different studies of culture, as sketched here, develop transnational potential? Yes, as it leaves behind a merely additive configuration and then opens itself up anew as a constellation of translation, as an emerging network of reciprocal absorptions, transmissions, interactions, but also of dominations. Such an approach may bring specific studies of culture into new ‘constellations’ with one another, but it may, again, produce differentiations. In doing so, national specificities will remain a decisive differential criterion for these academic traditions. Surely, we must try to go beyond this narrow mapping, following the boundaries of nation-states by studying not only differences, but also by stressing the old or new inter-weavings or blurrings of former lines of tradition or unilateral positionings. But how far will we remain caught up in this mapping of the national? It is still at work to some extent in the concept of the ‘trans/national’ as far as categories are concerned (see the title of this book).

Rather than focus on national identities and differences, it could be especially productive to look towards the development of transcultural “epistemic spaces” and, in doing so, focus on the “indeterminacy” of languages, knowledge systems, and people (cf. Jon Solomon’s groundbreaking contribution to this volume). Epistemic spaces are – according to Stuart Hall – spaces of knowledge that are opened up tangentially to established academic systems through concepts and theoretical focuses that cross boundaries (cf. Hall 1996: 395).

But even seizing such a widened horizon should not prevent us from engaging in detailed analysis – with regard to multilateral transfers and borrowings, misunderstandings and re-interpretations – not from observing things and phenomena that seem to be or are regarded as untranslatable. Even the ‘abduction’

of theories and concepts among different academic systems should be kept in view. And yet we should not stop at these relations of transfer, but rather push forward to the foundations that shaped these different systems of the study of culture in the first place: in other words, consider the linguistic standardizations and classifications of which they are part and investigate how these went hand in hand with building the nation-state. These kinds of linguistic standardizations almost always imply, at the same time, territorializations. They have consequences for the positioning of research traditions within the colonial system (cf. Jon Solomon's critique in this volume), as well as in the world-wide economic and cultural division of labor.

2 The Transnational Study of Culture – A Universalizing Perspective

So far I have foregrounded the *production* and *distribution* of knowledge. A further important point in the transnationalization of the study of culture concerns the *legitimation* and *institutionalization* of knowledge, as, for instance, claimed by the Canadian cultural studies scholars Richard Cavell and Imre Szeman: “Cultural studies thus emerges as a mode of critique of forms of the legitimation of knowledge – of the creation of cultural *capital* in Bourdieu's sense – and first and foremost of the university's role in this process” (Cavell and Szeman 2007: 3).

Certainly, the extent to which, and how critically, studies of culture actually stand in relation to other forms of the legitimation of knowledge in society should be examined at a more institutional level of academic fields and of intellectual capital. But the concrete circumstances of local and global expenditure of cultural-intellectual capital are also crucial, not least when hegemonic claims to theoretical influence are being asserted and authorities or even gatekeepers of theory are being established. Just how necessary it is to carry out analysis in this field is shown by an episode, which has been related by the scholar of Latin American Studies, Daniel Mato. According to Mato, the Argentinian anthropologist Néstor García Canclini was often asked whether his concept of ‘hybridization’ in his book *Hybrid Cultures* had been influenced by Homi Bhabha's idea of hybridity. Canclini answered in the negative. But this was not the point, rather, says Mato: “I wondered whether Bhabha has ever been asked about the influence of García Canclini on his work. I believe it is plausible to assume that the answer is negative” (Mato 2003: 791).

Mato contends that, in the course of this kind of “passionate search for the English influence” (Mato 2003: 791), cultural studies written in Spanish always came second to cultural studies written in English. Any attempts at differentiation, localization or historicization in this context are already clearly framed by these linguistic asymmetries working hand in hand with a stabilization of intellectual hierarchies. In this case, too, the assumption predominates that Anglo-American and European concepts and theories possess universal applicability – and can, therefore, lay claim to the highest level of authority and prestige. Quite apart from this example, it can be shown that, to a large extent, legitimations of knowledge employ the universalizability of concepts and theories as an argument. On the transnational horizon, this is used at the same time as a basis for deriving claims to a universal language for ‘global conversation’ or ‘cross-cultural dialogue.’

By taking a closer look at the institutionally and culturally specific situations of emergence and translation, these claims to universalization become highly questionable. “The ‘internationalization’ of cultural studies cannot mean the formation of a global, universally generalizable set of theories and objects of study” (Stratton and Ang 1996: 362). On the contrary, any internationalization of the study of culture remains necessarily referenced back to asymmetries, to relations of power and hierarchies between different cultures of knowledge and of scholarship. Instead of working towards the illusion of a unified global cosmopolitanism, the challenge of approaches working critically in fields of post-colonial asymmetries and binary divides should be brought to the fore. One, but an important, example for this can be found in the challenges of transnational feminist cultural studies. Work in this field attacks the homogenizing approach of a transnational study of culture, which does not adequately recognize differences and inequalities between gender roles and male and female positions (cf. Kaplan and Grewal 1999).

In light of assumptions about the superficial dynamics of intellectual mobility, we tend to mask such asymmetries. The critical point, however, is not to block them out, but to ask: How do things actually stand regarding access to hegemonic discourses and regarding specific positions within the geopolitics of knowledge? Here, an example: In its journey through western universities, and in particular via Latin American Studies in North America, the Indian Subaltern Studies debate has become an almost hegemonic international discourse (cf. Chakrabarty’s autobiographical contribution in this volume). The *Estudios Culturales*, on the contrary, by situating research on Latin America in Latin America itself, have only gained limited access to this discourse. For them, subaltern research remains explicitly connected to a commitment towards the “local” production of theory. These kinds of epistemological differences and power

gaps can be seen as productive stumbling blocks along the path of transnationalization. They, in particular, demand critical attention. Thus, using the example of North-American Latin American Studies, the Latin America scholar Susanne Klengel names the main danger: the production of theory separated from the place where it arose (in this case, Latin America) and subsequently becoming independent and disassociated from its context as “theory politics” (Klengel 2008: 135). In following up on the argument, one could ask: Are there other theories that may be in danger of becoming independent as vehicles of a global ‘theory politics?’ And do they blind us to gaps existing in the global politics of translation?

Naoki Sakai has undertaken a radical effort to mark out this problematic terrain. According to him, the focus on intellectual exchange and translations between different knowledge systems might just be a sham. Since this focus always remains clouded by the “regime of translation,” an “ideology that makes translators imagine their relationship to what they do in translation as the symmetrical exchange between two languages” (Sakai 1997: 51). In spite of this argument, it seems that the concept of translation is used very much as a vehicle of strategic universalism in the field of cultural claims toward global exchanges. By this I do not mean the mainstream academic legitimization of transnationalization, i.e. its reduction to a universalizing expansion of knowledge and concepts. I rather mean the frequent strategic references to a common language, without which – according to Robert Stam and Ella Shohat – “comparative (multi)Cultural Studies” could not be carried out (Stam and Shohat 2005: 492). This kind of strategic universalism is seen as a corrective to cultural relativism, to particularism and even to nation-based essentializations in which claims to difference often end.

By strategically extending the axis of universalization, further potential for universalizations can be recognized – the way universals connote a common language in which historically independent approaches could perhaps be articulated and circulated. *Global* knowledge production in the study of culture, the creation of corresponding epistemic spaces and of “global conversations” (Tsing 2005: 3), would constitute such universal shared points of reference. It is true: For a transnational perspective, this kind of understanding of a global production of knowledge could lead away from the self-assertions of western origin points of theory. The central idea here would no longer be travelling concepts that journey from the ‘original’ to the ‘translation’ and are transformed in the process. Rather, communication, interaction, and media could be investigated more closely as productive intersections in transnational studies of culture (cf. Thomas Weber’s contribution). If travelling concepts are still spoken about at all in this context, then they can really only be considered as the prod-

ucts of academic communication – whether of assumed “global conversations,” of “global encounters across difference” (Tsing 2005: 3), or of an “international cultural studies *rendez-vous*” (Stratton and Ang 1996: 367).

In any case, there is no longer a pre-given linear direction of travel, which usually runs from West to East and from North to South. These framing dichotomies are, in fact, split open (cf. Boris Buden’s critical interrogation of this essentializing dichotomic framework in his contribution). And conditions and scenarios are revealed for expressly “multi-sited” studies of culture (Solomon and Sakai 2006), for a multi-origin production of theory, and for a multi-directional flow of theories, including their specific resistances and “*blocages symboliques*” (Stam and Shohat 2009: 474).

Even though we cannot cover this kind of conceptual border-crossings fully in this book, we can at least take some first steps in this direction. Above all, the translation model could be brought in and could be made productive against current suggestions for focusing on transnational forms of academic communication based on mere exchange. As Robert Stam and Ella Shohat argued in their latest book on *Race in Translation*, a translational model can be used to “criticize narratives of intellectual exchange that posit dichotomous axes of foreign/native, export/import, and original/copy, proposing instead a more fluid transnational and translational methodology appropriate to cross-border intellectual interlocution” (Stam and Shohat 2012: xviii).

3 The Transnational Study of Culture – A Translational Perspective

Finally, one should ask: How is talking about cross-cultural issues (and comparative work in a fast shrinking world) possible on the same ground? In her book *Translingual Practice* Lydia Liu suggests the following approach: “one must turn to the occurrences of historical contact, interaction, translation, and the travel of words and ideas between languages” (Liu 1995: 19). Here, translation, above all, becomes a central category of a transnational discourse. Indeed, translation can build links between universalism and particularism. Translation is both: localization, but also – as the philosopher of culture Peter Osborne puts it – “a mode of production of theoretical generality [...] that is committed to the transformation (rather than mere ‘application’) of basic concepts in the process of the expansion of their range of reference to new circumstances” (Osborne 2008, also 2001: 53–62, a chapter entitled “Modernism as Translation”).

The basic assumption here is that “theoretical generality” is a result of translatability and translation, in particular in the sense of practical negotiation. The concern thus is not primarily with the production, distribution or legitimation of knowledge, but with intellectual cooperation. If translation is to be used as a category of practice, above and beyond a mere “trope of epistemological crossing” (Liu 1995: 1), then this level of intellectual cooperation needs to be taken seriously. Homi Bhabha’s definition of translation as a negotiation of differences thus could be explicitly applied to academic practice: Conferences and books on – and originating from – intellectual exchanges could, therefore, discuss how translatability and untranslatability arise through practices of negotiation and should ask to what extent this also generates “theoretical generality.”

Here, too, the starting point should not be on the level of universalistic claims and the a priori assumption of a transcultural validity of concepts, but rather with the transcultural uses and the practical working conditions of the translation of concepts. Lydia Liu, again, provides inspiration: “The study of translingual practice examines the process by which new words, meanings, discourses, and modes of representation arise, circulate, and acquire legitimacy within the host language [...] no longer [...] untouched by the contending interests of political and ideological struggles” (Liu 1995: 26). Translation, therefore, extends to “complex forms of mediations” (Liu 1995: 27), i.e. to forms of appropriation, transformation, domestication, and manipulation, and this takes place through historical contact, or even “struggles” (cf. Chakrabarty’s and Buden’s contributions to this volume). The dichotomy between original and translation in this perspective has long since ceased to be productive. Instead, a horizon unfolds on which translatability itself is, or has to be, created in the first place.

From this starting point, this volume could also help to collect or set out a more comprehensive range of questions in view of what is translatable, what is untranslatable, and what the existing processes of translation between the different studies of culture are. In this way, one could follow the “vehicle of translation” (Liu 1995: 21) by looking at the translation *of* concepts and categories. Going beyond this, one could also take up a different line of questioning and follow the “vehicle of concepts” instead (a translation *through* concepts). Or one could even follow an action-oriented translational path in the sense of a formulation by cultural theorist Robert Young: “Translation, the activity of the transposition of one language into another, has itself been translated by commentators into a *modus operandi* of our times” (Young 2011: 59). Because the processes of translation between academic cultures take place precisely *through and with the help of* concepts and categories, an important intersection for cross-cultural analyses surely lies here: taking, as a starting point, concepts and

categories that develop transnationally in the first place but which are also open to translation, to rewriting and transformation, i.e. not universalized from the start.

It is precisely attention to this close connection between translation and the unfolding of concepts and categories that promises to be a particularly productive field for further inquiry. It encourages a research practice that approaches things differently: Even before “cross-cultural translation” can be discussed, attention should be focussed on what Dipesh Chakrabarty has called “cross-categorical translation” (Chakrabarty 2000: 85). By introducing this concept, Chakrabarty challenges students of culture to apply the translational perspective first to their own analytical instruments. Before, in transnational approaches, issues of content are addressed, the fundamental terms of research, and the categories themselves – be they diverse categories of work, society, family, rights, democracy, etc. – should be questioned and their applicability checked. They should, above all, be opened to analytical categories from other knowledge and research systems.

The assumption underlying this demand is that a transnationally oriented study of culture needs to refer to diverse cultural histories and classifications as well as social practices as they are reflected in the terms of analysis themselves. Even at this state, there are already decisive and critical translational intersections. Comparison, transfer research, and translation analysis, therefore, need to start at these very intersections. Only then can we head towards a shared language or a possibly common point of reference. Only then can the different studies of culture be examined for systematic possibilities of connection along overlapping categories, concepts, and, finally, perhaps also ‘turns.’ This book seeks to demonstrate that attention to these kinds of transnational and translational intersections can indeed lead to new “epistemic spaces.” It thus hopes to open up a new horizon for a translational conception of the humanities. In this conception, as Emily Apter claimed in her article on “Untranslatables,” the leading question should address: “How to build a translational humanities responsive to fluctuations in geopolitics, and which intersects with but is not confined to national language frontiers” (Apter 2008: 597). The answer, according to Apter, can only be given with a new acknowledgement of the “untranslatable” (for an elaboration of this category in the context of a transformed transnational study of comparative literature, cf. Apter 2013).

In a similar sense, but perhaps more radically, is the position taken by Jon Solomon in his contribution to this volume: any effort to build a transnational study of culture has to critically consider the condition of the possibility of such a transnational project, i.e. the asymmetry of languages, cultures, and knowledge systems – which can only lead beyond the constraints of a “homolingual

system” by acknowledging the “indeterminacy” of peoples and languages (cf. Sakai 1997). With critical meta-reflections like these in mind, we should finally ask: What does this mean, in concrete terms, for the focus of this volume?

By returning to the image used at the beginning of this introduction, one could answer: The so-called western studies of culture could subject their own academic traditions to a “centrifuge” and, in doing so, disconnect themselves from both a universalistic top-down approach as well as from monolingualism. Instead, they could strengthen a bottom-up approach via increased attention to local knowledge and to specific traditions in the history of science. In this sense, the study of culture should be understood as a translation discipline and continue to elaborate the category of translation in this way: as a category that expressly throws light on the smaller units of communication – on concrete situations of interaction. To follow the study of culture along these lines would then also mean: bringing processes of translation in their intermediary steps into focus – steps that are force-fields too easily masked by a hazy view of the longer arcs of transition and transfer. What is advocated here is the attempt to really engage more with concrete actions and situations of translation, with all their breaks and non-simultaneities, even with untranslatabilities or failed translations.

Last but not least, at such intersections as those addressed in this book one could push forward to a level at which the course is also set for future transnational (academic) encounter: through world-crossing efforts of translations (instead of mere global dialogues). This could lead to examinations of the constellations and configurations of different ‘studies of culture’ much more strongly than ever, with regard to their zones of contact and confrontation. In particular, the relations of tension and differences among these various approaches could be developed as a ‘third space’ of academic communication. From this perspective, the transnational production of knowledge can then be thought of – according to Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s category – as global co-operation through “friction,” relying on translations as appropriations and transformations (cf. Tsing 2005).

Perhaps here, at the end of this introductory essay, we can be inspired by another provocative piece of art by the famous contemporary Chinese conceptual artist and political activist Ai Weiwei – by his revision of a richly traditional, truly antique, de facto thousand-year-old Chinese Han dynasty urn, on which there is an ostentatious, hand-painted Coca-Cola logo. Following the message of Ai Weiwei’s provocative piece of art, one could ask: Are the respective theoretical traditions in the studies of culture also ‘overwritten’ by global points of reference that newly inscribe themselves as theory icons, as ‘Coca-Cola-Theories’ so to speak? Or do completely new, historically reflected forms of

theory grow out of these ‘over-writings’ through independent and changed forms of appropriation and transformation?



Fig. 2: Ai Weiwei, *Han Dynasty Urn with Coca-Cola Logo*, 1994; Urn, Western Han Dynasty, 206 BC–24 AD (Photo credit: Ai Weiwei).

At any rate, the Coca-Cola urn provides one possible answer to the question posed at the start: How is knowledge gained – *before* or *through* its dissemination around the world? The answer could be: Knowledge is gained through translation – not through dissemination from an original, but through ongoing translations as negotiations, appropriations, and transformations.

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