

Editorial

## Special Issue Introduction “Transcultural Literary Studies: Politics, Theory, and Literary Analysis”

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As we witness the rise of intemperate nationalism, self-indulgent nativism, and aggressive xenophobia in many countries, multi- and intercultural studies and initiatives have come under considerable pressure. At least for now, it seems that they have not been able to offer satisfactory alternatives for populations that suffer under the ill effects of globalization or believe so. Theories of transculturalism arose out of the concern that part of the blame can be attributed to an underlying identity model that has not been able to set itself sufficiently apart from its own origins in culturalist traditions, leaving the door open for strong nationalistic and ethnocentric orientations. But how can we imagine transcultural communities? It seems sensible to examine whether transculturalism—with its questioning of the dominance of group identity and its return to the individual as privileged site for cultural multiplicity—can offer guideposts for conceptualizing ‘individual’ diversity without underplaying the role of class, religion, and community. To my mind, the question has not yet been answered. Some features of transculturalism, especially those that adhere to central propositions of the Enlightenment and Modernism, should be viewed cautiously with political and historical awareness. Among those, I would count elitist individualism and utopianism, teleologically structured conceptualizations of humanism, and an indiscriminating belief in the ascendancy of human universals, most recently appropriated from ‘hard’ human sciences such as evolutionary anthropology. Highlighting transcultural interpretations (in critical tension with ideas of national or sub-national cultures) is, by no small measure, a political decision that has often been prompted by a search for commonalities as a basis for the design of universal human rights, international law, transnational structures, and global education. At the same time, transcultural approaches are, *prima facie*, rooted in the ethos and tradition of the natural sciences, numerous social sciences, and even some areas within the humanities (e.g., philosophy). In short, transcultural studies cannot escape operating in the midst of ideological and political minefields. All the more, I would like to thank the contributors to this issue of *Humanities*, who did not shy away from taking risks in order to expound upon their particular understandings of transculturalism in interpretations of significant literary texts from the Middle Ages all the way to the 21st century.

I don’t consider it an accident that several contributions highlight the impact of the emergence of enlightened cultural cosmopolitanism at the end of the long 18th century. But the transcultural story of the post-Roman period did certainly not start there. One of the most impressive illustrations of the link between philosophical advances and transcultural identity is, to my mind, the first post-classical Enlightenment at the height of the Middle Ages, perhaps best exemplified by the Sephardic Jewish philosopher and scientist Maimonides, who, born in Cordova, traveled through much of North Africa and immersed himself deeply into the study of the Arab Enlightenment, served as Saladin’s personal physician, became a revered teacher in the Jewish communities of Morocco and Egypt and wrote his famous *Guide for the Perplexed* in Arabic. In the arts, we can find some reflection of this early episode of transculturality at the Sicilian royal court in *Palermo* of Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, e.g., the *Sicilian School* of poetry.

*Albrecht Classen* shows in his contribution that the late medieval Mediterranean world continued to inspire a transculturally enriched literature. Furthermore, the impact of the cultural encounters between the different religions, languages, and populations on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea reached far into its hinterlands, from the Middle East and the kingdoms of Niger and Mali to the world north of the Alps. The prose novels Classen discusses demonstrate how ‘German’ writers engaged the Mediterranean horizon. To what extent these late medieval novels comprise traits of transcultural aesthetics is indeed a fascinating question. At the center of Classen’s study are Elisabeth von Nassau-Saarbrücken’s *Königin Sibille* (1437), Thüring von Ringoltingen’s *Melusine* (1456), the Scottish Princess Eleonor’s novel *Pontus und Sidonia* (between 1440 and 1460), and the anonymously published *Fortunatus* (1509), which Classen calls the ultimate departure toward the transcultural in the Mediterranean context. It is Cyprus, the novel’s quintessential international location, to which *Fortunatus* returns after his grand tour through much of the known world; in Classen’s words: it is there where the Mediterranean and the transcultural meet and form a significant union. Classen concludes that specific foundations for a transcultural world emerge in the novels he examined, because their protagonists travel through concretely identifiable spaces, reflecting what Classen calls a significant “spatial turn” towards specific geographic terms and the assumption of an accessible multi-religious and multi-ethnic Mediterranean region.

*Claudia Nitschke*’s reading of Joachim Heinrich Campe’s *Robinson der Jüngere* (1779/80; *Robinson the Younger*) examines how Campe’s adaptation of Defoe’s novel explores the reconstruction of civilization for a commentary on contemporary social reality by offering (at the same time affirmative and challenging) transcultural perspectives on the most basic roots of civilized society. Campe’s novel is pedagogical and sets the story in a frame narrative that allows for it being reflected and discussed by the family’s children, in particular. Nitschke zeros in on the narrative evaluation of the emerging rules and norms and discusses the novel’s reflections on ‘innate’ and taught values to an extent within the context of Georg Lakoff’s and Mark Johnson’s ‘philosophy in the flesh’; i.e., the idea that basic moral metaphors root in bodily experience and social interactions that expose a high level of commonality over history and across cultures. Nitschke finds that “what bestows legitimacy on Robinson’s actions is the fact that they coincide with ‘values’ that are indeed shared (or are potentially shareable) by everyone, even the ‘savages’.” Only when Robinson meets this very premise, is learning and readapting possible. He can influence the process of valuing and its evaluative results, but he cannot interfere with the ‘blueprint’ that is shared by all human beings.” Thus Campe’s novel provides the kind of ‘first draft’ that Moral Foundation Theory emphasizes as a transcultural basis for experiential revisions and developments. One of the subliminal outcomes (as Nitschke carefully puts it) of Campe’s narration of his social experiment is that the basic interactive emergence of morality includes potentially all of God’s children and serves in this sense as a core position for universal human rights.

*Steven D. Martinson* introduces his literary analysis with a brief discussion of a number of theoretical approaches—e.g., Chladenius, Herder, Alois Wierlacher, and Wolfgang Welsch—that speak to conceptual distinctions between inter- and trans-culturalism. In Martinson’s assessment, the most striking distinction has been nicely condensed in Friedrich Schulze-Engler’s suggestion that “transcultural studies do not focus on what culture does with human beings but what different human beings do with culture.” Martinson then offers condensed readings of Lessing’s dramas *Die Juden* and *Nathan der Weise* and Goethe’s drama *Iphigenie auf Tauris* that focus on intercultural and transcultural dimensions. The basic underlying precept is that “the transcultural dimensions of literary texts cultivate transcultural mentalities”.

*James F. Howell* investigates the launch of a transcultural memory site: the place of Alexander von Humboldt in US history. To Howell’s mind, Humboldt’s brief visits to Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. in 1804, as well as his relations with the founding fathers were hardly as significant as current US and European historians claim. Why then, Howell asks, do we witness such emphatic appeals to reintroduce Humboldt into the functional memory (in the sense of Aleida Assmann) of the US? For Howell, this advocacy offers a peek into the potential of a transcultural fashioning of cultural

memory in a contemporary context. “The depictions of Humboldt in North America and Europe, and more importantly, the cultural motivations and aspirations behind those depictions, have aligned to such an extent that a transcultural space has been created in which multiple cultures can communicate about pressing needs and concerns while drawing on common points of reference.” The concerns that Howell isolates in recent US and European studies have shifted away from the 19th-century appreciation of Humboldt’s *Kosmos* into the political realm: Humboldt as “a climate change activist *avant-la-lettre*” or as “an embodiment of Enlightenment ideals and their potential”.

Arianna Dagnino offers the volume’s most comprehensive definition of the transcultural in the context of literary analysis. Here are some of the elements she includes: (a) Transculture denotes a person’s “freedom to live on the border of her ‘inborn’ culture or beyond it”; (b) The transcultural (or “transplace”) describes “an all-inclusive space of subjective consciousness and cultural possibilities which does not deny the formative importance of native cultures—and, to some extent, their accompanying worldviews—but at the same time allows an openness to the reception, integration, and negotiation of other cultures”; (c) The transplace usually depends upon a ‘transpatriation’ process, which “facilitates the development of a transcultural lens”, a decentering of all cultures in relation to all other cultures; (d) Transpatriation emphasizes the importance of “unlearning” identity formation strongly dependent on ethnicity, nationality, locality, or religious affiliation; (e) Transculture/ality carries an anti-ideological stance, a kind of ethical orientation on cultural overlap, exchange, fluidity and movement, rather than the dominance of difference; (f) “Though individualist in perspective, transculture/ality should not, however, be seen as a (somewhat natural) extension of the traditional liberal understanding of the individual. [ . . . ] As Epstein claims, in relation to our present, transculture ‘differs from both leveling globalism and isolating pluralism’.” As a case in point, Dagnino illustrates the development of a transcultural disposition and “its re-enactment in the form of transcultural narratives” in the novel *The Young Maronite* by the Libyan/Italian author Alessandro Spina.

Dagnino sorts out the novel’s transnational locales (Benghazi, Italy, Istanbul, and Sicily), its political setting (the beginnings of Italy’s colonial enterprise in Africa), its cross-cultural figurations, its proliferation of points of view, and the complexity of its linguistic codes and narrative genres. Dagnino describes the novel’s core “the art of unbelonging” as a “transcultural desire” (Maurizio Ascari), which takes the form of cultural translation. Regarding Spina’s narrative style, she distinguishes him as a transcultural writer from his “cousin species (migrant/diasporic/exile/postcolonial writers)” by emphasizing “his relaxed attitude when facing issues linked to identity, nationality, rootlessness and dislocation.

Eleonora Rao discusses Alice Kaplan’s fascinating ‘language memoir’ *French Lessons* (1993) as an autobiographical story of entering into the space of a second self via a linguistic order. Rao interjects Derrida’s caution that we are ultimately alienated from all linguistic orders, as all languages we know are not ours, but always the language of the other. The space of the self (the language we speak) is always somewhere else. Nevertheless Rao maintains that Kaplan’s ‘language memory’ (supported by her theoretical reflections on language) suggests at least this much: a preference for a language over another depending on the context and the emotion in question. Thus, French could, for instance, become Kaplan’s verbal safe-house, an instant refuge, and hiding place. Still, maintaining or regaining contact with the language of affect is vital. “Even though French had a salvific role in a phase of Kaplan’s life, as it was responsible for her ‘resurrection,’ for her ‘new skin,’ English remains the language of [in Kristeva’s words] ‘the body’s nocturnal memory’ the language of ‘the bittersweet slumber of childhood’”. But this does not mean that in Kaplan’s story an ‘authentic’ American self is lurking under a French one. Rather Kaplan confesses that she is grateful to her adapted languages “for teaching me that there is more than one way to speak, for giving me a role, for being the home I’ve made from my own will and my own imagination”.

Valérie K. Orlando’s article analyzes *Le Retour de l’Éléphant* (The Return of the Elephant, 2003) by the Tunisian author Abdelaziz Belkhodja and *Aux Etats-Unis d’Afrique* (African USA, 2006)

by the Djiboutian author Abdourahman A. Waberi as exemplary cosmopolitan narratives that demonstrate a transnational turn in African literature in the modus of ‘what-ifs’. These “hypothetical narratives” imagine a futuristic utopia/dystopia, where the world order has been reversed—failed, impoverished, and backward Western states that are confronted with an advanced, highly educated, and prosperous African continent; a constellation that allows for unique explorations of the potentials and drawbacks of globalization, migration, and other global trials of the 21st century. Orlando’s analysis highlights two postcolonial concepts: Abdelkébir Khatibi’s *une pensée-autre*—an emphatic postcolonial *being-in-the-world*, rather than being uniquely defined by tribe, nation or race—and Achille Mbembe’s theory of *Afropolitanism*—a global aesthetic *creolization* or *pluralization* of African modes of being-in-the-world. Although Orlando observes that the two dystopic utopian narratives remain “caught in a ‘double attachment’, in the middle of what Khatibi defines as ‘the constantly reemerging world of the colonizer’ and the ‘tribal Makhzen [state power] of the postcolonial nation’,” they, nevertheless, force Africa to confront its failings; and the West, “as it looks in the mirror and sees its image reflected back, is compelled to consider the potential that the African continent could offer if the tables were turned.” Furthermore, Orlando concludes that these Afropolitan novels partake in cosmopolitan ideals “that ground Africans’ being-in-the-world” and embrace a world citizenship that has left colonialism and post-colonialism behind.

James Tartaglia tries his hands on a philosophical approach to what he calls the transculturalist standoff, basically the Herderian paradox that humanism’s and, for that matter, transculturalism’s aim to transcend cultural baggage is itself rooted in a specific historical and geographical culture. Tartaglia stresses the difference between evaluative and descriptive judgments about the meaning of life or the lack of it and discusses two traditions: (a) “post-Nietzschean” philosophers and their reaction to Nihilism (Rorty is seen as the “clearest writer from this tradition”); and (b) the recent meaning-of-life debate, in particular, the attempts to circumvent the metaphysical aspects of the meaning-of-life question by posing it as a meaning-in-life question, which purportedly then could be judged according to objective (or subjective criteria) for a meaningful life. Tartaglia engages extensively in this debate (which is the topic of his most recent book), and argues that all its proponents ultimately fail, and so does the post-Nietzschean philosophy. Both continue to argue within a culturalist context and do not acknowledge that the life-is-meaningless position (nihilism) is not merely an evaluative, but rather a descriptive judgment. As soon as this is understood, Tartaglia believes, new avenues for a more productive approach to the transcultural standoff open up. The conflict of two humanistic thoughts (universal human values and the value of particularities) would no longer be “metaphysically principled, and we can return to the particularities of the case in hand. If we find some of their practices abhorrent, and think we have good reason to do so, then we try to persuade them of our evaluations while advertising their benefits. They can do the same with us. In the end, we hope, a rational, well-informed equilibrium will emerge. The concern that we could never find common ground fades against a common descriptive backdrop for our conflicting evaluations; there is a point of entry for debate, at the very least in physiological facts like pleasure and pain”. If the descriptive judgment of nihilism prompts concerns for ending up in “a Naziesque world,” Tartaglia reminds us that “the meaning of life has hardly proved a recipe for peace throughout the ages, and continues, in the hands of religious fanatics, to generate much of the trouble we find ourselves in today”.

Inez Baranay offers a personal account of how transcultural aspects of her life inform her fiction. “It is as if the transcultural were always the destination, though it remains to be seen if it proves to be another transitional space or one that is so comprehensively inclusive that it has no limits”. First, there is linguistic plurality—Hungarian, French and “the world of Englishes”—which prepares a transcultural space that ultimately opens up via the experience of migration: “in here everyone belongs because of their non-belonging [ . . . ]. But know this: it is not the end of difference. There’s space for a melting pot, there are countless versions of hybridisation and fusion (cultural, personal) and there is endless difference.” It is inner-city culture (here Sydney) that allows for a transcultural space that in turn allows for anything, except “heteronormativity.” So the writer moves from being labeled

experimental, then feminist, multicultural, and finally arrives at what she calls real diversity—“from the diversity of cultures to the even greater diversity of individuals.” Another line of development has the name “the global foreign” and traces the road “from travel writer to global soul.” Then there is the question if and how “the transcultural space: feeling foreign everywhere” can be a home: “As Helene Cixous wrote about dreams, ‘foreignness is a fantastic nationality’”. Finally there is the question if post-colonialism’s vocabulary—“categories of dominant and subordinate, coloniser and colonised, subalterns and superiors, orientalist and occidentalists” fits the transcultural. Here the answer of fiction has it somewhat easy and can be categorical: “Look, I answer, when we enter Transcultural Space we are in a space where such phenomena cannot exist. It’s a notional space, an ideal, and we can decide how it feels to live there. [ . . . ] And all of this *matters* in a world that needs ideals to be articulated”.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.



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