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The Trans/National Study of Culture: A Translational Perspective
ed. by Doris Bachmann-Medick (review)

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Reviews

The Trans/National Study of Culture: A Translational Perspective. Edited by Doris Bachmann-Medick. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014. Pp. viii + 271. Cloth €89.95. ISBN 978-3110333695.

This collection, which came out of a conference at the International Graduate Center for the Study of Culture at the University of Gießen in 2009, explores difficult challenges as well as fresh ways to create a transnational approach to studying culture that will break away from nation-specific models, especially from the dominance of Anglo-American and European theories and methods. The volume proposes that a translational perspective, using translation as an analytical concept, can open up current areas of research and foster new transnational ones.

In her introduction, Doris Bachmann-Medick, who is well known in cultural studies especially for *Cultural Turns. Neuorientierungen in den Kulturwissenschaften* (2006), points out the “crisis of a monolingual mode” (3). Since English is the dominant global language, a transnational study of culture, she believes, promotes Anglo-American approaches to the detriment of cultural studies written in other languages. To undermine assumptions that Anglo-American and European concepts and theories are universally valid and possess authority and prestige, Bachmann-Medick argues for “processes of localization” (4). While a “multi-local production of theory” can undermine hegemonic tendencies and emphasize diversity (9), a translational approach, by which she means “ongoing translations as negotiations, appropriations, and transformations” (18), can offer a path to a genuinely transnational study of culture. In the second introductory essay, Ansgar Nünning examines how approaches to the study of culture, for example, British cultural studies and German *Kulturwissenschaften*, are culturally and historically conditioned, underscoring that “the study of culture is itself very much culture-bound” (27). Cultural studies’ multiple perspectives and theoretical and methodological pluralism can cut across disciplinary boundaries, foster transdisciplinary relationships, and open up new areas of research. As he points out, however, “the development of genuinely transnational, or even trans-European, approaches to the study of culture is still a desideratum for future research rather than an established fact” (24).

The essays in the next section, “Conceptualizations and Histories,” develop issues raised in the introduction. The prominent subaltern studies scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty explores how as India modernizes it borrows and transforms some categories and practices from Europe that Indians make their own. He also points out that European ideas stemmed from particular historical and intellectual traditions that cannot claim universal validity. Jon Solomon urges the need for a vocabulary

that recognizes the fluidity of peoples and languages as well as the history of repression of difference, homogenization, and normalization undertaken by nation-states. He warns that although translation can provide a bridgehead in the study of culture and presupposes equality and equivalency, it can hide institutionalized asymmetries and power relations. Andreas Langenohl outlines the history of translation studies that now includes not only linguistic translation, but also questions of “intercultural convergence, translatability, and transferability” (96). In his view, translation, which by mediating between two different contexts also changes them, can be both a bridge and a boundary. Bachmann-Medick believes that it is essential to situate theories into their historical context. Using the concept of hybridity, she shows how, as it became universalized, it became dehistoricized and was even co-opted by business for marketing purposes. Translation therefore becomes “a crucial practice for connecting (universalizing) concepts back to historical life worlds and ‘local histories’” (130). Matthias Middell looks at traveling concepts and argues that cultural transfers produce new spaces and build networks across borders. Christina Lutter observes that translation transforms actors, texts, and objects. She supports employing diverse approaches to the study of cultures, “equipping a toolbox with which a variety of *studies of culture* can be undertaken that live up to the exigencies of their objects of study, contexts, and the people involved” (165).

The last part of the book, “Knowledge Systems and Discursive Fields,” contains case studies. Boris Buden criticizes the classification of an “Eastern European Study of Culture,” since it implies that eastern Europe is the cognitive “Other” and that the West is a norm “against which the peripheral, the provincial, is to be measured” (174). Christa Knellwolf King discusses how Australian cultural studies, adapting the British cultural studies model of empowering marginalized members of society, exposes the sexist and racist foundations of white Australian self-definition and undermines myths of Australia’s treatment of the aboriginal population. Rainer Winter looks at the history of cultural studies, specifically British cultural studies with its commitment to the social and political usefulness of the knowledge it produces. In his study of media and communication, Thomas Weber points to problems with what is translated. For example, for a long time there were no German translations of important works in media and communication studies. Even translations of such influential thinkers as Derrida, Lacan, and others experienced considerable delays in being translated into German. In the concluding essay, Birgit Mersmann examines rifts between visual culture and image culture studies and points out the irony that art history, which opposed the visual culture movement, has found ways to transform itself into transnational cultural studies.

To counter concerns about the hegemony of Anglo-America and Europe, several authors refer to important work by cultural studies scholars from other regions, such as Naoki Sakai from Japan and Néstor García Canclini, the Argentinian cultural theorist. Except for Chakrabarty, originally from India, however, the volume contains

no essays from cultural studies scholars outside of the Anglo-American, European, and Australian spheres. By including Chakrabarty, who was not listed in the original conference program on which the book is based, the editor clearly tried to introduce a variety of voices. If there had been space, more such voices could have strengthened the volume's transnational and translational focus. Overall, the book succeeds in highlighting many current challenges within cultural studies, and its thought-provoking essays with their different perspectives should foster lively debates about new directions in cultural studies.

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China und Europa. Sprache und Kultur, Werte und Recht. Edited by Walter Pape, Susanne Preuschoff, Wei Yuqing, and Zhao Jin. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014. Pp. vii + 337. Paper €99.95. ISBN 978-3110313246.

Published as the second volume in the book series "Chinese-Western Discourse," this volume takes on the ambitious task of examining the Chinese-European cultural encounters from various linguistic, cultural, economic, and juristic perspectives. Nevertheless, readers seeking discussions on transnational, transcultural dialogues between China and various European nations could be disappointed as the vast majority of the volume's eighteen essays (including two written in English) focus on the cultural differences and interactions between Germany and China alone. The twenty-one contributors to the volume are from various academic disciplines in Germany and China, eleven of whom currently work or have studied at the University of Cologne in Germany.

The first two chapters focus on comparative discussions from the perspectives of cultural studies and literary studies. Chapter 1, "Verschiedene Sprachen, verschiedene Kulturen, verschiedene Wissenschaften?," contains four essays. Qu Weiguo's discussion illustrates the complexity of the definition of difference due to language ambiguity, which explains the question mark in the chapter title. Heinrich Geiger examines the Chinese adaptation of the Western notion of identity in a cultural-political context. Focusing on the concept of language skepsis, Wei Yuqing's essay compares the Chinese Taoist classic *Zhuangzi* with "Chandos-Brief" by Hugo von Hofmannsthal. Zhao Jin attempts to deliver a comparative observation on the "language style" revealed in textual materials used for the purpose of promotion and advertisement by German and Chinese companies. "China und Deutschland im Kulturvergleich" contains Claudia Bickmann's essay arguing for the possibility of approaching Kant from a neo-Confucianist perspective, as well as Shi Fuqi's analysis of the Chinese reception of Ernst Cassirer in the 1980s. Thomas Zimmer's essay, the only one that extends the discussion beyond the Germany-China concentration of this volume, provides a unique and fascinating perspective that examines writings