

## *Editorial Note*

This issue of *Transcultural Studies* features two stand-alone articles analyzing circulations of concepts or religions and a themed section rethinking artistic contributions to knowledge production from a transcultural angle. Diverse in terms of disciplinary background (ranging from intellectual and missionary history to media studies, art history, and anthropology) and regional focus (including Japan, China, West- and Central Asia as well as the United States), the four studies highlight, each in their own way, the complex ways in which individual and collective agency is distributed in the contested creation of inescapably entangled worlds.

While sharing an interest in the efficacy of more or less visible Eurasian networks, the two historical essays opening this issue approach their respective topics on very different scales and with very different goals: one reconstructs a brief and seemingly insignificant moment in the history of translation to unsettle conventional units of investigation in the writing of intellectual history; the other reviews the span of more than a millennium to re-evaluate the connection between strategies of persuasion and the success and legacy of missionary activities. Despite, or perhaps because of, their pronounced differences both pieces illustrate the potential of a global outlook that understands the “global” as a multi-scalar perspective with sufficient granularity to inform and support both micro-historical studies and macro-historical inquiries.

David Mervart’s essay on early Japanese attempts to find an adequate rendering for the European notion of a “republic of letters” starts at the most microscopic level. Looking over the shoulders of a lonely translator struggling in late eighteenth-century Nagasaki to transpose this peculiar European metaphor to a context his curious Japanese audience may recognize as relevant to their own practices and concerns, the article throws the man’s labors into relief by zooming out from his scholar’s studio and situating them against the larger background of both Sino-Japanese and trans-Eurasian exchanges of knowledge and information in the early modern period. Migrations of people and texts, facilitated by the rise of print culture and crossing multiple spatial, linguistic, and political boundaries, are traced as material conditions of our translator’s troubles. At the same time, the circuits of sociability that made such movements possible are identified as indispensable social and intellectual conduits linking distant but in many ways comparable milieus. The eventual solution proposed by the weary translator evoked the spirit and practices valorized in the imaginary European “republic of letters” by equating this fictive community, no less metaphorically, with the seminar-style reading sessions of learned gentlemen common in private academies

throughout Tokugawa Japan. In Mervart's re-creation, this fleeting moment gains methodological significance as an eloquent reminder that the continuity which students of intellectual history, even those professing to operate in a global mode, are used to ascribe to epistemic communities need not coincide with linguistic or political entities. Rather than elucidating an episode in early modern "Japanese thought" the author's intricate tale recovers a mediated multilingual conversation connecting permeable worlds of learning located at both ends of the Eurasian landmass that defy simplistic characterizations in national or cultural terms.

The permeability of boundaries figures no less prominently in Thomas Ertl's comparison of the Nestorian and Franciscan missionary presence in East and Central Asia. Puzzled by the starkly different legacies and levels of success of these two distinct missionary efforts, the author traces the steps of a dazzling array of monks, traders, priests, and soldiers who travelled to the Far East to spread the gospel as well as the reverse journeys of converts, pilgrims, and emissaries seeking instruction or alliances with Christian leaders. This meticulous analysis pays equal attention to macroscopic reconstructions of the pathways along which better and less known mediators journeyed and microscopic re-creations of significant encounters in places as varied as Yangzhou, Baghdad, Xian, Quanzhou, Karakorum, Genoa, Ormus, the Tarim Basin, and the Mongolian steppe. Although invariably marked by the co-existence of multiple languages and religions, if not outright syncretism, hardly any of these scattered contact zones remained conducive to missionary activities for sustained periods of time. Likewise, the stability of the long-distance networks on which the missionaries relied depended on favorable conditions both at home and abroad. Ertl argues that in addition to their respective strategies of persuasion, both types of volatility must be taken into account when explaining the paradoxical results of the Nestorian and Franciscan missions: the relative success of the Nestorians in Asia that was soon overshadowed by their fatal loss of support in Mesopotamia on the one hand, and on the other the Franciscans' inability to leave a lasting mark in the Far East while decisively shaping European images of Asia and its inhabitants through their widely circulated travelogues and letters.

The second segment of this issue of *Transcultural Studies* features a themed section entitled *Rethinking Global Knowledge Production: Global Media Cultures—Distributive Creativity*, whose authors engage with what might be termed the participatory turn in contemporary art. Art history's move away from a history of style into the more amorphous field of visual culture can be seen as an attempt to make space for different media—prints, posters, video, film, and digital images. Apart from challenging the established methods of the discipline,

this privileging of forms of collective and collaborative production among artists, curators, technicians, scenographers, and playwrights has unsettled the notion of authorship that is premised on the modernist legacy of artistic autonomy as a guarantor of a work's authenticity. Contemporary collaborative art practice deploys the notion of "creativity" as a way of democratizing the elitist concept of "art." It reads the work as process rather than finished product and the viewer no longer as passive consumer but as participant in the continuing production of the work. Even a mass medium like television is equipped with technical possibilities of enhancing a mode of participation that—by blurring the distinction between sender and receiver—could promote a more reflexive stance. While socially collaborative practices have been largely seen as artistic gestures of resistance, as a refusal to capitulate to a politics of self-interest and a culture of the spectacle, a scholarly engagement with this form of "distributive creativity"—as the articles in this section show—has to grapple with a number of tensions that make up the matrix between producers, works, and functions. Moreover, by valorizing often intangible group interactions over the more tangible, definitive image, object, or exhibition, participatory art becomes a slippery field to research. Introducing the themed section, Franziska Koch points to the methodological challenges of investigating distributed agency and relational spectatorship from a transcultural perspective. What happens to a work when seen at another time and in another place through the prism of cultural difference? Does it become a site to negotiate that difference?

Samantha Schramm addresses many of these issues in her study of the exhibition *The People's Choice (Arroz con Mango)*, created in New York in 1981 as part of a collaborative enterprise between the artists' collective Group Material and the inhabitants of the Spanish speaking neighborhood of 13<sup>th</sup> Street, where a room was rented for the show. The author identifies multiple levels of agency involved in the production of artistic knowledge: collective curatorship within the artists' group, the agency of the local residents who chose objects seeped with private memories from their homes and brought them into the realm of the exhibition space, where they in turn became agents—Latourian actants—in the production and transmission of meaning. The choice of alternative viewing spaces far removed from the museum, Schramm argues, fosters a more intense, even haptic, form of viewing and transforms the spectator into a participant. And yet, as she points out, a series of tensions pervaded the exhibition: there was the difficulty in identifying the terms on which collective authorship gets negotiated, the struggle between institutionalized and informal curatorial agency, and not least the problematic situation of the objects themselves as the individual memories they embodied were in danger of being overlaid by a form of pre-packaged ethnicity. Paradoxically, the multiple possibilities of cultural reading rendered the exhibition into a transcultural space where the

objects mediated different understandings of culture—and where in the end their multiple stories, their references to countless places and times, militated against closed readings or the ascription of fixed identities within a given urban neighborhood.

From a disciplinary perspective, any analysis of art or media as engaged social activity requires analytical tools and a methodological approach that, at least in part, draws upon concepts of the social sciences, such as community, empowerment, or agency, to name but a few. Such an approach, combining anthropology with media studies, informs Cora Bender's investigation of the formation of a post-frontier, Native American popular culture around 1900, where she analyses participatory art as both a socio-political as well as a symbolic activity. Her article conceptualizes "distributed creativity" as a set of cultural and media strategies that took shape in the interstitial contexts of American nation-building and the frontier cultures, which were marked by axes of power along which circulation and exchange took place. Bender fleshes out the different strategies resorted to by Native groups to "stage" cultural productions, themselves imbricated in transcultural exchanges between groups within and beyond the reservations. Far from being passive observers of the emergence of new media or quasi-passive appropriators of their technical possibilities, Native Americans, Bender forcefully argues, were "there when media first happened" and their choices and strategies significantly contributed to its development. Mediatization in turn-of-the-century North America took place within a transcultural space of collaboration, transformation, and struggle across a field of unequal power relationships. A similar dynamic is still at work today: digital media, though an available resource that enhances the visibility and audibility of claims, continues to be controlled by powerful institutions and legal statutes.

The two articles in this themed section suggest that distributed creativity could engender a more fruitful and dynamic relationship between the political and the aesthetic. By using transcultural methods to query the material they investigate, both authors signal towards the potential of transcultural mobility and connectivity to generate subjectivities that would address the tension between containment in spaces, memories, or routines as well as overlapping identities that produce a desire to transcend the limits of historical location and to address the world. A world, as these and the two preceding articles in this issue show, that takes shape in and through such appeals, either as the concrete stage for human action or the abstract arena in which competing claims for the recognition of identities, ideas, and beliefs are adjudicated.

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