

Transcultural Field Notes

Sophie Florence, Ruprecht-Karls Universität, Heidelberg

During March of this year in Aotearoa/New Zealand, a white supremacist entered two places of peaceful worship and took the lives of fifty-one people. Those in the Mosques that day included both those who had recently chosen Aotearoa as home, and those for whom it always had been.¹ The terrorist left behind a manifesto, “The Great Replacement,” which listed a perceived global “invasion” of Muslims and non-white immigrants among his motivations, thus revealing a deeply skewed misunderstanding of history and migration. Aotearoa is, of course, a colonised country, and any “replacement” in Aotearoa’s history would certainly not be a replacement of pākehā (non-Māori New Zealanders) by Muslims. In fact, according to the Federation of Islamic Associations of New Zealand, the country’s national Muslim organisation, Muslim families began to settle in the country as early as 1769, and have thus been a valued part of the fabric of Aotearoa for almost as long as the earliest British missionaries.²

While Aotearoa was the chosen site for this attack and must claim responsibility for allowing such a vicious undercurrent of Islamophobia to build unchecked, the inspiration behind this attack as well as the multitude of problems that it has revealed are global and need to be addressed as such. For instance, in his manifesto, the terrorist describes his radicalisation during his travels in Europe, via engagement with identitarian movements in Germany, Austria, and France. One of the aims of this attack was to join the pantheon of alt-right “heroes,” and inspire others to commit similar acts of violence.³ Indeed, the content of this manifesto is almost identical to those of others who have committed similar yet geographically distant racially based mass killings, such as that of the recent El Paso shooter, and is expressed through a shared sceptical and cynical code of memes. The attack

1 Megan Specia, “The New Zealand Shooting Victims Spanned Generations and Nationalities,” *New York Times*, March 19, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/19/world/asia/new-zealand-shooting-victims-names.html>.

2 Eva Nisa and Faried F. Saenong, “New Zealand has been Home to Muslims for Centuries and will Remain so,” March 18, 2019, accessed June 12, 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/new-zealand-has-been-home-muslims-centuries-and-will-remain-so>. For the early history of Aotearoa and its religious make-up, see Geoff Troughton, “Missionaries, Historians and the Peace Tradition in New Zealand,” in *Te Rongopai 1814, “Takoto te pai!”: Bicentenary Reflections on Christian Beginnings and Developments in Aotearoa New Zealand*, ed. Allan K. Davidson, Stuart Lange, Peter Lineham, and Adrienne Puckey (Auckland: General Synod of the Anglican Church in Aotearoa New Zealand and Polynesia, 2014), 228–245.

3 For this reason, he is not named in this piece, nor will I provide a link to the manifesto.

in Aotearoa is, therefore, part of a disturbing and de-centred digital community of fascistically inspired violence.

These extremist communities and their violent acts do not occur in a vacuum, in many ways they are reflective of the mainstream debate and the ways in which people speak about immigration and race. The discourse of replacement and invasion has clear reference to Samuel Huntington's infamous and poorly researched *Clash of Civilisations*, which has recently been granted renewed support by the popular-culture philosopher Slavoj Žižek.⁴ Through the reach of these works and the publication of misguided articles in popular newspapers, it becomes clear that even those who would not actively wish harm on immigrants or unfamiliar peoples engage in the same misreadings and misrememberings that inspire violent offenders, and thus allow such ideologies to thrive.⁵ This problem is particularly apparent in the marked global increase in populist governments, which are in many cases founded on a shared discourse of invasion and pitch to a public that is primed to believe it.⁶

We in transcultural studies have the power to change this discourse. Those of us who have the great privilege of exploring the multiple worlds and unlikely connections that our reality has and continues to contain must accept the responsibility that comes with education, and shed the illusion that the change that we need is going to come of its own accord.

Undoubtedly, to change this discourse is a monumental task. However, as scholars we are able to see alternatives to what we have now, to other ways of being. Those of us who work with historical material know the ways in which life and complex societies can prosper without the damaging consumption that is slowly burning our planet alive; we know that as difficult as it is to imagine life without outbursts of fascist violence, it was also once difficult to imagine life outside of the divine right of kings. We in transcultural studies are particularly well positioned to create meaningful change, as the complexities of human migration as revealed by transcultural studies directly impact and assist those whose lot places them at the mercy of

4 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996); Slavoj Žižek *Refugees, Terror and Other Troubles with the Neighbors: Against the Double Blackmail* (New York: Melville House, 2016), 107. According to Žižek, "refugees come from a culture that is incompatible with Western European notions of Human Rights."

5 The trend of banal support for vicious ideology is of course well supported historically. For one instance, see Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1973).

6 Sontag has demonstrated the ways in which members of the public interpret images of suffering according to the political positions of which they are part. Susan Sontag, "Regarding the Pain of Others," *Diogenes* 1 (2003): 127–139.

violence, aggressive diatribes, and hostile governments. The view of culture as unconfined to nationalist borders, art as collaboration, and knowledge as produced via a series of asymmetrical encounters, are all powerful antidotes to the misguided views pushed by the populist discourse. Whereas the approaches characteristic of transcultural studies have been founded to question disciplinary boundaries within academia,⁷ we must also consider how we can effectively share this information with the public.

As an initial step in this direction, we have formed a new student group: Heidelberg Talks. The main goal of Heidelberg Talks is to apply the theories and methods of transcultural studies in order to reduce the ignorance, fear, and racism caused by the resurgence of xenophobic misinformation and propaganda. Thanks to generous funding from the Studierendenrat der Universität Heidelberg (Student council of the University of Heidelberg), and support from the MA in Transcultural Studies Fachschaft (MATS student council), over the coming semester we will host a series of public talks in Heidelberg. These monthly events will entail a guest lecture, followed by an informal and multilingual discussion session, facilitated by student volunteers, between members of the public and members of the groups under discussion. In these informal discussion sessions, we aim to shed classist expectations of politically correct language, and encourage participants to express and address their unaired fears before they can be exploited by hate-fuelled groups. We believe that this lecture series will simultaneously reduce the disconnect between the public and the university, and improve our own understanding of the concerns to which our discipline relates.

In July, we hosted the first of these events, entitled “Mediaevalismus und Kultur: Eine Genealogie von Thomas Jefferson bis zur Game of Thrones Generation” (Medievalism and Culture: A Genealogy from Thomas Jefferson to the Game of Thrones Generation). The myth of a historically white Europe is one of the factors that has led to the wide-spread fear that current trends of migration will have a negative impact on so-called “European culture”; and versions of this fabricated history are re-produced and utilised by the extremist groups discussed above. In order to draw attention to this problem, we sought to capitalise on the cultural moment generated by the end of the popular television series *Game of Thrones*. Our speaker, Russell Ó Ríagáin, demonstrated the ways in which the image of a white Middle Ages has been created and supported through works of fantasy and their ideological contexts. The informal discussion that followed focused on the ways that these fantasies echo throughout our current political

7 Monica Juneja and Christian Kravagna, “Understanding Transculturalism,” in *Transcultural Modernisms*, ed. Fahim Amir et.al. (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013): 25–26.

discourse, and how this problem might be addressed through the broadening of our literary canons. We concluded with a discussion on how to repackage such information for popular culture.



Fig. 1: Poster for the event “Mediaevalismus und Kultur,” July 19, 2019. Design by Wang Fengyu, PhD student East Asian Art History (copyright Wang Fengyu).

It is our intention to form a broad network of organisations with similar aims, and we are currently building associations with both discriminated groups and the organisations which aim to support them. For instance, we are collaborating with the *Dokumentations- und Kulturzentrum Deutscher Sinti*

und Roma (Documentation and Cultural Centre of German Sinti and Roma) in Heidelberg, and negotiating support from the *Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst* (German Academic Exchange Service, DAAD). Ideally, we hope to establish a lasting structure for such outreach. Our organisation also aims to support other student initiatives. For example, during October in Heidelberg, one of our members, Sharon Chi, will host a panel on stereotypes and international students. Using her own experience as an international student, Sharon aims here to nurture a truthful dialogue between local and foreign students, in order for us all to examine our own internalised assumptions. We hope that these initiatives are just the beginning of outreach from transcultural studies, and that our predecessors and teachers will lend their authority to our attempts.

Out of respect to the families of those whose lives were lost in Linwood and Al Noor Mosques, we wish to seize the possibility to transition *aroha* (compassion) into committed action for a different future. Our group is in its earliest stages, and we are still in need of volunteers. If you have ideas for topics or events, or wish to offer your time and expertise, please do not hesitate to contact us at heidelbergtalks@gmail.com.