

Editor's Note

This issue of *Transcultural Studies* brings together five fine studies with three different foci. Each essay argues with its own modern countertext, which helps sharpen its profile and highlights its relevance for present-day scholarly and public debate. And all five open the door to new questions about processes of transcultural interaction and their dynamics.

The articles by Bernd Schneidmüller and Rudolph Ng confront modern European and Chinese historiographies and public perceptions with historical records that have been pruned so as not to disturb a unified vision—that of an unbroken continuity of European identity in the former case, and of the victimization of China by the Great Powers in the latter. Once installed in their rightful place, these records bring forth new insights: Schneidmüller reveals different and greatly shifting medieval notions of European identity formed in relation to other continents of the world; Ng provides evidence of a close interaction between foreigners and Chinese officials in securing China's international interests, but also in convincing the Peking court that it had a responsibility for the welfare even of lowly Chinese coolies in Cuba.

The contributions by Nikolas Jaspert and Benjamin Zachariah focus on the definition of concepts that can be used to characterize transcultural actors and currents. Both use a case study approach to substantiate their arguments. Jaspert explores the notion of the cultural broker in mediating between political entities that were often committed to competing religions, while Zachariah, by uncovering the close connections between Indian nationalists and German National Socialists, argues for recasting our concept of fascism by discarding its Eurocentric frame so as to accommodate the transcultural interactions characteristic of this particular ideological repertoire.

Joyce Brodsky has cooperated with two artists, one, Rohini Devasher, sojourning in New Delhi, the other, Anjali Deshmukh, in New York, to explore transculturality as a lived process of crossing boundaries. In their life, work, and thinking, both artists are highly articulate actors who consciously live in a world where transcultural interaction is an accepted feature of everyday life. And yet, these normalized interactions still sit uneasily within inherited structures that are characterized by multiple and often overlapping boundaries: conceptual frames such as those demarcating the notions of art, science, or virtual realities; institutionalized structures such as nation-states, traditions, or museums, or ingrained expectations of the artist as the proactive

performer and the spectator as the passive recipient. Their dialogue with the art historian shows that their multiple crossings of boundaries proactively react to the pressures they feel from the persistent boundaries framing art.

While all of the contributions draw their conclusions from detailed source-based research, they also invite us to undertake further explorations. How, in the gradual formation of the consciousness of a world that encompassed the entire globe, did other geographically, culturally, religiously, ethnically, or even climatically circumscribed entities such as the “Muslim” or “Buddhist” world, “Persia”, “East Asia”, “India,” or “Asia” define themselves and each other and what was the range of changing or competing conceptions that were articulated? How did these articulations interact with each other? What came about when, for example, “Europeans” perused early Arab and Persian travelogues or the world map that Muhammad al-Idrisi drew for the Norman ruler Roger II in Palermo? What were, furthermore, the conceptual underpinnings of identifying these entities beyond the empty geographical signifier? And how were frames—such as the idea of climate as a determining factor—in turn negotiated in transcultural interactions? How did the Europeans become “white” or the Chinese “yellow” without themselves noticing or being asked?

Demonstrating the crucial role played by foreign nationals and even diplomats in an interactive process involving Chinese gangs and court officials that both started and ended the shipping of Chinese coolie labor to Latin America opens the door to a range of important as well as intriguing questions: was there indeed—and more than simply in principle—a level field for different nation states in the evolving system of international law so that even the Great Powers would support the cause of a weaker nation against one of their own if they felt it had a case? How does the judgment on the merits of the Chinese case relate to the Standard of Civilization that became codified in international law at this time? What was the role of these foreign nationals in recasting the Qing court’s perception of its responsibilities towards even the lowliest of its citizens in far-away Cuba? Was there a global levelling process that gradually entitled human beings—whatever their station and place—to some basic rights and what forms of activity and organization developed to help enforce this entitlement? What notion of its own responsibilities towards its people did the Chinese court have, and how did it react to and interact with the notions gradually encoded into international law?

The cultural brokers discussed by Jaspert mediate across frontiers, perceived by both sides as a dividing line between themselves and potentially hostile others. It is a role that was useful and perhaps even profitable, but because the purpose of these brokers was to mediate compromises rather than win decisive victories, it came with little glory and was often taken on by people

with little standing in the official hierarchy. The fact that rulers around the medieval Mediterranean made active use of such brokers shows that to them the familiar modern narrative of a medieval Mediterranean world exhausted peace, and the notion of mediators as haloed peace-bringers would not have sounded fitting. The metaphorical concept of the broker as used by Jaspert successfully groups a wide range of historical actors with limited institutional power—merchants, mercenaries, women, slaves, monks—based on their specific function in transcultural and transnational interaction. His study invites further exploration of the potential of this concept as an explanatory category in transcultural studies beyond its use in political and legal negotiations. Many of its core features (such as trust, protection from both sides, perceived usefulness, and value in facilitating interaction) also apply to a range of other actants including objects, practices, and concepts. One might even say that liminal areas, such as the Mediterranean Sea or frontiers, can act as brokers because they are accessible and known to both sides and facilitate communication between them without being committed to either.

Transcultural interaction does not take place in a utopian dreamland with everyone on his or her best behavior and harboring only the best intentions. It is often most intense in areas where one might like to see less of it. This certainly is the case with fascism, an ideological current with followers around the world during the inter-war years, which, after the Second World War, was recast as the direct precursor of Auschwitz. Communist critics followed the directives of the Comintern and branded their opponents according to a single perspective that saw fascism everywhere as a reaction of the same range of domestic forces to the same range of domestic problems and opponents. In doing so, they disregarded both the hugely different local conditions and origins of fascist movements in places such as India, the US, Italy, Iraq, Chile, Germany, England, France, Japan, or China, and the actual interaction among these movements regardless of their inherent differences. While this interaction shows that the involved actors consciously shared a “fascist” mindset (which was also the view of their Communist opponents as well as the various secret services tracking the activities of both of them) or were testing its fit for their own agenda, Zachariah’s study of the Indian subcontinent prompts us to ask: what was the main anchor for fascism’s attractiveness for the different actors espousing fascist ideas and connecting to fascist organizations? Was it, for example in India and other British colonies, Nazi polemics against British imperialism, going by the motto “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” (which has no intrinsic connection to fascism) rather than the claim to being part of a *Herrenrasse*? Was it, for example in China, not Nazi Antisemitism but fascism’s promise to provide an ideology for the masses that could turn them against Communism as well as offer forms of organization and propaganda that could match Communist efforts in these

fields? And how was China to negotiate fascism linked to Nazi Germany while fighting against a Japanese occupation, given that Germany and Japan were both part of the Axis alliance and Japan was advertising its role in China as liberating it from the Communist menace? How did ideological affinity and political calculation or even philosophy interact to have a sizeable contingent of Indian volunteers fight on the German side against the Soviet Union and to have Bose's Indian National Army try to liberate India from British colonial rule by marching into northern India with the Japanese Imperial Army? And, last but not least, how can we explain the place of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* at the top of the Indian bestseller list in our days?

Crossing boundaries, as Brodsky's article shows, is a provocative, creative, and liberating act. In all three aspects it can be constitutive of modern art and live up to its purpose. But crossing boundaries presupposes the boundary and the question is whether the crossing is as dependent on the boundaries as the boundaries are on the crossing. Evidently, there are many boundaries out there that cannot be eliminated by fiat and many more that one would rather not want to eliminate. (A human being randomly spraying pedestrians with bullets crosses boundaries of humane and legal behavior that one rather might want to keep in place.) In fields such as art, performance, fiction, or philosophy there are few hard obstacles to such crossings but the soft boundaries of tradition and habit, often reinforced by rewarding compliance and punishing transgression, can become formidable constraints. The field of Transcultural Studies as a whole crosses boundaries as a matter of course, while greatly benefitting from work done within the traditional boundaries of academic fields. Crossing boundaries unwittingly depends on and contributes to the perpetuation of these very same boundaries. The problem comes to a head in Brodsky's discussion and the artistic practice of Anjali Deshmukh and Rohini Devasher with Boris Groys' theory of the institution of the museum. Groys argued that actual or potential museumization was a key marker that separated art from objects as well as originals from copies, a process that recasts objects as "art". It has also been a key feature in the validation of objects for the art market. Does crossing the boundaries of the museum into public spaces or the World Wide Web provide a critical view of the limits of the museum, or does it aim at the elimination of this institution, and if so, will there be any markers of art and what would they be? The article prompts us to come to terms with differences in the kinds of boundaries as well as the dialectics between boundaries and their crossing.

Transcultural Studies is looking forward to further discussions of these issues.

Rudolf G. Wagner