

Editorial Note

This issue of our journal presents two individual contributions alongside the first part of a themed section that we plan to continue in our next issue. The individual essays follow the global linkages that shaped the literary and artistic worlds of Taishō era Japan and sustained the proliferation of street art in post-“Arab Spring” Egypt. While drawing on very different methodological inspirations, both illustrate the vibrancy of a perspective that suspends the focus on preconceived units of investigation and instead allows its material to determine the sites, scales, and pathways of inquiry. As such, they can be read, like many articles in our previous issues, as exemplifying, and at the same time embracing, the potential of transcultural studies. But our journal would miss its purpose if it operated merely as a platform propagating, or cheerleading, what its editors and many contributors regard as an overdue recalibration of the humanities. It needs to probe with equal rigor the limitations and blind spots of transcultural modes of inquiry and the losses their unequivocal endorsement may entail. It is in this spirit that the guest editors of our themed section set out to examine the ambivalent relationship between what they see as an emerging “transcultural paradigm” and established disciplinary practices. The multivocal and partly sobering assessments of this relationship in the four essays in this issue’s themed section, “Transcultural Studies: Areas and Disciplines,” highlight—no less than the two individual articles preceding them—that to remain fertile, a transcultural approach can never congeal into a portable set of universally applicable conceptual tools. Rather, it must be reinvented on a case by case basis, with as much empathy and ingenuity as one can muster, in critical dialogue with specific local and regional conditions.

The article opening this issue is a good illustration of such a dialogue. Starting from an apparent anomaly—the unparalleled interest that the collection *Cubist Poems*, written by the American painter Max Weber (1881–1961), attracted in the cultural world of 1910s and 1920s Tokyo—Pierantonio Zanotti recreates subtle shifts in the field of cultural production incited by Japan’s increasingly seamless integration in global art circuits. Although Japan, according to contemporary observers, continued to occupy only a marginal position in the international networks of cultural exchange, many modern urban intellectuals were keenly aware that the study and connoisseurship of European and North American art was one of the fastest and most profitable ways to accrue cultural and symbolic capital. Cutting-edge information on the “latest schools” of Western literature and art, which was particularly useful to improve one’s standing in the interconnected Japanese worlds of literature (*bundan*), non-traditional poetry (*shidan*), and painting (*gadan*), were circulated in a wealth of newly-established periodicals, many of

which positioned themselves as supporters of a decidedly modern and globally-orientated avant-garde. Zanotti analyzes the unexpected success of Weber's little-known poetry against the background of this conducive climate and disentangles the diverse threads that connect its reception to parallel and related trends. Once the appetite for cubist paintings had paved the way for adaptations of Weber's poems, which reached Japan amidst a wave of interest in futurist, vitalist, and post-impressionist ideas, his works quickly gained a life of their own and became intertwined with a "double logic of legitimization." According to this logic, his modestly innovative poems served as widely available material in Japanese discourses on new art and literature and as handy references for Japanese avant-garde poetry. It is tempting to describe this particular transcultural entanglement in transactional terms: Weber's poetry gained and consolidated its appeal thanks to the continued efforts of his Japanese recipients to borrow from it. The success of this mutually beneficial relationship resembles similar associations, not only in the worlds of painting and poetry, but also in the fields of philosophy and science. The same is true for its decline, as the convenient arrangement did not last long. Soon, some Japanese critics accused Weber's poems of mediocrity, a clear sign, according to Zanotti, of how fast they had become full and equal members of an increasingly globalized avant-garde scene.

Concomitant with transcultural studies' refusal of the notion of "pure" cultures, critical studies of visuality remind us that all "visual" media are mixed, in that they invariably mobilize other senses, especially tactility and orality, and their memories across time and space. Even the most canonical of genres function in relation to language, are contingent on their viewers' knowledge of a context or a story to understand their message. Building on this premise, Saphinaz-Amal Naguib investigates the proliferation of street art in the urban settings of Egypt during the political ferment of the "Arab Spring" as part of a nexus between an oral heritage of vernacular poetry and popular sayings, political slogans, and activist performances. Their messages, she argues, translate into material forms of graffiti and calligraphitti; they acquire a specific affective resonance as they reclaim and reshape urban space through their active and transfigured presence. Though the artists who created these interventionist works were trained in established institutions of art and continue to build on learnt practices, their projects have charted a place in an expanded field of post-studio engaged or participatory art that connotes the involvement of large numbers of viewers-*cum*-participants as opposed to a one-to-one relationship between the beholder and the work. The engaged public thus becomes part of the material and medium of such a politicized aesthetic. Art practices of this kind do not generally enter the commercial circuits of art, even as, in the examples presented by Naguib, they continue

to be identified as projects by individual artists. Here, however, the artist is conceived of less as a producer of a discrete, portable object, but rather as a producer of a political situation at an “opportune moment where time and action meet,” one mediated through the materiality of the work that, for all its ephemerality, functions as a mnemonic device. Yet, as Naguib demonstrates, materially ephemeral art acquires a non-material afterlife through digital media, where it circulates globally on Internet platforms and can stake a claim to recognition as part of Egypt’s intangible heritage. The implications of reinstating a frame that invariably assimilates heritage to a consensual national memory is an aspect that the paper does not problematize, perhaps because it is still too early to envisage the future lives of this corpus. Implicit in this study are a further set of questions about contemporary visual practices that consciously work to undermine the boundaries between artistic creativity and knowledge production. The examples of street art studied here sensitize us to the specific, “undisciplined” texture of visual thinking that can spawn forms of knowing which can overlap but not be conflated with mainstream disciplines, even as it draws upon their resources such as texts, writing, archives, and oral traditions. Such knowledge acquires a force of its own, unpredictable and incipient in any space—urban or rural, derelict or wasteland—and whose dynamics await exploration.

The field of transcultural studies, systematically researched during the past years not only at the Heidelberg Cluster “Asia and Europe in a Global Context,” now resonates in multiple directions. This issue’s themed section, planned in two parts, offers a forum to present and debate the diverse perspectives that inform our young field. The collection focuses on the nexus between transcultural studies, regional expertise, and disciplinary formations to deliberate on the usefulness of a transcultural approach as a critical lens to investigate and question disciplinary as well as institutional practices in the humanities. Introducing the essays in this issue, Daniel G. König and Katja Rakow draw attention to the many uses of the term “transcultural” in a variety of contexts and disciplines: uses that, inevitably, are marked by equally varying degrees of scholarly rigor. The genealogy of the term “transculturation” goes back to the 1940s, with Fernando Ortiz’s work on sugar and tobacco cultures in colonial and post-colonial Cuba. Since then the field has integrated more recent theoretical approaches, notably the linguistic-cultural turn and postcolonial studies in general, whose insights it seeks to refine and take forward. König and Rakow point to the possibilities of a transcultural approach but also highlight the exceptional challenges faced by researchers and teachers who seek to engage with transcultural studies’ tenets, an aspect the authors see neglected in more euphoric embraces of the field’s potential. At the same time, the introduction implicitly draws attention to the value of transcultural studies as a locus of criticality that questions the premises

and methods of existing disciplines and seeks to open them to new questions, to sharpen their tools rather than dilute their rigor through experiments with an insufficiently defined interdisciplinarity.

Following from Ortiz's move to disconnect race or ethnicity from culture, transcultural studies takes on a fuller critique of conceptualizations of culture as they have come to be circumscribed by the political and territorial borders of modern nation-states. Nation-building processes, in turn, have fundamentally shaped the formation of disciplines in that they have fashioned the building of archives and university curricula, including the disciplinary formations and area studies discussed by the authors of this themed section. One consequence of the creation of such taxonomic fields as pedagogical props of modern nations is that research problems have been largely defined according to individual regions or single disciplines, each treated as a self-contained unit. This leaves us with a host of unasked questions, unstudied relationships, and an equally large number of anomalies that do not fit into existing explanatory patterns. Transcultural studies provides us with an analytical mode to describe and theorize processes either overlooked or designated by concepts that are not sufficiently precise or end up as theoretical straightjackets into which a whole range of experiences of circulation and encounter come to be squeezed. While investigations of transcultural processes are about circulation, connectivities, or dealing with plurality and difference, it is the critical potential of the approach, namely to overcome the constraints of methodological nationalism by engaging with the epistemological foundations of disciplines, that makes it a valuable methodological tool.

The first part of our themed section exploring the nexus between transcultural studies and the disciplines starts with three essays examining the close but uneasy relationship between transcultural inquiry and area studies. All three examine fields of inquiry that used to be, and in some cases still are, housed in faculties or departments of "Oriental Studies." Despite these shared and by now much maligned origins, their contributions to and uses of transcultural perspectives display notable differences, rooted in part in their specific disciplinary histories, partly in the distinct social, political, and ideological trajectories of the regions they scrutinize, and also in the changing place of the humanities in the disciplinary pecking order. Read in conjunction, the three case studies add a much needed transcultural angle to discussions of an issue recently raised with renewed urgency by Sheldon Pollock, namely, "the trouble with areas and how to discipline them."¹

1 Sheldon Pollock, "Areas, Disciplines, and the Goals of Inquiry," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 75, no. 4 (November 2016): 913–928.

In his investigation of the scholarly field of Islamic studies, constituted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Daniel König draws our attention to the transcultural phenomena—encounters, exchanges, and networks that unfolded in the wake of migration and conquest over several centuries—intrinsic to this geographically vast and culturally diverse domain. Such an observation of historical phenomena does not automatically translate into an analytical approach that aims to find appropriate methods to unravel the dynamics of these transcultural processes or evolve a set of concepts to plausibly theorize them. Instead, as König demonstrates, prevailing scholarly paradigms in Islamic studies, though they have registered several shifts, display a tendency to congeal into positions overwhelmingly preoccupied with plotting the tensions between identity and alterity, between “Islam and the West.” The article zooms into a “transcultural crossfire” between Orientalist and Occidental positions, the latter a blanket term for nationalist-nativist resistance to a putative “Western conceptual imperialism” under which, according to König, a transcultural approach might be subsumed. The account of this “crossfire” turns out to be a demonstration of an appropriation and deployment of similar arguments on both sides that mirror each other, as their modes of othering draw on shared assumptions underpinning concepts of religion, nation, and culture. Instead of stopping at this point, it could be argued that the usefulness of a transcultural view lies precisely in its ability to take us beyond this hall of mirrors with its endless, mutually sustaining reflections of the other and reaffirmations of the self, towards comprehending the workings of such complicities between seemingly opposed camps. Can these crossfire-like positions that draw on anti-modernist critiques of liberal capitalism that we also encounter globally—among Arabs, Chinese, Japanese, as well as Europeans—be studied as a broader transcultural history? Can narratives that appear to inhabit disparate domains be placed on a common matrix and be researched as part of a network of circulating knowledge, produced both within and outside of academia, and patterns of argument that different nativist groups across the globe partake of, even as their individual articulations retain a cultural specificity? The logic of these questions can result in framing units of investigation beyond single, sealed entities to examine the formation of a phenomenon by following the thread of accounts that may intersect, converge, and engage with each other.

Chinese intellectual history, the subject of Pablo Blitstein’s essay, can be regarded as another branch of the non-European regional studies that has become enmeshed in a close but uneasy relationship with transcultural studies. Part of this unease, according to Blitstein, may be the result of uncanny affinities. While its roots can be traced back to the polyglot and indeed quite “transcultural” traditions of classical sinology, Chinese intellectual history,

as it has come to be practiced since the 1980s, is a more immediate heir to a presentist conception of “area studies” that limited its tasks to offering historical explanations for contemporary developments. The institutionalized frame of reference for such explanations and the default unit of investigation was the modern nation. Blitstein traces the not always successful efforts to overcome the confines imposed by this methodological nationalism through the various “turns” that have animated intellectual historians over the past two decades (global, material, spatial). Many of the arguments they put forward resonate with concerns at the heart of a transcultural agenda, at least if the latter is detached from its own associations with nationalist or culturalist causes in postcolonial Latin America or post-communist Russia. Yet, even if the two fields are beginning to converge, they still have much to learn from each other. Transcultural studies can help systematize the scattered critiques of methodological nationalism that intellectual historians have formulated in their works, for example by supporting their rejection of static notions of “nations” or “cultures” with what Blitstein calls a kinetic and relational “social ontology,” which sees such formations not as causes but as results of human interaction and exchange. Intellectual historians, in turn, can provide hard empirical evidence for the strong claims of this ontology, for example by highlighting the foundational role of relationality for the emergence of medieval Chinese literary cultures. The two fields thus appear as natural allies. But as long as their overlapping agendas are not accepted as the default mode of humanistic inquiry, they share a temporary interest in retaining their distinct identities. For the time being, the moniker “transcultural” remains an aspirational marker of an unfulfilled critical purpose.

Hans-Martin Krämer’s essay on the history and prospects of a transcultural mode of inquiry in the field of Japanese studies takes up several questions raised in slightly different terms by the two previous contributions. While focusing on developments in the second half of the twentieth century, Krämer starts out by reminding us that European studies of Japan were never burdened with as much “Orientalist baggage” as their Islamic and Chinese counterparts. From the outset, the field was shaped to an unusual degree by co-production. Less central to assertions of European identity, it was pioneered by long-term residents of Japan who readily acknowledged their debt to local interlocutors. Its entry into European universities was also fostered by Japanese scholars who already in the late nineteenth century participated in academic conferences throughout Europe and regularly published in European languages. One paradoxical effect of this manifestly transcultural beginning was the consequential impression that Japan had little in common with its Asian neighbors and needed to be understood as an isolated entity. Throughout the twentieth century, Japanese and European studies of Japan—as in the case of Islam often mirroring one

another's arguments—contributed to the persistence of this co-produced myth. Even scholars who explicitly rejected claims of Japan's uniqueness, Krämer argues, often failed to entirely shed its legacy. This holds particularly true for comparative inquiries but extends also to studies highlighting contacts that trace connections as unidirectional flows. Works informed by modernization theory confirm it by removing Japan from its regional context and measuring it with an allegedly neutral Euro-American yardstick. Studies inspired by the idea of multiple modernities fortify it by basing their claims on a reified image of "Japanese culture." And explorations of the world system or the "great divergence" revive it by sidelining Japan ahistorically and equating (East) Asia with an always already dominant China. Krämer's article demonstrates how a transcultural approach can advance a powerful critique of both the myth and its often unrecognized legacy. However, a transcultural perspective can do more than debunk essentialist delusions such as that of Japanese uniqueness. As the author shows in his brief outline of the neglected contribution of Islam to the formation of Japanese pan-Asianism, it can also direct our attention to phenomena that have quite literally no place in studies conducted within the confines of conventional cultural and civilizational boundaries. As such, it opens up new spaces of inquiry that call for more varied methodological tools and more precise analytical languages.

In the final contribution to this themed section, Esther Berg and Katja Rakow observe that the emergence of religious studies as a field of scholarship was, not unlike Japanese studies, itself a product of transcultural encounters. Such an observation can hardly be contested; indeed it might be regarded as a truism applicable to several disciplines in the humanities and social sciences—history, anthropology, art history, archaeology or philology—that were all constitutively formed or recast within a context of the global entanglements of their times. Of greater pertinence, it would seem, is the distinction that needs to be made between what the authors designate as the "transcultural component" of their field and the analytical challenges that it presents for research. Berg and Rakow demonstrate the uses of a transcultural approach with an account of the formation and global spread of Pentecostalism. They argue that such a perspective can bring several lesser-known dimensions to light; for instance, it allows for reinstating different scales of practice that in turn enable an investigation of such points of intersection and negotiation that might get flattened when operating on a single scale, be it global, national, or local. The authors deploy this method to "decentre" the prevalent narrative of origins that situates the birth of the Pentecostal movement in a 1906 meeting at Azusa Street in Los Angeles, from where it is said to have spread to the rest of the world. Instead, they make a case for studying the "glocal origins" of the movement as a step towards dismantling a diffusionist

paradigm. In other words, they propose that the meetings at Azusa Street were already transcultured and must be studied beyond the confines of a purely local context by linking Azusa Street to a network of Christian missions across the globe. Circuits of exchange—newspapers, journals, missionary travels, and correspondence—had since the mid-nineteenth century connected Christian communities in Africa and Asia to Pentecostal centres, of which Azusa Street was an important hub, one that developed over a long period, as it partook of circulating ideas and practices. The proposition to “decentre” the “Western origins” of Pentecostal Christianity could be pushed even further to eschew the question of fixing “origins” altogether, because, when viewed through a transcultural lens, such a line of inquiry is perhaps not the most productive agenda. Moreover, even as we admit that the ability to navigate multiple scales, thus avoiding simple binaries between the global and the local, gives the transcultural approach an explanatory edge over concepts such as transnationalism, translocality, or methods used in global history, denominations of scale assume a further complexity that needs to be considered. Scale frequently forms a field of tension between the perspective of actors and the processes in which they are involved. A region or even a nation can be perceived as a “locality” from the viewpoint of the agents, for whom it may be a site to be recuperated, for instance from an empire, or an anchor against fragility that is seen as resulting from phenomena on a macro-scale. A similar argument can be made for places designated as “centres” or “peripheries”: examples cited by Berg and Rakow, drawn from individual narratives and re-imagined geographies of Pentecostalism, urge us to read the use of such terms as forms of self-positioning and therefore as one more factor to be woven into the web of transcultural relationalities.

A transcultural perspective, we may deduce from these evocative essays, is not so much about a received or ready-made procedure, but rather an approach that has to be tested, forged, refined, and recalibrated repeatedly in the course of research. Particularly in view of this useful reminder, we hope that the articles of this themed section will invite responses as well as further contributions probing the promises, weaknesses, and side effects of the inevitably diverse transcultural perspectives that they began to highlight here.

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