

# Transcultural/Transculturation

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The concept of transculturation designates the processes of transformation that unfold through extended contacts and relationships between cultures. The term and its cognates transculture/transcultural/transculturality are an explicit critique of the notion of culture, as it emerged in the humanities and the social sciences in tandem with the idea of the modern nation. The nationally framed understanding of culture continues to rest on the postulate that lifeworlds of identifiable groups are ethnically bound, internally cohesive, and linguistically homogeneous spheres.

Coined by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, the concept of transculturation undermines the stable nexus posited to exist between culture and the territorial container of the nation-state by drawing our attention to the processuality of cultural formations (Ortiz 1995; see also Juneja 2023, 23–33). Even as its genealogy goes back to Ortiz's writings of the 1940s on the history of Cuba, the notion of transculturation has only now matured to bring forth a distinct theoretical paradigm. Both an episteme and a toolbox, this new ontology of culture forms the kernel of a theory of transculturation that is distinct for its process-oriented dynamism and its concreteness. While transculturation pre-supposes for a large part spatial mobility, it is neither synonymous with nor reducible to it. Rather, its focus on developments through which forms emerge within circuits of exchange make it a field constituted relationally. The ostensible 'cultural' that a theory of transculturation takes as its object is not only fundamentally made through modes of transculturation in the first place, but continuously remade through all subsequent phases of its existence. Processual and continually morphing, such an ontology of culture is also concrete in that it is formed from the ground up, precisely through its interaction between units that are constituted through these very processes. Such a theory endeavours to develop a precise terminological apparatus to describe the many kinds of interaction that constitute its core, rather than subsuming them all under blanket concepts, for instance 'hybridity' or 'flow' or 'circulation'. In this sense, the transcultural can show the way to refine the global by infusing it with greater precision, by allowing scholarship to closely study the dynamics of connection and interruption, of cosmopolitan exchange and antagonism, interaction and refusal, as well as to analyse the morphologies of friction, rejection, or resistance. A transcultural perspective anticipates the issues highlighted by the concept of global dis:connect that has drawn our attention to unrealized or interrupted connections as inseparable from the processes of entanglement, as indeed 'central formative components of it'. Responding to the call for a 'decidedly trans- and interdisciplinary engagement with the concept of disconnectivity' (→ **Introduction**), a theory of transculturation

can contribute to developing a much-needed repertoire of terms and concepts to make sense of disruptions or hiatuses. A close analysis of the processes that unfold under the blanket description provided by the latter terms can produce concrete understandings of the multiple possibilities inherent within constellations that are constituted by an interplay of seemingly contrary movements.

Ortiz's investigation of nation-building processes in Cuba draws our attention to an ever-present tension familiar to us today: the coming into being of a national community was, on the one hand, a product of a transcultural dynamic that followed from migration, multilingualism, and ethnic plurality, all of which were constitutive of the identities of that community. On the other hand, Ortiz confronts these processes with such attempts to stabilize their unruliness by seeking recourse to representations of an integrated cultural unit, cast as the bounded space of the nation and the ideological basis for all fixed identities. The invention of a past considered uncontaminated by cultural contact is analysed by him in terms that point to the workings of power within groups that cut across the coloniser-colonised divide, a perspective that avoids the trap of thinking in binaries that has characterised nationalist positions as well as much of postcolonial and, more recently, decolonial analysis. Equally important, such a tension urges an investigation of the paradoxes and frictions inherent within nation-building processes, which encompass practices of memory-making, or heritage formation, or the challenges of post-migration (→ **Postmigration/Migration**). All of these are subject to contrary pulls between transculturally formed identities of individuals and groups that make up the so-called imagined community and attempts by nations to manufacture a particular version of history by privileging certain strands of culture as authentically national, while marginalizing others.

The above analysis signalled to the predicament of many anti-colonial national movements across the globe. In other words, the nation offered the ground on which a politics of emancipation could be staged, while at the same time it was active in the production of notions such as separate, pure cultures, the authentic native, and bounded identities, all to serve as artifices of power. Viewed in this light, the explanatory potential of the transcultural as an analytical tool exceeds that of the 'transnational', frequently used in global studies to transcend the boundaries of individual nation-states, without, however, disrupting the nexus between the entities 'nation' and 'culture' by unpacking the former and delineating its internal faultlines. Furthermore, viewed from a transcultural perspective, the relationship between the national and the global is more complex and contradictory than conventionally viewed in much of global history. This is owing to the nation's role in resisting the violence of conquest and colonisation, on the one hand, combined, on the other, with its need to stabilise its self-representation through a play of power, dispossession, and everyday violence. The latter, in turn, is sustained by ideologies

and technologies of power, imbricated in global/transcultural attachments. In the domain of art history, a transcultural perspective refuses the choice of the nation as a unit of investigation and characterising principle of the enterprise of art making, even while acknowledging its potential as an imagined realm for artistic positions, a life-giving force in the face of colonialism and neo-colonialism. When adopted as an automatic gesture to frame surveys and units of art historical investigations, the analytical category of the nation is bound to lapse into the ethnographic reflexes that underpin such a choice. And yet, the category of the nation can equally function as a point of critical interrogation, built around questions rather than answers. It can as well serve as an opportunity to redraw the matrix of references within which concepts of culture might be recast.<sup>1</sup>

The writing of global histories today has moved beyond the macro-level analyses that had characterised approaches of the early phases of the paradigm. More recently, studies of the global have engaged in a productive cross-fertilization with micro-historical perspectives, to develop methods with which to negotiate multiple scales (see Trivellato 2011; Epple 2012, 37–47; Berg 2013, 1–13). In addition we witness a positional shift within investigations that now take as their starting point and primary focus regions that were once regarded a periphery of Euro-America, enabling the field to overcome the limitations of both a national framework as well as the provincialism of a single, sealed ‘area’. Methodological impulses from a theory of transculturation can contribute to further refining the procedures of global history, as they address, in particular, the challenge of finding explanatory paradigms for dealing with processes which, following mobility and encounter, are formed through a tension between cultural difference and historical connectivity. Such processes might appear paradoxical in that they combine accommodation, partial absorption, refusal, or engagement on different levels with cultural difference, without however producing synchronicity. The agenda to look for cultural commensurability across distances has frequently led to exclusion or repression of aspects of distinctiveness or the non-commensurable. What are the analytical tools that would help us come to grips with the tension between the commensurable and the incommensurable? And what constitutes the ‘commensurable’? Is it a category that depends on the intellectual and philosophical positions of modern scholarship? The importance attached to the inclusion of artistic practice within the concept of global dis:connect is motivated by a similar concern, that is, to recuperate absent or refused communications that do not always leave a trace in official archives. The project to analyse dis:connection as an ‘aesthetics of omissions’ (→ **Introduction**), or to study the contrary dynamics of forced displacement and fresh place-mak-

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1 These reflections have been fleshed out in detail and using empirical case studies in Juneja 2023.

ing that marks experiences of forced migration, can in turn provide a synergetic impulse to new directions within transcultural studies that investigate enmity as relational and quintessentially ambivalent (Becke, Jaspert, and Kurtz 2024).

The following example from the study of global modernism with a focus on its trajectories in South Asia can serve to illustrate the question of unrealized connections in the face of cultural difference. Following prolific research, recent art historical scholarship has effectively redrawn the map of aesthetic modernism to tell that story, no longer as a single chronicle of diffusion from a centre to absorptive peripheries, but as an expression of a connected, multivalent and, at the same time, uneven modernity. Scholars of South Asia have uncovered copious amounts of material to throw light on artistic experiments that unfolded at several sites across the Indian subcontinent, at the same time drawing our attention to stories of contact between individual actors across the boundaries of the colonial world. Prominent among these was the Austrian scholar, Stella Kramrisch, who in the 1920s became an important scholarly voice and cultural mediator in the Indian art world. In the years she spent in India, she introduced the students and faculty at the universities of Calcutta and Santiniketan to modern European art together with the language of formalist art criticism in a move to free Indian objects from the colonial domains of ethnology or antiquarian studies, and instead to dignify them as ‘art’. The same approach informed her writings in German where she sought to demonstrate to a European readership that Indian art was neither reducible to ‘ornament’, nor to be studied as a source of unspoilt forms that promised a new beginning for Western modernism.<sup>2</sup> It was in this context that Kramrisch was instrumental in curating an important exhibition in Calcutta, today known as the Bauhaus exhibition. In recent years, this show has been singled out as a foundational moment in the history of artistic modernism, and designated as a harbinger of a ‘cosmopolitan avant-garde’ (Bittner and Rhomberg 2013; see also Mitter 2007)<sup>3</sup>—a valorisation that, however, calls for a closer, critical look. The exhibition, which opened in December 1922 in the rooms of the Indian Society of Oriental Art in the heart of colonial Calcutta, brought some 250 works of expressionist and abstract art from Weimar to Calcutta. Alongside of these, a cross-section of Indian artists from Calcutta featured in the event. Their work was informed by varying interpretations of what it meant to be ‘modern’; yet it did not reveal an overt resemblance to or even affinities with the formal language and pictorial concerns of Bauhaus modernism. What united the two was a shared rejection of academic naturalism, introduced to India via colonial art schools. The art world in Calcutta at the time was divided between those

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<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed account, see Juneja 2023, 162–71. See also Ziebritzki 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Mitter takes the exhibition as the starting point for his account of an Indian avant-garde.

who painted in this 'Western' idiom and those who – from a nationalist position – rejected it in favour of a more nativist return to pre-modern styles. The two groups of works – by German artists of the Bauhaus and Indian modernists – could thus be brought together by a curatorial hand, even though their motivating impulses differed and their understanding of modernist form remained pictorially dissimilar. At the Indian Society of Oriental Art, the two sets of works were displayed in adjacent but separate rooms, so there is little evidence of any form of encounter. If anything, the event of 1922 made visible the deep faultlines within the Calcutta art world, highlighting the retraction into 'Indianness' as one claim to modernity. The Calcutta Bauhaus exhibition of 1922 furnishes an example of how certain global processes, while propelled by the humanist-cum-vanguard spirit of individual actors – in this case, Kramrisch and the polymath scholar Rabindranath Tagore – falter in the face of contingencies of local practice and divisions within the sites where they unfold. As a result, the intended aims of individual initiatives prove to be at best only partially realisable. This in turn raises questions about the criteria scholarship deploys to judge the long-term effects of such processes. Our evaluation – in this case the valorisation of the show as a global 'cosmopolitan' undertaking – often tends to rest, at least in part, on specific intellectual predilections and philosophical convictions of our times. Examples such as this show the way to unpacking the morphology of transculturation, and to make place for failed connections, so that we can speak more precisely across disparate contexts (Juneja 2023, 163–167). Studying dis:connectivity in turn promises to carry these questions further by transcending the scope of early globalisation studies that were often ideologically invested in the search for models of syncretic phenomena.

Negotiating the tension or the shifting relationships between the culturally commensurable and the non-assimilable can also help to recuperate those concepts belonging to disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, which have undergone erasure or flattening due to the diffusion of modern disciplinary taxonomies across the globe, now treated as universal. To take an example from art history: concepts such as 'vision', 'materiality', 'originals' and 'copies', or even the concept of 'art' – are all used ubiquitously today in art historical discourse that takes place mainly in English or another European language. Do they, however, stand for a shared history and universe of meaning across the globe? Methods of transculturation enable us to look at concepts as migrant notions without, however, remaining trapped in a binary of assimilation versus epistemic violence; the latter is often held to be inflicted by imposing 'Western' analytical frames on 'non-Western' cultures. It can instead be argued that when concepts migrate – as many did from the Western world to Asian contexts – they disconnect, at least partially, from their original moorings, while taking root in new cultural settings. In such a process, conceptual categories absorb other subterranean notions, or become entangled with

different practices and understandings. Studying these dynamics requires, first, taking a close look at the negotiation between different linguistic sources; secondly, it necessitates extending the formation of a concept beyond purely lexical definitions – in particular for art history – to investigate the interaction between text and visual practice that is crucial to meaning-making and the production of a society's conceptual knowledge. The transcultural trajectories of the term 'art', for instance, bring to light once more a dynamic of absorption, accommodation, fragmentation, and friction, which can serve as a lens through which to make sense of conflicts that erupt, increasingly on a global scale, around images and objects and cannot be contained within a discourse of secular enlightenment versus religious fundamentalism (Flood 2002, 641–659; Mahmood 2009, 836–862; Juneja 2018, 161–189).

A cross-fertilization of a global history of dis:connections with a theory of transculturation can induce a salutary reflection of the underlying epistemic foundations of our disciplines, once we query the understanding of culture they transport. Such a reflection would in turn point the way to non-hierarchical, critical, and capacious disciplines. By privileging an approach that historicizes differences and locates these in a field of forces, transculturation offers a potential tool for unravelling connections, differences, and frictions that govern the relationships of regions across the globe.

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