

The problems with delimiting the notion of transculturality in literary studies

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Transculturality is hardly a new term – it has been in use for more than 30 years since its introduction to the humanistic discourse by Wolfgang Iser in the 1990s. It intersects with other *trans* approaches present in current literary studies: transnational (to be discussed more later), transdisciplinary, transmedial, or transgender. In the ACLA report from 2017, Jessica Berman stated that critical perspectives she labelled collectively as “trans” have not only “animated” comparative studies in the past decade, but they can also be a chance to “rearticulate comparative literature now” (106–107). Thus, the expectations for transculturality and other perspectives that transcend any given boundaries were and indeed still are very high. However, despite extensive research being conducted in different parts of the world and on a plethora of topics, the notion of transculturality is still far from being clear and stable, and varies from one researcher to another. This unsteadiness of meaning may actually be an important factor in transculturality’s constant popularity – the term can be deployed in diverse contexts, in multiple types of critical approaches, and across different disciplines. But it also raises some issues and requires constant redefinition for each particular usage. My aim here is to indicate issues and doubts that need to be addressed by any scholar wishing to explore transcultural literary history, or to write about literary history from a transcultural perspective. There are four major “critical points”, which I believe need to be considered when using terms “transcultural” and “transculturality”. The first one involves the deployment of those notions to describe both the subject of the analysis (e.g., transcultural writers or literary works) and the method or approach to otherwise non-transcultural phenomena. The second pertains to the question whether transculturality refers only to the modern, globalized world or to cultures of all times and spaces. The third concerns the difference between transculturality and transnationality, a term that gained popularity in the 21st century. And finally, the last one refers to the usage of the term “transcultural” to describe a non-equal relation between two or more cultures, for example “inspirations” drawn from non-Western cultures in orientalist and exoticist literary works.

SUBJECT OR METHOD?

Transculturality can be deployed in two principal manners – as a term describing a subject of study and/or as a method of analysis. Choosing one of these manners will automatically outline a different field of study: one can either study transculturality understood as a cultural phenomenon or be transcultural in the way one juxtaposes various and otherwise non-transcultural cultural facts. The first understanding of transculturality is situated closer to Welsch's original notion, described as a "consequence of the inner differentiation and complexity of modern cultures" (1999, 197). One of the best-known examples of this approach is the research conducted by Arianna Dagnino, who uses terms such as "transcultural writers" and "transcultural literature". Dagnino states that certain contemporary writers have developed what she calls a transcultural mindset, and that their works cannot be perceived as a product of a single culture, but rather as a decentered hybrid created from elements drawn from different cultures. Those writers (Dagnino mentions, among others, Michael Ondaatje, Pico Ayer, and Amin Maalouf) "showed us a path towards a transcultural attitude/mode of being" (2012, 2). Among other noteworthy works in this field are *Transcultural Identities in Contemporary Literature* (2013), edited by Irene Gilsenan Nordin, Julie Hansen, and Carmen Zamorano Llena, which uses the term transculturality in two non-contradictory ways: to name a thematic focus of a certain literary works and to describe hybrid identity of authors, *The Transcultural Turn* (2014), edited by Lucy Bond and Jessica Rapson, whose aim is to "conceptualize the diverse ways in which memorial practices negotiate relationships between local, national, and international communities in the age of globalization" (19), and *Transcultural English Studies* (2009), edited by Frank Schulze-Engler and Sissy Helf, which examines the transculturality of literary works written in English by authors of non-British heritage.

The other use of the term transcultural focuses more on an approach to literature rather than on the transculturality in Welsch's meaning. This understanding of transculturality aims at comparing and freely juxtaposing texts and cultural artifacts across various cultures and discussing possible literary and cultural parallels, affinities, or mutual inspirations. This critical approach does not require the examined texts to be transcultural themselves – instead it sees them through transcultural lenses as phenomena that can and should be compared. Among examples of such an approach are Jessica Berman's *Modernist Commitments* (2011), which aims at examining modernist political engagement by juxtaposing modernist works from different parts of the world, *Transcultural Poetics and the Concept of the Poet* (2016) by Ranjan Ghosh, who analyzes the very concept of poet within multiple literary traditions (e.g. Anglo-American, Arabic, Chinese, Sanskrit, and Urdu), and to name a Polish example, Beata Śniecikowska's *Haiku po polsku* (Haiku in Polish), a study of parallels between Polish poetry and Japanese haiku, whose aim is to look for "transcultural common spots" (2016, 131).

Such an approach also characterizes both David Damrosch's world literature, which he defines not as a "set canon of texts but a mode of reading" (2003, 297), and Anders Pettersson's transcultural literary history (2006, 2008). Damrosch argues that

to establish a literary field of study one needs only three works, “interestingly juxtaposed and studied with care” but which do not have to be linked by any causal relationship (such as influence) or any kind of mutual dependency: “*Antigone*, *Shakuntala*, and *Twelfth Night* can together open up a world of dramatic possibility” (2003, 299). This idea seems to be situated very close to the program of transcultural literary history, proposed by a group of Scandinavian comparatists led by Anders Pettersson. Their aim, as Pettersson explains, is to “transcend the borders of a single culture in [...] choice of topic” (2006, 1), and to create a literary history “with no pre-determined national or temporal limitations” (2008, 463). Rather than proposing a gargantuan task of creating a history of world’s literature, Pettersson suggests that this new mode of research should focus on individual case studies, thus creating a “world history of literature” (2006, 22). Transcultural literary history has produced several edited volumes, such as *Literary History: Towards a Global Perspective* (edited by Anders Pettersson, Gunilla Lindberg-Wada, Margareta Petersson, and Stefan Helgesson 2006) and *Studying Transcultural Literary History* (edited by Lindberg-Wada 2006) however, despite its noble goals it did not gain much popularity.

An interesting proposal of a transcultural method came from a group of Polish researchers in aesthetics. Their critical approach, transcultural aesthetic studies, aims at going beyond a Eurocentric point of view and opening up towards non-Western cultures. Krystyna Wilkoszewska, the editor of two volumes on transcultural aesthetic studies (*Estetyka transkulturowa* [Transcultural aesthetics], 2004; and *Aesthetics and cultures*, 2013, available in English) has developed a set of guidelines on how to conduct such research, of which the most important is an ethical one: to respect other cultures (2012, 207–211); the other two guidelines are that research into other aesthetics should remain somewhat superficial and that it needs to create a new critical language. Apart from that, transcultural aesthetic studies did not establish any clear field or method of study. Instead, researchers working under its auspices proposed a series of specific analysis on particular topics, narrow in scope, and produced a series of books about aesthetics of non-European cultures.

MODERN PHENOMENA OR A GENERAL FEATURE OF CULTURES?

The next issue is only relevant to transculturality as the subject of study; transculturality as a critical approach to literary studies simply avoids this question. Is transculturality something that describes current cultures or is it inherent to all cultures, in any given time or space? Welsch himself is not entirely clear on the matter. On the one hand, he states that transculturality is an “inner differentiation and complexity of modern cultures” and that “cultures today are extremely interconnected and entangled with each other” as a result of “migratory processes, as well as of worldwide material and immaterial communications systems and economic interdependencies and dependencies” (1999, 197). On the other, he explains that “transculturality is in no way completely new historically”, giving the example of European history (199). In a later article on transculturality (sent for a Polish conference on transcultural aesthetics and thus available, as far as I know, only in Polish) Welsch states that cultures were indeed always to some extent transcultural or had

a transcultural disposition (although there are cultures more open towards hybridization than others; Welsch considers Japanese culture as example of a particularly open culture) and that the current globalized and highly interconnected world has only made the issue more visible and enabled hybridization on a bigger scale (2004, 33–34).

Most of the research examining transculturality as a subject, i.e., a feature of literary text or of writers, is being done on contemporary or at least modern examples. This is the case of such prominent examples as Arianna Dagnino's exploration of transcultural writers, Paul Jay's analysis of multiculturalism, transcultural identity, and globalization in contemporary literature (although Jay's book *Global Matters. The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies*, 2010, uses the term transnationality rather than transculturality), or Frank Schulze-Engler's interest in transcultural English-language literature. The latter also proposes to use the notion of transculturality as a replacement for the term postcolonial, which in Schulze-Engler's view, despite its many merits, became a "mega-concept" encompassing all non-Western literary work. Transculturality is better, argues Schulze-Engler, at describing the current decentralized field of global literature, whereas the term "postcolonial" focuses solely on the literature of former colonies, migrants, and diasporas (2007, 20–32).

There are, however, a couple of exceptions to this general inclination towards defining transculturality as a contemporary feature. One of them is research into the transcultural roots of European and American modernism. Rupert Richard Arrowsmith, author of *Modernism and the Museum*, seeks to prove that the "earliest manifestations of Modernism, then, were transcultural to a far greater extent than has previously been acknowledged, and should be seen as the beginnings of a human, rather than a merely regional, cultural milieu" (2011, 40). It is worth noting that researchers in this field of study do not always actually use the term transcultural, though they can certainly be seen as scholars dealing with transculturality. Among examples of such monographs describing the transcultural roots of Western modernisms (apart from Arrowsmith's *Modernism and the Museum*) are *Orientalism and Modernism: The Legacy of China in Pound and Williams* (1995) and *The Modernist Response to Chinese Art: Pound, Moore, Stevens* (2003) by Zhaoming Qian, *Whitmanism, Imagism, and Modernism in China and America* (1998) by Guiyou Huang (all three of them examine the influence of Chinese poetry on Western modernist poets), and *Japan, France, and East-West Aesthetics* (2004) by Jan Walsh Hokenson (which analyzes the transcultural effects on Western literature of inspiration drawn in 19th century from Japanese aesthetics via *ukiyo-e* paintings). A signal of a shift in understanding transculturality resulting in defining it as a quality of culture that may occur in any given time and space can be also found in such publications as *East Meets West in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: Transcultural Experiences in the Premodern World* (2013), edited by Albrecht Classen, and *Transcultural Literary Studies: Politics, Theory, and Literary Analysis* (2017), by Bernd Fisher, in which some of the featured articles use the term transculturality to describe, for example, aspects of the European Middle Ages and Romanticism.

TRANSCULTURALITY AND TRANSNATIONALITY OR WHAT EXACTLY IS CULTURE?

The next problem – or rather set of intermingled problems – lies strictly within the term transculturality itself – in the definition of culture, inherent to the notion and problematic at the same time. It seems that even Welsch himself struggled for a time to free himself from the traditional vision of culture as something inherently interrelated with nation. He criticizes Herder's visualization of cultures as closed, homogeneous spheres or islands (1999, 195) and states (in the longer version of his classic article on transculturality) that “we are mistaken when we continue to speak of German, French, Japanese, Indian, etc. cultures as if these were clearly defined and closed entities; what we really have in mind when speaking this way are political or linguistic communities, not actual cultural formations” (2001, 67). But at the same time, he cannot escape using terms such as “Japanese culture”, “Indian culture” (75) or to propose statements like this one: “Germans, for example, today have implemented more elements of the French and Italian lifestyle than ever before” (69). By doing so he silently assumes that there are classifiable structures we can call cultures, that they are more or less coherent with the notions of nations, and that we can point out and describe their distinctive features.

The problem of defining the relation between nation and culture plays an important role in establishing the difference – if there indeed is any – between transculturality and transnationality, a term that rapidly gained popularity in the first decade of the 21st century, mostly due to a new type of research that emerged in a perhaps not so obvious place – modernist studies (until that point it was usually the field of comparative studies that had taken upon itself the obligation to widen the scope of research to truly global proportions). In 2008 Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz announced that “there can be no doubt that modernist studies is undergoing a transnational turn” (738). This turn proposes globalizing literary studies in modernism, and the main goals of the research conducted under its auspices limiting Eurocentrism and openness towards non-European or non-Western cultures. In their article, Mao and Walkowitz discuss three new types of research: the first broadens the scope of modernist studies by incorporating literary productions from different parts of the world, the second traces transnational circulation of art, while the third analyzes the relation of modernism and imperialism and colonialism (738–739). In my opinion the unique quality of the transnational turn in modernist studies lies in its non-theoretical character – unlike previous comparatist propositions such as *Weltliteratur* or transcultural literary history, transnational research is an actual practice rather than a program, manifesto or a new theoretical proposal, that consists of a case-by-case body of works by researchers who try to reframe modernism as a global phenomenon as well as to uncover the non-European roots of Western modernism.

The usage of the term transnationality in modernist studies and other works on current global world literature (e.g., Jay 2010) seems to situate its meaning fairly close to that of transculturality. This would mean that both terms can be used interchangeably or even that one of them is redundant. This changes, however, depending

on how and to what extent we are willing to link the notion of culture with the notion of nation. If, as Welsch does, we think of cultures in national terms and use phrases such as “Japanese culture”, “German culture”, “Ukrainian culture”, etc., then transculturality has virtually the same meaning as transnationality – both describe phenomena that cross national-cultural boundaries. This is in fact how Welsch understands his term, as he talks about the transculturality of Europe – he writes at some point that “styles developed across the countries and nations” (1999, 200). In that regard one of the two “trans-” notions seems unnecessary and following the law of parsimony should be scrapped. If, however, we think of cultures in supranational terms, such as “European culture”, “East Asian Culture” or even broader notions of “Eastern culture” or “Western culture”, then transnationality and transculturality name different types of social and aesthetical exchange. With that in mind, we would use the term transculturality to describe relationships between Polish and Arabic literature or Austrian and Japanese art, but we would not apply it to the research on intertextual relationships between Polish and French literary works – such links are transnational because they transcend the national boundaries, but they are not transcultural, because both French and Polish literary works were created within the same framework of European culture. I think that Welsch’s argument of the historical transculturality of Europe mentioned above can be seen not so much as an example of historical transculturality, but rather as proof that different European nations and their works of art actually belong to the same European culture. This, by the way, poses an additional question concerning the way we – researchers based in Central Europe – perceive our field of study. Do we tend to envision it as part of the European tradition or as something separate – thus resulting in using narrower notions of Western Europe, Central Europe, and Eastern Europe?

The nature of the relation between the terms nation and culture may seem like a secondary problem, one that can be dealt with anew in each specific research project, but to me it is an issue of notable significance. In our current times, when we are finally seeing literary studies become less Eurocentric and slowly open up towards non-Western literary works, it is crucial to establish what the “culture” part of transculturality really means to us. For me, it requires transcending not only national but also ethnic and even continental boundaries. Otherwise, we risk falling right back into the abyss of Eurocentrism. If we are willing to define transculturality as having essentially the same meaning as transnationality, then we might recede into the field of study characteristic for the French School of comparative literature and the original 19th-century *Weltliteratur*. It could lead to a potential situation in which credit for being “transcultural” goes to a researcher who is still confined within the narrow field of European/Western culture. This is precisely the concern raised by Pettersson about world literature, which in the scope proposed by some researchers (such as Franco Moretti or Christopher Prendergast) can hardly be seen as global, as it focuses heavily on the perceived key role of the West in the world’s literary field. If we want transculturality to be a notion that can describe the global or planetary dimension of literature, then it is necessary to differentiate the notions of transnationality and transculturality and of nation and culture.

TRANSCULTURALITY AND/OR EXOTICISM

My last concern stems from personal experience. When I was discussing various ways in which Japanese influences presented themselves in Polish literature of early modernism, I tried to explain my understanding of transculturality (which is largely based on Welsch's concept) by using phrases such as a "dynamic, hybrid entity" and "negotiation field between two or more cultures". I noted that only a part of my research was using Welsch's notion, as I don't consider all of the examples of Polish literary *japonisme* to be transcultural. To my confusion, I was asked why I am not referring to Polish "translations" of Japanese poems as transcultural. They do, my interlocutor argued, seem to be a "negotiation field" between two cultures. The problem with those translations is that they can hardly be called translations, because Polish writers adapted Japanese poems to the perceived needs of the European reader by implementing significant changes to the original texts: they added rhymes and rhythm, and used distinctively European and completely inadequate forms, such as the triolet. I would consider the actions of those "translators" a violation of the original texts rather than examples of transculturality¹. But the very idea of using the notion of transculturality in such a context made me realize a potential flaw – and danger – in the way the term can be understood. What form of cultural exchange or transition is precisely transcultural? Can we analyze Western orientalism and exoticism with their constructed image of the Other in terms of transculturality? Are we willing, and if yes, to what extent, to discuss as examples of transcultural hybridization orientalist "borrowing" ("with no intention of returning", as Christopher Reeds points out; 2016, 13) poetic forms, motifs, philosophical ideas, etc., from non-Western cultures? Are 19th-century European Indomania and *japonisme* examples of transculturality or are they merely exotic, orientalist appropriations? What of the inherently unequal relations between privileged and nonprivileged, central and marginal, colonizers and subalterns – can they be examples of a transcultural "negotiation field" and if so, what is the negotiating position of those from whom the West is doing the "borrowing"?

The problem here is twofold. The first is an ethical one: if we discuss orientalism and exoticism solely as instances of transculturality, then we might fail to see how they disseminated a distorted view of non-Western cultures. If I were to discuss Polish translations and paraphrases of Japanese literary works, be it poetry or prose, as examples of transcultural exchange, it would veil the fact that they essentially demolished the original versions and presented to Polish readers a false image of Japanese culture – all in the name of a chauvinistic conviction that European aesthetics and poetics are by definition better than anything the rest of the world has to offer. Transculturality has a powerful demystifying potential, but it can also obscure phenomena that would be better described with different conceptual categories. The second issue is a definitional one and requires drawing a line between transculturality and exoticization. Welsch describes transculturality as a process of hybridization, of merger, or even, in the longer version of his article, as a state in which the provenance of elements taken from different cultures is no longer visible or discernible (Welsch uses an example of a traditional Japanese restaurant

decorated with Italian furniture; 2001, 69–70). This applies to both the macro- and micro-level, as Welsch states that “we are cultural hybrids” (1999, 199) – transculturality implies a certain degree of internalization and accepting certain constructs from other cultures as one’s own. This links the German philosopher’s concept with Fernando Ortiz’s term *transculturation*, which predates Welsch’s term by half a century (the term “transculturation” was coined by Ortiz in 1940). The definition of transculturation clearly implies that it is a specific type of cultural exchange which requires a fusion of two cultures, resulting in a new cultural phenomenon (Ortiz 1995, 102–103). With that in mind, I would argue that the notion of transculturality should not be automatically deployed to describe any form of cultural exchange or transfer. Not all art and literary relationships between European and non-European cultures are transcultural, because some of them clearly do not fulfill Welsch’s and Ortiz’s criteria of internalization and merger. In that regard, inspirations drawn by Europe from Chinese, Japanese, Indian or Arabic culture are disputable as instances of transculturality, because in most cases they are used precisely for their exoticness, otherness and strangeness – and those features are being celebrated and valued more than their potential ability to merge with and transform Western culture. Such instances therefore can and should be examined in terms of intertextuality, orientalism, exoticism, and imperialism – but not necessarily transculturality.

GOING GLOBAL

Transculturality and transnationality seem to be a part of a bigger shift in the humanities, one that is often called a global turn. In terms of literary studies, it resulted in three major types of research: edited volumes on global literature with multitude authors from different parts of the world (such as *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernism* edited by Mark Wollaeger, 2013), comparative monographs juxtaposing literary works from Western and non-Western cultures, and monographs on transcultural roots of certain Western literary phenomena. The aim of all those works is, firstly, to include into the field of literary studies traditions and texts that up until now were marginalized, and secondly, to rethink the existing concepts and notions that we use to describe literature. It seems, however, that deployment of the second aim is far rarer than the first – globalizing literary studies too often means simply adding a selected non-Western work to the field of study. Such approach means that literary works from different parts of the world are often being arbitrarily assigned to the European periodization and described by imposed and often inadequate European terms. A similar argument is presented by Susan Stanford Friedman in her book *Planetary Modernism* in which she points out that “the field has insufficiently challenged the prevailing ‘Western’ framework within which studies of modernity and modernism are conducted” (2015, 3). Kaira M. Cabañas calls this situation an “assimilationist logic” and explains the importance of realizing that “aesthetic categories and movements are neither neutral nor natural containers of information”. She then proceeds to indicate that the very notion of “globality” is a product of Western episteme and

that “global’ is just a veiled way of saying ‘non-Western’”. “No scholar in the United States uses ‘global’ to designate Western modernism”, she adds (2021, s.p.). I cannot help but wonder if the adjective “transcultural” is not akin to “global” in that regard – is “transcultural” not used, to paraphrase Cabañas, as a (thinly) veiled way of saying “non-Western”?

I agree with Jessica Berman in that trans perspectives (and transculturality among them) can “provide a lens to see the many spheres of operation of texts and the challenges they can pose to normative regimes of embodiment and subjectivity globally” (2017, 107). Transculturality – whether used as a method of examining literature or as a way to describe today’s globalized and interconnected world – has great potential for literary studies. But the problems with defining the term itself and explaining what it means to write transcultural literary history demonstrate that we need to be careful when using those notions. It is still far too easy to recede into Eurocentrism despite one’s good intentions. Perhaps the way out of this trap might be a simple one: to be open towards non-Western cultures – and, possibly even more importantly, to the critique and comments offered by non-Western scholars.

NOTE

¹ This example can open up another discussion on the issue of translation theory, which I omit here due to vastness of this topic. It is worth noting that transcultural analysis rarely refers to the problem of different strategies of translation, although it may be useful in certain types of research.

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Transculturality. Globality. World literature. Culture.

The global turn in literary studies brings the necessity of looking for new ways to analyze literature and literary history, and to reframe the categories we use to describe it. Transculturality, though in use for the past 30 years, still seems one of the freshest and most promising terms to use in a newly profiled literary study. However, recent publications have proved that the meaning of the term is at best unstable – transculturality is being used in different, sometimes contradictory ways. This article focuses on some of the issues that one may face when dealing with the notion of transculturality.

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