

## Transatlantic Archives and the Chronotope

*Considering its planetary scale, transatlantic archival research can be both a reason for utmost scholarly enthusiasm and a reason to question the carbon footprint of our work. Tobias Boes refers back to Tim Sommers ambivalent thoughts about transatlantic archives [on this blog](#). Introducing Mihail Bakhtin's concept of the »chronotope« he considers the multiple spatio-temporal frames that structure the archive, drawing attention to the environmental impact of transatlantic scholarship.*

By Tobias Boes

In his essay on »[Transatlantic Archives and Transatlantic Literary Studies](#),« Tim Sommer makes an eloquent case for archives as sites that traverse multiple scales of analysis, from the individual to the regional and even the global. Thus, the Thomas Mann Collection at the Beinecke Library in New Haven is at once a repository for documents related to an individual life, a testament to Yale's institutional aspirations within U.S. academia, and an illustration of the competitive acquisitions policies that uneasily tie North American libraries to their European counterparts.

Within cultural criticism, however, spatial frames of analysis can never be divorced from temporal ones, as a host of theorists from Walter Benjamin and Mikhail Bakhtin in the early twentieth century to Homi Bhabha and Arjun Appadurai at the start of the twenty-first have taught us. Historical time takes on different shapes depending on whether we look at it across regional, national, or transnational spaces. It is not a coincidence, for example, that the genealogical principle that so elegantly structures Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* reaches the end of its usefulness at the precise moment that provincial Lübeck becomes subsumed into the newly founded German nation. Bakhtin coined the useful term »chronotope« to refer to such divergent time-spaces ("Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel").

While this is a literary example, its underlying principle applies equally well to sociological modes of inquiry, including studies of transatlantic literary archives, such as the one pursued by Sommer. Let me illustrate with an example from my own work. In the early stages of research for my book *Thomas Mann's War* (2019), which examines Mann's self-reinvention as a public intellectual during his American exile, I learned about a special edition of the author's works that had been published by the Bermann-Fischer Verlag in 1945 for distribution to German soldiers held in American POW camps.[1] As I furthermore discovered, many of these soldiers had subsequently taken their acquisitions back to Germany as souvenirs, where they became the cornerstones of post-war family libraries. Over time, I would purchase some of these volumes for my own bookshelf. My first encounter with them, however, took place on a computer screen in the German National Library in Leipzig, from where I was able to access digitized holdings of the German Exile Archive in Frankfurt that are not publicly available on the internet. Eventually, the research trajectory that I began on that day would culminate in a section of my book that I have since regularly used to frame problems of transatlantic literary history.

This little story combines references to three different kinds of archives that operate on three different spatiotemporal scales. First, there are the personal archives by which war returnees (and possibly their descendants) try to keep alive the memory of a particularly traumatic moment of lived experience, the Second World War. Then, there is the National Library in Leipzig, which conceives of itself as the »[memory of the \[German\] nation](#)« — a complex epithet, given that it is actually an amalgam of two institutions that were founded at different times in different nation-states. And finally, there is the [German Exile Archive](#), whose holdings are united not only by the experience of transnational dispersal, but also by that of historical rupture — spatiotemporal categories that come together in the keywords of »exile« and »emigration.«

Any consideration of the sociocultural function that physical materials play in individual archives must pay attention to the chronotopes that structure these repositories. For example, if I am studying the personal archive of a German intellectual who spent time as a prisoner in America (Alfred Andersch, say, or Hans Werner Richter) and I there encounter a POW edition of *The Magic Mountain*, then I need to be aware of the ways in which the collecting activities were tied to the unique rhythms of an individual biography. But if I pull the same book from the shelves of the German National Library, then I should be cognizant of the self-conception of that library as a vessel for Germany's print memory, and I will need to consider the ways in which this conception is tied to what Benedict Anderson would have called the »homogeneous empty time« of the nation state (*Imagined Communities*).

These different chronotopes, furthermore, do not exist in isolation from one another. They can be brought into dialogue — and in fact, to practice »Transatlantic Literary History« means nothing else than to engage in such a conversation. When I was looking at the digital copy of *The Magic Mountain* in the Leipzig reading room, for example, I invariably had to think about the complex ways in which the German Exile Archive related to the German National Library, of which it organizationally is a part. What does the experience of exile and rupture do to the self-conception of a nation-state, which is built around continuity and self-similarity? How are the historical traumas of emigration blunted (or perhaps conserved) by being incorporated into a national archive?

The American literary critic Wai Chee Dimock reflected on many of these issues in her 2006 study *Through other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time*. While the majority of her book is devoted to formal literary questions, such as the exact relationship between epic and novel, Dimock too opens with a consideration of clashing time-spaces surrounding a single archive that is at once national and trans-national: the Iraqi National Library that burned to the ground on April 14, 2003, while American soldiers stood by without raising a finger. I mention Dimock's book in the present context because its invocation of »deep time« also reminds us that time-scales, including the ones that are at play in the study of transatlantic archives, are not necessarily bound to human experience. As Dimock puts it: »Gayatri Spivak speaks of »planetary« as a never-to-be realized horizon, a »catachresis for

inscribing collective responsibility.« She urges us to hazard it for just that reason. This book takes that risk. It is an attempt to rethink the shape of literature against the history and habitat of the human species.« (6).

What might it mean to employ a »planetary scale« in our evaluation of transatlantic literary archives? I would like to suggest that it would necessitate, first, a different attitude towards the labor that we ourselves do in these archives. A typical literary monograph that is based on archival work will invariably contain a list of abbreviations that are used to identify those archives within the text itself. Such a list spatializes archival labor, and we are all familiar with the sensation of awe that overcomes us as we gaze upon a particularly erudite volume: so many different archives consulted, so many different places pulled together into a single conceptual frame! But at the same time, these lists occlude the temporal dimensions of archival work: the stories of hectic journeys, labor-intensive trans-Atlantic passages, chance encounters and missed opportunities that we find, if at all, retold in abbreviated form in the acknowledgements section.

This temporal dimension, furthermore, reaches across multiple scales into the supra-human timeframe of the Anthropocene. For transatlantic archival research is invariably more fossil-fuel intensive than purely formalist analysis, and the side effects of such labor become a permanent part of the species memories that we inscribe into the geological and climatological records of our planet. As we move forward into a future of environmental emergencies, this will occasion ever harder questions: is the knowledge to be gained from a specific archive, or a specific trip, worth its carbon cost? Or put slightly differently: are we prepared for the footprint of archival discoveries to linger longer than any memory of the archive itself, or even of humanity as a species?

I realize this may seem like an overly academic argument, for after all, does not all human activity have a carbon cost? Is not everything that we do, therefore, recorded in time scales that exceed our imagination? And this being the case, should we not vigorously defend the virtues of transatlantic inquiry, which can have very real short-term payoffs, such as increased international understanding and harmony?

Undoubtedly so, but consider also the following: one of the most immediate symptoms of the Anthropocene is natural habitat loss due to deforestation, and one of the most serious consequences of habitat loss is a stark rise of zoonotic diseases. The most impactful of such diseases to date is, of course COVID-19. COVID-19, however, has already had a profound effect on the distinctly human timeframes in which most of us exclusively conceptualize transatlantic archival research. It has closed archives and disrupted funding schemes, putting projects on hold indefinitely. It has made tickets to the reading room in, for example, the German National Archives in Berlin-Lichterfelde precious commodities. And it has upended scholarly trajectories, as researchers realize they cannot possibly complete articles or books within the rigid temporal confines of the tenure track or the German *WissZeitVG*. Wai Chee Dimock

speaks in this context of »fractal loops« by which patterns that span non-human (and thus for us seemingly irrelevant) time scales leave self-similar imprints across much more circumscribed temporal frames (75–6).

Carbon consciousness is thus a necessity, rather than a luxury, for future archival labor. As we move further into the twenty-first century, the fact that multiple time scales are at play in transatlantic work will cease to be a matter of primarily conceptual interest and assert itself with increasingly pragmatic force. The questions »how can I travel, when can I travel, and are such travels worth the long-term cost?« will become even more important than they already are, and they will reshape the landscape of scientific inquiry. The multiple chronotopes of the literary archive will thereby become visible in all their abject glory.

[1] See Boes, 212–220; German translation, 263–272.

## References

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