

Provenance. Approaches to a Transatlantic Material History of Literature

The endeavor of transatlantic research challenges common ideas of archives. In previous articles on this blog, [Tim Sommer](#) elaborated on the dispersal of literary papers and the according obstacles in studying them and [Tobias Boes](#) introduced Bakhtin's idea of the chronotope to examine the spatio-temporal frames that structure archives. Caroline Jessen (Dubnow-Institut Leipzig) takes up these threads to propose a plea for a transatlantic material history of literature. Focusing on provenance as an epistemic category, Jessen suggests to examine our hidden, yet persisting commitment to the notion of a national literature as an example of challenging the narratives implicit to our current understanding of archives.

By Caroline Jessen

Scattered Material, Diverse Media, and Archival Politics

[Tim Sommer's essay](#) opens up a discussion about »the material, logistical, and economic dimensions of transatlantic literary history beneath and beyond the elusive migration of texts and ideas« (Sommer). Claiming that processes of literary transfer and translation should not be isolated from their »profane« prerequisites and contexts, his essay points to an entire field of research for transatlantic studies and a wide range of approaches.

As Tim argues, autographs and manuscripts can be thought of »as commodities in a market environment that witnesses complex exchanges between economic, cultural, and symbolic capital«. Picking up this thread with regard to Thomas Mann's papers, it might be interesting to explore the ways in which archival holdings in Zurich and New Haven have been used as material resources granting institutions authority to give direction to publishing projects, to foster literary research, and to contextualize and curate manifestations of Mann's work. Such a perspective allows to explore the history of Thomas-Mann-scholarship and its centers of gravity as something deeply connected to the preservation and location of the author's papers: transatlantic cooperation and competition against the background of scattered stocks.

The dynamics of such transfers and translocations, however, are not limited to the 20th century. Thus, it might be worthwhile to explore how the secularization of church-property in Germany at the beginning of the 19th century affected collection-development and research at expanding American university libraries; on a micro level, it might be interesting to explore how research into Early Modern Literature in the United States was advanced by the transfer of one unique collection of Baroque literature (namely Curt von Faber du Faur's collection) from Munich via Florence to New Haven Yale's Sterling Library in the early 1940s, or how the microfilms of this valuable collection affected transatlantic collaboration.

Transatlantic transfers of literary estates, manuscripts and book collections have been a substantial phenomenon and subject of debate at least since the 19th century. Manifestations of these debates form part of a *transatlantic material history of literature* too. Such a history might help us to understand the extent to which translocations and discussions about access, location, value, and ownership relate to concepts of ›national literature‹ that are still effective in archival collecting policies, library classifications, research funding, and the language of our own research, in spite of transnational studies, collaboration, and literary works subverting national boundaries.

The Chronotope and the Concept of National Literature

Focusing on Bakhtin's idea of the ›chronotope‹, [Tobias Boes](#) draws attention to the need to think of archives and libraries as ›spatiotemporal‹ operations. The chronotope, in his approach, is a cognitive concept as much as a narrative feature of literary texts. Referring to copies of POW editions of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* in different collection contexts, Boes underlines the ways in which books and collections form part of narratives, or rather figures, one needs to be aware of – for example a copy of the POW edition of *The Magic Mountain* at »the National Library in Leipzig, which conceives of itself as the ›memory of the [German] nation‹«, and the German Exile Archive, a department of this library »whose holdings are united not only by the experience of transnational dispersal, but also by that of historical rupture«. Depending on a reader's perspective, the book forms part of different, if not conflicting rhetorical figures and contexts of meaning. According to Boes, Bakhtin's concept provides a methodological framework to discern the ideological and sociocultural implications of such time-space figures characterizing collecting institutions.

As elements of chronotopes, figures of the archive as an organism, an ›organic whole‹ or ›body‹ seem to be tied to concepts of national literature. They can be traced in collecting policies, classification, as well as programmatic documents. Wilhelm Dilthey, in his often-quoted essay on »archives for literature« (1889), sketched archives as spaces showing texts as integral parts of larger entities (oeuvre, epoch, individual life, generation etc.) and as symbolical representations of tradition and national heritage. While Westminster Abbey assembled »mortal bodies«, archives for literature were supposed to integrate and represent the »immortal ideal substance« of the nation's grand writers. Against the background of such thinking, the dispersion and translocation of archives was regarded as murder. Thus, the sale of the literary estate of Novalis in 1930 and its subsequent dispersal were – to give just one example – compared »to a living, breathing organism being cut into small pieces«, a tangible violation of the integrity of »the spiritual space of the nation« (Tuchmann). To this day, these lines of thought can be traced in the ways in which books, collections, estates and autographs are being classified and presented. To some extent, these archival structures help us to navigate vast amounts of material and information, as they attempt to preserve ›original order‹ or to create meaningful contexts; but as chronotopes, they have implications for how we perceive the objects of literary study. Thus, beyond its

value for research into sociocultural dynamics, the concept of the chronotope relates to epistemic concerns.

Provenance as a Form of Epistemic Knowledge

Having said this, the analysis of ›archival chronotopes‹ might run the risk of underestimating the messy materiality of archives and libraries and the ways in which manuscripts, books, and historical collections challenge the authority of narratives implying fixed (ideological) spatiotemporal relations. As material objects with distinct ›biographies‹ and *provenance*, autographs, manuscripts, and books challenge homogeneous representations: In any given collection, they point to other places, previous owners/readers, and different contexts of meaning. They subvert the idea of canonical timelessness as much as linear time and fixed location. To date, these counter-narratives are, to a large extent, invisible. With regard to manuscripts, most collecting institutions do not yet seem to think of provenance as part of the knowledge their catalogues need to make accessible to the public. Thus, while these institutions strive to discuss and co-develop new approaches to literature and literary study, their catalogues still tend to promote concepts of ownership, and national literature. In recent years, while projects such as the German Literature Archive's »[Global Archives](#)« and networks such as »[Diasporic Archives](#)«, led by the University of Reading, have started to approach archival transmission from a new angle, these projects did not yet affect archival arrangement and description.

Studies of modern literature have not yet embraced provenance as a form of epistemic knowledge relevant to its transnational questions beyond issues of ownership. If it is vital to explore the history of archival objects and concrete translocations (and to analyze the language in which these translocations are addressed or rather made invisible), provenance, understood as »facts of ownership and transfer« as much as »ideas and narratives about the origins and itineraries of objects« (Feigenbaum and Reist), is a basic concept implying time and place as two related categories of inquiry. Provenance draws attention to the fact that archives are neither static repositories nor passive memory. Art historical studies provide exciting models for a material history of transatlantic literary transfer: Against the background of National Socialism and Colonialism, violent translocations and contested artefacts, art history has embraced »provenance« as a concept to explore *material, sensual and intellectual appropriations* of cultural artefacts (Savoy) and developed new (digital) methodological approaches to the study of art. Following up on research by Carlos Spoerhase and others as well as engaging in transdisciplinary and experimental approaches, literary studies can develop their own theory of materiality, literary form and provenance. It might be worthwhile to refer to literary concepts such as the chronotope and to provenance research in order to explore strong narratives of archives *and* the »complex course of descent« (Foucault) most archival objects attest to. The latter might help us »to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion« and to challenge archives to open up to those fragmentary contexts of meaning and counter-narratives, they still tend to overshadow.

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