

Carried by the Sea

In the coming months, we will discuss fundamental questions concerning Transatlantic Literary Studies on this blog: What historical, methodological, cultural, and political challenges does this approach entail? The series opens with an essay by German Studies scholar David D. Kim (University of California, Los Angeles). His plea: Transatlantic Literary Studies should be part of a global literary history that takes cultural, linguistic, religious, and international diversities into account.

By David D. Kim

To know that the following set of reflections on Transatlantic Literary Studies will launch this blog is deeply humbling. Our generation is not the first one to engage with this expansive theme. Kai Sina, who has initiated this blog, and I are following the steps of colleagues whose groundbreaking scholarship has paved the way for interdisciplinary, multilingual, and politically engaged approaches to literary concerns across the Atlantic, and I look forward to revitalizing this scholarly tradition.

I was asked to address three questions in this blog post. First, why are Transatlantic Literary Studies significant today? Second, what deserves special attention in this regard? Third, what challenges do we face in this research?

I wish to preface my responses to these queries by specifying what Pierre Bourdieu calls »the habitus«. I am a scholar of German, postcolonial, and global studies and I teach at UCLA, a large public research university located only a few miles from Thomas Mann's home in Pacific Palisades. The 46,000 graduate and undergraduate students on our campus represent all 50 U.S. states and more than 100 countries. Of the 32,000 undergraduate students, approximately 60% represent non-White ethnic backgrounds. Thus, White students make up a minority. Likewise, the city of Los Angeles is exemplary of California's cultural diversity and multiethnicity. As of 2019, four million people live in the City of Angels, not counting the surrounding counties, and half of its population consists of Asians, Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans (U.S. Census 2019).

These demographics give you a general sense of the diverse context within which I examine the movement of persons and things, the exchange of ideas and feelings or the cooperation and the conflict between nations through a literary lens. For me, Transatlantic Literary Studies constitutes an intellectually vibrant field, which contributes to my larger cosmopolitan research, extending across the Pacific to East Asian countries such as China, South Korea, and Japan. The vantage point through which I pursue Transatlantic Literary Studies is informed by cultural, linguistic, religious, and international diversities I encounter on a daily basis. In other words, I consider Transatlantic Literary Studies to be a rigorous interdisciplinary, multilingual, and transnational constellation of knowledges necessary for tracking the movement, transformation, and untranslatability of ideas, words, persons or things around the globe.

As this brief description suggests, the study of literature in transatlantic terms challenges us to take a fresh look at concepts and methodologies that are commonly taken for granted within disciplinary contexts. Since there is no self-evident conceptual, theoretical or methodological foundation upon which communication or commonality is fostered between scholarly communities on both sides of the Atlantic, Transatlantic Literary Studies provides us with unique opportunities for grappling with urgent political, ethical, moral or social matters of concern, and for reconfiguring traditional disciplinary norms, values, and practices in response to historical realities. For example, what constellation of concepts, histories, and values is associated with the term »migrant worker« across the tense Mexico-U.S. border in the English language and how does this terminology resonate across the Atlantic with its German equivalent *Gastarbeiter*, which has its own cultural, linguistic, international, and transhistorical trajectory? Edward Said refers to such a literary approach as »secular criticism«. A literary text is certainly capable of engendering a world of its own through imagination; it need not be a mirror image of the given world. Still, every literary text emerges from the world in which it is written and this worldly, secular attention is essential for gaining a deeper understanding of the material and immaterial networks across the Atlantic Ocean. Transatlantic Literary Studies is an experimental site for teasing out such encounters, transfers, conflicts or missed opportunities at conceptual, theoretical, and methodological levels.

I do not want to simplify this complex intellectual endeavor. It involves real cultural, institutional, political, and ideological differences. When we bring into dialogue the field of *Germanistik* in Germany and German Studies in North America, we are compelled to be self-reflective and as transparent as possible about the assumptions we hold, the concepts we invoke, the methods we use, the histories that haunt us, and the conclusions we draw. Our negotiation requires — aside from multilingual competency — a recalibrated sense of dialogue. Paul Michael Lützeler is right when he writes:

Insofern verlangt es von den Partnern auf beiden Seiten der atlantischen Welt Geduld und Diplomatie, in verwirrend komplexen Konstellationen jene Gemeinsamkeiten herauszufinden, die eine Verständigung und möglicherweise ein gemeinsames Agieren erlauben.

Institutional partnerships and personal friendships are crucial components of a genuine transatlantic conversation, such that even difficult subjects, emotionally laden disagreements, remain under common scrutiny.

In the hope of eliciting further thought, I would like to raise three open-ended questions, which seem to be central for Transatlantic Literary Studies today. To be sure, there are more, but in recognition of the fact that my small contribution is only the first of many, I wish to direct your attention to what scholars have already begun to discuss, but needs more extensive investigation.

First, historian Peter Miller has edited a book that explores new possibilities of historiography on the basis of the sea. He calls this intellectual activity »thalassography.« So if we take the Atlantic as a mediating sea for Transatlantic Literary Studies, what new conceptual, theoretical, and methodological

possibilities might come about? How do these inquiries challenge existing disciplinary knowledges? What refreshing stories emerge on the horizon? And how are they similar to or different from Transpacific Literary Studies or Indian Ocean Studies?

Second, studies of transatlantic relations run the danger of focusing on North America and Western Europe for a number of institutional, epistemological, and ontological reasons. How might Transatlantic Literary Studies be revitalized if we focus more deliberately on material and immaterial connections across the South Atlantic? What if we attend more strategically to literary works that connect Latin America or Central America to minor European cultures or West African countries? How does this geopolitical reorientation influence our collective transatlantic engagement with the histories and literatures not only of privileged individuals and elite social classes, but also of slaves, marginalized communities of color, and working classes?

Last but not least, scholars and students at U.S. universities seem to be more able to address ethical, moral, and political questions than their counterparts at European universities. The central role that cultural, postcolonial, and LGBTQ studies, along with migration, ethnic, race, environmental and urban studies, have played in U.S. higher education makes a difference when Transatlantic Literary Studies consider ethical concerns, moral dilemmas, and political-activist concerns. The explicit connection that U.S. scholars have long drawn between research, teaching, and what is known as »community engagement« or »scholarly activism« sheds light on different conceptual, theoretical, and pedagogical valences on my side of the Atlantic. In Europe, this sort of research-based, community-engaged pedagogy is slowly catching on (cf. Aramburuzabala, McIlrath, and Opazo 2019). Some of these intellectual engagements may seem odd for literary studies at German universities, but in my view both positions need to be carefully related across the Atlantic.

I welcome your feedback on these points and others. Please feel free to reach out to me through [Kai Sina](#). Thank you again for providing me with this platform.

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