

## Transatlantic Archives and Transatlantic Literary Studies

*In his contribution to our essay series, Tim Sommer (Heidelberg University) draws our attention to transatlantic literary archives. He describes the appeals and challenges of dealing with the diasporic dispersal of literary papers. And he reminds us of everyday constraints of transatlantic research: collections scattered across continents, current travel restrictions, and the fragmentary digitization of archives.*

By Tim Sommer

In late February 1938, a mere four days after landing on the shores of the country that would soon become his long-term sanctuary from the horrors of Nazi Germany, Thomas Mann delivered a short address at Yale University's Woolsey Hall. His remarks were occasioned by the establishment of a collection of autograph manuscripts, first editions, and scholarly commentary that aimed at providing tangible evidence of his career as a writer over the previous four decades. Overwhelmed by the warm reception of his work on the other side of the Atlantic, Mann characterized himself as »phantastisch berührt [...] von der Aufmerksamkeit und Sympathie [...], die die akademische Wissenschaft eines fremden, seinem Ursprung so fernen Landes diesem Leben und seinem fragmentarischen Gelingen widmet« (1997: 441). Before long, the United States would cease to be a foreign or far-away place for Mann. Emigrating across the ocean and naturalized through their incorporation into an American institution, his manuscripts paved the way for his own makeover as a U.S. citizen and a transatlantic intellectual.

What does this snapshot of Mann at New Haven tell us about transatlantic literary history, the subject to which this blog is dedicated? For one thing, it illustrates that it is not only texts and authors that are geographically mobile. As they travel, so do the material artefacts that accompany literary production. Like much of the broader field of comparative literature, transatlantic literary studies routinely emphasize the importance of textual circulation and cultural translation beyond national and linguistic borders. We often — too often, it would seem to me — think of these processes as disembodied, as elements of a Goethean »spiritual commerce« that trades in ideas rather than objects. As Corinna Norrick-Rühl demonstrates in [her contribution](#) to the conversation initiated by this blog, book history is one area of enquiry that powerfully reminds us of the material, logistical, and economic dimensions of transatlantic literary history beneath and beyond the elusive migration of texts and ideas. Paying attention to transatlantic archives and their often diverse holdings represents another way of taking the thingliness of transnational literary contact into account.

The sense in which I'm here using the term *archive* is a partial one, to be sure. For many literary and cultural historians, the word does not necessarily describe an actual institution or, for that matter, evoke the image of material objects. Influential writings by Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, among others, have contributed to a shift in the semantics of the term that has resulted in a move away from the

materiality of the artefact and towards an archaeology of discursive structures. The »transatlantic archive,« in this sense, describes more general historical phenomena or epistemic formations that are shaped by the complex realities of the Atlantic as a cultural contact zone and manifest themselves in all manner of written, oral, or intangible evidence. The study of the political, economic, and legal contexts of slavery and enforced migration has been one among several research fields in which such a notion of the archive has been fruitfully employed.

My own current research focuses more specifically on archives as institutions dedicated to the preservation of actual documents — on literary archives, libraries, and special collections that assemble and curate papers of various kinds. Over the course of working on a previous project, I spent countless hours combing through material in archives on both sides of the Atlantic in order to retrace how nineteenth-century British and American writers were shaping a transnational literary sphere. Transatlantic approaches have a long tradition in the fields of English and American literary studies, arguably a more established one than in German studies on either side of the ocean. As various taxonomies of the research landscape of transatlantic studies have illustrated (see Armitage and Rezek), the Atlantic has been investigated on a number of different scales, ranging from micro-level analyses concerned with the impact of transatlantic dynamics on specific regions to the comprehensive transcultural and multilingual perspective eloquently championed by David Kim in [the inaugural post of this blog](#).

As an object of critical enquiry, the transatlantic archive is not limited to any single one of these scales of analysis. [Yale's Thomas Mann Collection](#), for example, may prompt us to look into the transnationally entangled history of an individual institutional setting just as much as it can inspire larger questions about the global circulation of literary papers as commodities in a market environment that witnesses complex exchanges between economic, cultural, and symbolic capital (Mann's Ivy League consecration was accompanied by a handsome payment [see Vaget 2011: 314], money that Yale was prepared to invest for its future association with a celebrated European Nobel laureate). Although they are only beginning to receive scholarly attention, I believe that such literary-sociological dimensions of transatlantic archives represent one of the most exciting areas in which transatlantic literary studies and research on transatlantic literary history can develop in the future — building on, but at the same time going beyond the rich body of already existing historically and philologically oriented comparative scholarship.

Another crucial way in which we might begin to think about transatlantic archives and their cultural significance is closing in on the cultural politics behind them. In both Europe and North America, the preservation of literary papers has traditionally been understood as an exercise in heritage building — with major institutions dedicated to safeguarding manuscripts as part of a collective cultural memory that is more often than not determined by notions of cultural and linguistic identity. Archives to this extent share a common institutional origin with the disciplinary structures that have long determined the study

of literary history as a set of nationally specific traditions — as separate entities that the modern university neatly compartmentalizes into a range of modern languages departments essentially independent from one another. If comparative literature and transatlantic studies have mounted a challenge to this disciplinary consensus, the national archive model has in turn had to cope with the reality of a diasporic dispersal of literary papers across the Atlantic and beyond — a form of transnational migration that raises a set of complex questions about ownership, access, and identity.

Literary manuscripts and collections of books and documents have crossed national borders as part of economic transactions, but also as the result of transatlantic emigration and exile. Research initiatives such as the University of Reading's [Diasporic Literary Archives](#) network or the [Global Archives](#) project coordinated by the German Literature Archive seek to recover these histories of material uprooting and to address the difficulties that arise from such dislocations. Taking the richly layered cultural sphere of the Atlantic as its analytical frame of reference, transatlantic literary studies can I think offer an important contribution to such ongoing work, shedding light on how notions of cultural identity relate to the material objects that societies choose to remember — or, to appropriate — as forming their collective heritage. Seen from this vantage point, literary archives and the transatlantic material record are not, as is sometimes implied, the domain of an obsolete historicist positivism or of a philological ivory-towerism, but can enter into a productive dialogue with the kind of cultural studies mode of enquiry that is often understood to be diametrically opposed to »the archive« in the institutional — though not, of course, in the Foucauldian or Derridean — sense of the term. Rather than merely yielding »objective« historical evidence, transatlantic archives and their multinational and multilingual collections are themselves at the heart of controversial political, cultural, and legal debates (see Leader 2013).

That today a substantial number of Thomas Mann's papers are kept at Yale is perhaps most immediately the result of the political upheavals of the twentieth century, but it also illustrates the competitive acquisition policy for which American archival institutions became known — and feared — on the other side of the Atlantic in the decades following World War II. The transcontinental dispersal of Mann's *Nachlass* between New Haven and Zurich is just one characteristic example of »split collections« — authors' papers scattered across institutions in different corners of the globe (Sutton 2018: 7). This represents one of the key practical challenges for the kind of research that I have been describing here. Engaging with material in transatlantic archives often enough entails following paper trails that lead to a range of far-flung locations. It requires a form of critical engagement that at times needs to be as itinerant as the authors, texts, and ideas whose movements transatlantic literary studies endeavours to map. If access restrictions and limited funding have traditionally been among the major obstacles for archival research, lockdowns and restrictions on international travel have more recently created a new, but certainly no less painful gap — one that digitization is only slowly and incompletely beginning to bridge. If there is one thing that the idea of the archive drives home most acutely at the present moment, it is that transatlantic transfer and exchange are not all spirit and no matter, but have always been bound up with

tangible frictions of various sorts. As archival objects remain all but inaccessible to most transatlantically-minded researchers for the time being, transatlantic archives themselves become all the more intriguing as objects of study.

## References

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