

NADJA GERNALZICK and GABRIELE PISARZ-RAMIREZ, eds. *Transmediality and Transculturality* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2013), 444 pp.

As Nadja Gernalzick and Gabriele Pizarz-Ramirez, the editors of the essay volume *Transmediality and Transculturality*, note in their preface, the notion of “transculturation” traces back to the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortíz’s 1940 study *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar*. At present, they suggest, it “has joined an entire cluster of ‘trans-’ terms—transmedial, transnational, translocal, transareal, transdifferent, transversal—that signal an increased critical engagement of social sciences and cultural studies with traditional social, spatial, national, or cultural boundaries” (xvii). Out of this cluster, it is “transmediality,” understood as the “transfer and processuality in medial exchanges that resist closure” (xii), that serves as the volume’s second focalizing concept. The overall aim of the book is to provide “a joint consideration of the two terms, contributing to the discussion in a field constituted by the relations between the more or less established terms interculturality, intertextuality, and intermediality; multiculturalism and multimediality; cross-culturality and cross-media; hyperculturality, hypertexts, and hypermedia; as well as also metamediality and remediation” (xi). Against this proliferation of terms and concepts and against the “at times inflationary use [of] the [trans-] prefix,” the editors position the “case studies” (xviii) they have assembled for this substantial collection to “demonstrate[], profile[], and test[]” (xi) the conceptual and (inter-)disciplinary histories as well as the explanatory potentials of transculturality and transmediality.

The collection consists of twenty-one essays (and a generous number of black-and-white as well as color illustrations) that are framed by the editors’ preface, which offers a useful and illuminating comparative conceptual history of the two guiding concepts, and a “postface” by Birgit Mersmann, which revisits some of the issues raised across the volume and rethinks them from the perspective of translation studies. Hailing from a broad range of disciplines (American Studies, British Studies, German Studies, Romance Literatures and Languages, Inter-American Studies, Media Studies, Comparative Literature), the contributors approach transmediation and transculturation from a variety of angles and frequently subscribe to dif-

ferent definitions and understandings of these terms. This polyphony is simultaneously the volume’s greatest asset and its greatest weakness. On the one hand, it foregrounds the theoretical and conceptual richness of these terms and their productive applicability in case studies ranging from literature, theater, and film, to non-fiction writing, painting, and (digital) performance art. On the other hand, they make the reading experience a *tour de force* through sometimes uneven territory and prevent the volume from serving as an introductory text to transmediality and transculturality as key theoretical concepts of our current moment. Even though the editors plausibly structure the essays into three sections that move from investigations of transmediality (I) to reconsiderations of Ortíz’s notion of transculturality (II), to an interest in current applications of transculturality and transmediality (III), one is occasionally left with the feeling of reading two books at once: one about Ortíz’s legacy in the field of Inter-American Studies, and another one about mostly current configurations of the transmedial and the transcultural across different media. This criticism notwithstanding, the editors must be commended for assembling a number of insightful and occasionally brilliant essays that, *en tout*, manage to challenge received disciplinary perspectives.

The preface provides a useful introduction to the discursive and disciplinary history of the two titular terms and places these terms into a comparative framework by considering their applications in Latin American, Anglo-American, and German contexts. Noting the relative neglect of Ortíz’s work outside of Latin America, Gernalzick and Pizarz-Ramirez make a compelling case about its much-needed reconsideration, and they point to the productive possibilities of connecting it with notions of transmediality. They base their understanding of transmediality on Urs Meyer, Roberto Simanowski, and Christoph Zeller’s definition of the term as “the simultaneous presence of the media involved” and adopt their focus on “the participating media *in the process* of transition” (qtd. and trans. Gernalzick and Pizarz-Ramirez xii). What may be missing, however, is an extended explanation of the specific interconnection of transmediality and transculturality as critical concepts beyond the intriguing, but relatively general, suggestion that “transmediality and transculturality have been launched into debates about cultural and medial sectionalisms when

competing terms such as inter- or multiculturalism and inter- or multimediality entrenched virulent distinctions for the organization of privilege and hierarchy” (xi).

The essays in part one (Transmediality) focus largely on literary instantiations of transmediality, with the exception of Christopher Zeller’s investigation of the German performance artist Wolf Vostell’s Fluxus-inspired happenings of the 1960s and their status as “transmedial representation[s]” rather than immediate experiences of a life-like presence (23). Other essays in this part engage the theoretical and practical differentiation between inter- and transmediality (Meyer on contemporary German literature, Eilittä on media conceptions in German romanticism, Lipinski on a stage adaptation of Goethe’s *Wahlverwandtschaften*, Seiler on Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*) and the manifold ways of reading literary works such as Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* (Capulet) or Nina Simone’s autobiography *I Put a Spell on You* (Gutenberger) through the lenses of inter- and transmedial theory. Julia Straub’s piece on the transmedial mythicity of Dante’s Beatrice in the literature and the arts of Victorian Britain offers a particularly insightful analysis of the literary figure’s “cultural afterlife” (102): “the vagrancy of myths in the context of transmediality, their equal representability in different medial forms,” and their ability to indicate “larger cultural concerns [...] independent of generic or medial boundaries” (102, 103).

The essays in part two (“Transculturality: Pursuing the Legacy of Fernando Ortíz”) revolve around Ortíz’s original conceptualization of transculturality, its discursive legacy, and its significance as a tool for literary and cultural analysis. Markus Heide’s assessment, through an Ortízian lens, of the Cuban poet and political activist José Martí as a critically marginalized precursor of recent cultural theory is especially impressive. Heide proposes that “Martí’s work, on the one hand, illustrates the visionary, romantic, and utopian aspects of pan-American unity, and, on the other hand, addresses and anticipates contradictions, conflicts, and power asymmetries within the Western hemisphere that until today characterize the political, cultural, and literary life of the Americas, as well as relations between American nation states” (142). For this analysis, Ortíz’s concept of transculturation offers a fruitful starting point, as it does for the consideration of border-crossing

and often ambiguous personal, cultural, and literary connections examined in the other essays on Cuban/Cuban-American literature (Stauder on Carpentier’s novel *El siglo de las luces*, Künstler on Firmat’s autobiography *Next Year in Cuba*, Gremels on the poetry of William Navarrete, Köder on homophobia in revolutionary Cuba) and music (Valdés on Cuban hip hop) in this part. Perhaps because of its thematic unity, this part is the most cohesive of the volume, even though one wonders why the two essays in Spanish (Gremels, Valdéz) were not translated into English in order to ensure greater accessibility for a broader readership.

The essays in part three (“Transculturality and Transmediality in Current Application”) are more clearly centered on recent and relatively recent transcultural and transmedial phenomena, including digital avant-garde installations (Simanowski), literary fiction (Schinko on Lethem’s *The Fortress of Solitude* and *You Don’t Love Me Yet*) and transfiction (Banita on Eggers’s *What Is the What*), visual media (de Toro on Frida Kahlo, Brandt on “giant movies” and the “culture of corporeality” of the 1950s, Weymann on films, paintings, and novels of Peter Weiss), and cultural theory (Wägenbaur on performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña and postcolonial theoretician Homi K. Bhabha). They provide snapshots of generally well-chosen transmedial and transcultural phenomena rather than a systematic mapping of the field at large, but in many cases—such as Schinko’s pop culture-sensitive reading of Lethem or Banita’s profound inquiry into the moral and ethical problems of Egger’s transfictional approach to the humanitarian crisis and war in Sudan—the close readings are more than mere case studies and forcefully illustrate the potential of transmediality and transculturality as critical terms and theoretical concepts.

The book closes with Birgit Mersmann’s essay “Global Routes,” which connects transmediation and transculturation with theories and practices of translation studies. Expanding the notion of translation “to include all different kinds of cultural transference, among these the transfer of ideas, of artistic forms including visual arts and music, of material objects, and of modern media” (407), Mersmann unfolds a mediological approach to “cultural translation” that complements many of the key ideas voiced throughout the volume and culminates in a consideration of what she

calls “iconic transculturality,” i.e. the ways in which cultural translation “becomes manifest in concrete image phenomena” (416).

As noted above, the diversity, polyphony, and multi-perspectivity of Gernalzick and Pizarz-Ramirez’s volume can be taxing at times, requiring a reader who is willing to follow each of the contributors’ conceptual self-positioning and their sometimes idiosyncratic choice of subject matter. But there is also something rewarding about a book that resists what seems to be a current trend towards streamlining academic publications into pre-

dictable formats and forcing diversity into conventional forms of argumentation. While I assume that many readers will cherry-pick chapters from this book depending on their own research interests, I would suggest that it is very much worthwhile to read the book cover to cover, if only to recognize that one’s own theoretical and conceptual preferences are just that—preferences that should always be taken with a grain of salt and must stand the test against the preferences of others.

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