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Transcultural Studies Student Conference

Universität Heidelberg, April 2018

REVIEWED BY MARJOLEIN DE RAAT

On April 27th, 2018, I was a panellist at the first *Transcultural Studies Student Conference* held at Heidelberg University.

The conference organizers had accepted papers from a wide range of disciplines and perspectives, from social studies and anthropology to history and material culture. The overlying theme was the theory and practice of transculturation. This was a student conference, and the presenters were all MA students, recent graduates, or PhD students.

Transcultural Studies is a programme offered by Heidelberg University, but the theory it covers is not yet well known in other universities. For many of the panellists, including myself, this was the first time they applied the term “transculturation” to their research. Others, mainly the ones affiliated with Heidelberg University, already had years of experience using the terms and concepts of transculturation. This caused a slight unevenness in the discussions—many of the issues that were novel and relevant for some, were old news for others. Still, the different ideas about the definition of transculturalism made for a fruitful discussion.

The day started with a keynote address by Monica Juneja, professor of Global Art History at Heidelberg University, about the theory of transculturalism and how it can help when researching cultural conflicts. After the keynote lecture, the program continued with four panels and a final discussion. Because of the broad range of disciplines of the participants, it was sometimes hard to see how the subjects of the panels could fall under the same category. The themes of the four panels were *Religion and Art*, *Mobility and Placemaking*, *Knowledge in Practice*, and *Identities and Narratives*.

The papers presented in the first panel, *Religion and Art*, all fit the theme of the panel well. They all had to do with religion and visual culture. The main item that all presenters addressed was how certain visual elements get repurposed in new contexts, where they acquire very different (religious) meanings. The question arose whether the original identity is the “real” one and the new interpretation an appropriation, or whether it should not be regarded in such terms. Another issue that this panel covered is whether an item that shows a mixture of artistic styles, and retains elements of its influences, can be seen as a new style in itself.

The second panel, *Mobility and Placemaking*, also consisted of papers that fit the panel’s theme very well. The main item in this panel was replacement and diaspora, and how to deal with heritage in a new environment. The issue of how migrating people shape their identity came up both in generations-old diasporic communities, as well as recent refugees. A problem that all panellists addressed

is the difficulty of writing about groups of people without “otherizing” or “essentializing” them when you are discussing their cultural identity. Each panellist had their own ideas and methods for that, but a definite answer could not be given by any of them.

The third panel, *Knowledge in Application*, was less consistent. It was hard to find a common theme in the papers. They seemed like they didn’t fit in with any other panel and were thus swept together under a vague title. Since the papers dealt with architecture, photography, mosaics, and ceramics, I felt like they would’ve fit better in the *Art* category. However, their topics did not deal so much with the visual qualities, but more with the way cultures are represented. The concept of orientalism came up in commercial and political contexts. Most of the issues that the panellists brought up had already been covered in the first panel (mixing of visual styles) or the second (representation and “othering”). By this time, the conference started to feel quite long and full for just one day.

However, the last panel *Identities and Narratives*, proved to be filled with interesting and engaging topics and managed to revive the audience. The panellists switched the perspective slightly by not talking about how cultures are presented by others, but about how people define themselves. Whether that involved funk music in Brazil, religious practices of minorities and nationalist discourse in China, or BDSM communities in Europe, all presenters discussed the way identities get shaped and constantly re-defined under the influence of internationalisation. In that regard, it was a nice supplement to the second panel, which dealt with similar themes.

After the four panels, the conference concluded with a general discussion. Here the difficulty in trying to align all these different disciplines and perspectives became most apparent. The approach of a cultural anthropologist is very different from that of a historian or an art student. Many participants disagreed about research methods and the interpretation of theory. Others also had a problem with the use of the term orientalism, claiming that that term was coined for a specific phenomenon and could not be freely applied to other situations. Most participants agreed that in many cases, questions of representations and identity are more nuanced than what orientalism can cover.

Throughout the conference, the problem of terminology was consistent. This was, in many cases, caused by unfamiliarity with the concept of transculturation and the associated vocabulary. Some people did not like the word “transcultural” and preferred “hybrid” or “mixture,” while others deem those terms unfitting and condescending.

One of the main questions about transculturalism, that I also shared, is where the line gets drawn. Transculturalism does not see cultures as singular or essential, with exchange only taking place at clearly defined borders, but rather as blurry, fluid, constantly re-negotiated, and dependent on the perspective of the viewer.

However, as one participant put it, this does not mean we should think of cultures as one big soup in which differences do not exist at all. The balance is hard to find, especially for those that were only just introduced to the concept. For the “newcomers” the debate about transculturalism was interesting and beneficial to their understanding of the concept, but it seemed little more than a repetition of old arguments for those who had dealt with the theme more often already.

Another problem that was discussed was the question of the academic perspective. By talking about other cultures, are we not doing precisely what we criticize? No other consensus was reached other than the conclusion that scholars cannot do more than try their best. At some point in the discussion, the organisation was criticized for not inviting a diverse enough group of panellists, and for being eurocentric. Other participants quickly defended the organisation, pointing out that most of the panellists were women, and a wide range of countries and backgrounds were represented. The organization gave a very practical explanation, namely that on one side they were dependent on the papers they received, and on the other side, the budget of the conference simply did not allow the covering of travel expenses for people from outside of Europe. Therefore, it was inevitable that most of the presenters were European scholars, providing a European perspective.

I personally did not share the opinion that the conference was eurocentric. Instead, one thing I personally noticed was the emphasis on Asia. Although the conference was about transculturality as a global phenomenon, I felt like the majority of the papers dealt with Asia (mainly Japan, India, and China). This may be explained by the fact that the host faculty of Heidelberg University is called “Asia and Europe in a Global Context”. Perhaps I am biased because my own research focuses on Asia as well, ; in any case, I did not mind this at all, but I can imagine participants with a very different research topic might have felt a bit out of place.

In conclusion, I thought the conference provided an opportunity to get acquainted with concepts and research methods with which I would have otherwise not easily have come in contact. I found most of the papers interesting and well-researched, although there was some overlap and repetition in the themes. Despite some differences of opinions, in general, the participants were genuinely interested in each other’s papers. Because the panellists all came from very different disciplines and have different approaches to the theory and practice, it was sometimes hard to understand or connect with each other’s research. Nevertheless, I was impressed by the engagement and interest, both from the audience and the panellists.