

**The Trans/National Study of Culture**

# Concepts for the Study of Culture



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## Volume 4

# **The Trans/National Study of Culture**

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## **A Translational Perspective**

Edited by  
Doris Bachmann-Medick

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Christina Lutter

# What Do We Translate when We Translate?

Context, Process, and Practice as Categories of Cultural Analysis\*

Even after decades of research and theoretical examination, both ‘culture’ and ‘translation’ – not to mention their (inter-)relations – remain intriguing, albeit controversial and fuzzy, categories of description and analysis. These categories are entangled within and between different contexts of practice, theoretical approaches, and academic disciplines, as an ever growing body of research literature shows.<sup>1</sup> The concept and title of this volume *The Trans/National Study of Culture* rightly suggest that one reason for this confusion is that the term ‘cultural translation’ still needs thorough examination and differentiation, especially as it has been appropriated by and become a keyword in rather different academic and national traditions, such as *cultural studies*, *sciences humaines*, and *Kulturwissenschaften*. What is more, it seems that using the term ‘translation’ demands a cautious differentiation from related terms used to describe cultural encounters, contacts and changes – for example, ‘exchange,’ ‘transfer,’ ‘transition,’ or ‘transformation’ – and it also calls for a review of the relations between different modes of translation, especially between linguistic and cultural ones.

The notions I have mentioned so far, and their partially overlapping meanings, all have one thing in common: they postulate and execute a turn away from the idea of a unified ‘Culture with a capital C’<sup>2</sup> to contextual, process-

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1 See the Routledge journal *Translation Studies*, founded in 2008; Bal 2002; St-Pierre and Kar 2007. For an extensive bibliography, also see the chapter “Translational Turn” in Bachmann-Medick 2006: 238–283.

2 In analogy with Stuart Hall’s famous rejection of a “Theory” for its own sake, articulated twenty-five years ago: “I am not interested in Theory, I am interested in going on theorizing” (quoted in Grossberg 1996 [1986]: 150; cf. also the other contributions in Morley and Chen 1996, and in Hall 2000).

related, and practice-oriented conceptions of how the cultural production of meanings, as well as cultural encounters, exchange processes and conflicts, in past or present times, might have worked. In a subtle essay on the reception of Homi Bhabha's work, Birgit Wagner (2009, cf. also 2012) has recently explored the term 'cultural translation' that, at least in the German-speaking world, has been flourishing ever since the publication of Bhabha's seminal work *The Location of Culture* (1994). As Wagner shows, when a term enjoys a "career" of fashionability, as Bhabha's 'cultural translation' has, there is always a downside – its inflationary use, for example, which more often than not involves a blurring of terms. In this article I, therefore, first want to outline some of the problems that are caused by such an inflationary use of concepts like translation and culture. In its second part, I will accentuate the advantages of a more rigorous combination of the study of history and cultural analysis by using an example from early medieval history to show the contextual specificity of cultural translations, which are often associated with today's recent phenomena of globalization.<sup>3</sup>

The first challenge I want to address concerns the relations between language and culture. I am a historian, and neither a linguist nor a translator, even if I may pride myself in roughly meeting the criteria that Umberto Eco, specialist in semiotics and, at the same time, essayist and translator himself, has defined as the minimal requirements to be able to theoretically inquire into the issue of translation: "translation scholars should have had at least one of the following experiences during their life: translating, checking and editing translations, or being translated and working in close co-operation with their translators" (Eco 2004: 1). Eco himself has dealt with issues related to inter-lingual, inter-semiotic, and cultural translations for more than half a century – the work of a lifetime. And in each of his works he has dealt with these problems by staying close to the object, striving for precision, and always giving a wide range of context-specific examples. Looking at his work certainly makes me feel very cautious when it comes to big claims – especially as Eco always demonstrates the author's and translator's respect for the object of translation and for his readers (cf. also Bal 2002).

Linguists speak about translations from one 'natural' language into the other, while 'cultural translation' widens the concept to characterize the transfer of ideas and values, of patterns of thought and behavior between different cultural contexts (cf. Wagner 2009: 1; Wagner et al. 2012). The link between these approaches is that both describe changes, to which both language and the 'ob-

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<sup>3</sup> For a subtle and comprehensive interdisciplinary approach, see, e.g., Kreff et al. 2011.

jects' of cultural translation are subjected as complex processes of *de-* and *re-*contextualization. According to Walter Benjamin, language is always already translated (cf. Benjamin 2002: 76; cf. Wagner 2009: 3). It continually changes in the process of translation between linguistic and cultural contexts, without any identifiable 'starting point.' Drawing on Benjamin, Homi Bhabha develops a similar argument for cultural translation: culture is always already translation. Still, there are important differences: in "translation proper," to draw on one of Eco's main arguments in his recent work on "translation as negotiation," "faithfulness to the original text" plays an important role, even if the expression – in Eco's own words – might seem somewhat "outdated" in light of contemporary literary and translation theories that "stress the principle according to which, in the translating process, the impact a translation has upon its own cultural milieu is more important than an impossible equivalence with the original" (Eco 2004: 4–5). Nonetheless, there are, in fact, certain commonsensical rules defining the "limits of interpretation" (cf. the title of Eco 1994) as well as what may distinguish a 'good' translation from a 'bad' one, in keeping with the translator's aim of rendering the text's intentions as well as its context. However, this stands in contrast to cultural translation in Bhabha's sense, which is basically in line with literary theory, and which foregrounds the shifts and changes of meaning in the process of recontextualization and reception – that is, the performative and transformative aspects of translating (cf. Bhabha 1994; Burke 2000, 2007).

These are doubtlessly some of the most compelling aspects of this concept, when one looks into the reasons and processes of cultural change. Still, at the same time, a closer look at the notions of 'translation' and 'transformation' is needed. 'Translation' and also 'transfer' derive from the same Latin stem, *ferre*, which means to carry something from one place to another; 'transformation,' on the other hand, derives from *formare*, which means 'to form.' In the practice of encounters and exchanges, contacts and conflicts (eventually resulting in cultural changes), single constituents cannot remain unchanged. Actors, texts, and objects are changed within processes of translation; they are not only *translated* but eventually *trans-formed*. At this point, we can obviously no longer deal with questions of 'faithfulness' to an 'original,' to which an interlingual translation in Eco's terms would be committed. Rather, at this point we reach the limits of the metaphorical equivalence between the idea and practice of interlingual and cultural translations. These are the distinctions we should discuss further, and we would suffer a distinct loss to take up the question formulated in the title of this volume, if we were to level these differences too quickly.

I am thus worried by hasty analogies that, especially within debates about cultural translation, may result in ‘short circuits.’ Firstly, it seems that ‘language’ and ‘culture’ are often short-circuited to resemble one another. This cannot merely be demonstrated by a multitude of non-academic cases, for example the meta-discourse on the European Union, but also in academic debates on this issue. Birgit Wagner (2009) quotes a very telling example from the mission statement of the important and commendable online journal *Eurozine*, a network of more than 75 European cultural journals. Under the heading “Translation of cultures,” the journal claimed in 2008 that “by translating articles *from different European cultures*, *Eurozine* enables a rich and freewheeling dialogue, which is the foundation of a European public space worthy of its name” (cf. Wagner 2009: 2). This somehow floating equation of languages with “cultures” is by no means ‘innocent,’ but highly problematic, as, on the one hand, ‘culture’ is reduced to language, and, on the other hand, supposed ‘differences’ between cultures are, thus, reified by means of differences between languages. Fortunately, the people responsible for this text seem to have noticed the problem, or been prompted to do so, for the passage – though retaining the header “The philosophy: translation of cultures” – now reads: “Translation is the key to creating a European public space that respects diversity. By translating texts into one of the widely-spoken European languages, *Eurozine* creates the possibility for texts to be understood and valued outside of their original context” (Buljevic et al. 2013).

Secondly, the focus inherent in the keyword of ‘globalization,’ on spatial rather than other aspects of cultural difference, including ‘transnational’ translations, often effects a certain (perhaps unintended) ‘short circuit’ between culture and space. While Homi Bhabha, in his book *The Location of Culture*, distinguishes between ‘transnational’ and ‘translational,’ this stands in contrast to the reception of his texts, where the very terms of ‘space’ and ‘culture’ are, implicitly or explicitly, equated, as in the case of ‘language’ and ‘culture’: *transnational*, *transcultural*, and *translational* become interchangeable. As in the case of the implicit identification of language with culture, ‘translation,’ thus, is reduced to just a few aspects of its spectrum of meanings (cf. Bachmann-Medick 2010: 260–262).

Another issue addressed in the title of this volume and in need of clarification is the relation between different research cultures. Inter- and transdisciplinarity are specific forms of transcultural communication and translation. Even more fundamentally, each form of scholarly reception, and the incorporation of new elements into existing traditions involved, is an instance of such a process. For example, by drawing on Walter Benjamin, postcolonial theorist Bhabha integrates one of the founding fathers of German *Kulturwissenschaften*

into his body of thought (cf. Bhabha 1994: 163–164; Wagner 2009: 4). Another example is the theoretical turn in British cultural studies connected with Stuart Hall, which would not have been possible without the reception of then-contemporary French poststructuralism (cf. Hall 2000; Morley and Chen 1996). By now it has become quite commonplace to insist that cultural studies and *Kulturwissenschaften* only exist in the plural, and that the ancient dichotomies like cultural studies vs. *Kulturwissenschaften*, history vs. theory, cultural studies vs. history, and even cultural studies vs. political economy hardly facilitate down-to-earth research and, what is more, are mere constructions themselves. As early as 1995, Lawrence Grossberg playfully subtitled an essay dealing with the relations between cultural studies and political economy with “Is Anybody Else Bored with this Debate?” (Grossberg 1995). Birgit Wagner entitled her paper at the *3rd Crossroads in Cultural Studies Conference* in Birmingham (2000), a discussion of literary and personal relations between Antonio Gramsci, Walter Benjamin and Antonio Machado, as “Thinking and Writing in Networks” (Wagner 2001). And Meaghan Morris, in her *Too Soon Too Late: History in Popular Culture* (1998), points out the need for locating cultural studies’ issues in a proper historical context. She pinpoints some of the problems related to a “culture of theory” that applies to many traditions within cultural studies (as well as within the field of *Kulturwissenschaften*, one might add) as well as meta-theories that represent big entities and ‘monolithic’ subjects – the West, Modernity, Fordism – and phrases such as “ever since Plato/Descartes/the Enlightenment” (you name it). All of these do not leave much room for contextually oriented work, particularly as a “culture of theory” is more often than not characterized by debates about theoretical or bibliographic frames of reference rather than about specific objects of analysis (Morris 1998: 2).

Against this background, it seems especially helpful to draw from a multifaceted concept of culture, such as that which developed within and out of the very tensions between different traditions of cultural research and analysis of historical material and from the development of the viewpoint of the *longue durée* in historical changes (cf. Lutter and Reisenleitner 2002; Lässig 2012). Within this context, the following assumptions seem especially important: cultural contacts and conflicts, translations and transformations always happen in specific locations (spaces and places); they are always situated in specific historical contexts; and they are always enacted by specific persons. Just as Meaghan Morris points out the importance of a historical perspective for research on popular culture, historians of globalization such as Jürgen Osterhammel illustrate the need to historically contextualize processes of ‘globalization’ in the long nineteenth century, as do cultural historians like Peter

Burke in his studies on early modern cultural contacts and conflicts, negotiations, and translations; (cf. Osterhammel 2009; Burke 2000, 2007).

I would now like to discuss an example deliberately taken from medieval history to accentuate what might be evident – namely, that cultural translations, with all their respective specificities, are in no way restricted to a certain historical era. In the context of the comprehensive research conducted on Late Antiquity and the European Early Middle Ages during the last decades, the grand narratives of what was formerly called the Great Migration and the corresponding grand historical entities of ‘peoples’ or ‘cultures’ have been comprehensively deconstructed. Instead, medievalists talk about the “Transformation of the Roman World,” and this is all about long processes of imagining and constructing communities.<sup>4</sup> Still, when Benedict Anderson wrote his groundbreaking book on *Imagined Communities* (1983) and touched on the early medieval period, he only quoted works on medieval history published more than forty years prior.<sup>5</sup> This is a very practical example of the lack of ‘translation’ between disciplines (or if you like, research cultures) – but in no way a conceptual or necessary one.

The Great Migration was not a single, coherent migration but a multitude of ‘migrations’ that were in no sense directed toward any predefined or common goal. They constituted vastly diverse major and minor conquests, long-term population shifts and complex processes of integration spanning several centuries, just as ‘frontiers’ constituted border areas and contact zones spanning hundreds of kilometers. Especially from AD 400 to 900, border areas repeatedly underwent fundamental change (cf. Pohl et al. 2000; McKitterick 2001; Pohl 2005).

Life in these border areas in the final decades of the fifth century is described by a unique document for the time, the so-called *Vita St. Severini*. It is an early hagiographic account of the Saint Severinus, who was probably a former Roman official in the border region of Noricum at the Danube in what is today’s Upper and Lower Austria, but, in fact, very little is known about his personal background. This region sets the scene for the events reported, which took place during the 480s, when the remaining Roman population of the region decided to leave its dwellings and what was left of Roman infrastructure and move south to Italy, which still constituted the center of the Roman world (cf. Lotter 1976;

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<sup>4</sup> For major comparative research projects undertaken since the early 1990s, see the book series *Transformation of the Roman World* (Leiden/Boston: Brill); for projects since 1997, see also Pohl and Reimitz 1998; Pohl et al. 2000; Corradini et al. 2003.

<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Walter Pohl for this observation.

Wolfram 1995). Eugippius, the author of the text and a member of the Saint's community, wrote the story down decades later, after the group had left the Danube region and settled in Naples in 511, about twenty-five years after the migration and the protagonist's death (cf. Noll 1981). It is not clear whether Eugippius had ever even personally met the protagonist of his account.

The *Vita*, as a piece of hagiography from the very beginnings of Christianity in West and Central Europe, is an extremely precious source that gives at least some insights into the living conditions and everyday life of these decades of accelerated transformation, during which the Roman infrastructure lost significance and early structures of Christian communities took over the organization of what was needed at the time. So, the "Saint" Severinus – and, in fact, there was nothing like a procedure of canonization at the time – simply did what was necessary: negotiate with the non-Roman neighbors, defend his community against sometimes hostile raids, and fend off floods, storms and plagues of locusts. To be sure, as demanded by the genre, he did all of this on behalf and by order of God and by means of miracles, as one would expect from a decent saint. Therefore, the account gives a lot of information both on contemporary needs, beliefs, and ways of life, but also, and most importantly within this context, on contacts and conflicts between different groups not only simultaneously present but, at least for a certain time, actually co-existing in the region.

I would finally like to link some of the theoretical debates about concepts of 'culture,' and its translation and transformation, in the field of cultural and postcolonial studies to similar discussions in medieval studies that pursue comparable questions about the specificity of source materials and the possibilities and limits of their analysis (cf. Spiegel 1990). In doing so, I will draw on the *Vita St. Severini*, a seminal text for medievalists, to consider the advantages and disadvantages of the terms in question.

One of the basic assumptions uniting contemporary cultural theory and medieval studies is the concept of individual and social identities as constructed (e.g., in Hall and du Gay 1996; Hall 1997). Their cultural constituents are seen as multiple and mostly ambivalent, if not contradictory forms of shared signs and narrations in the past and present (on early medieval history, see Pohl and Reimitz 1998; Corradini et al. 2003). 'Culture' is not an articulation of stable identities of ethnic or religious communities but conceived as the manifold and changing categories and formations of knowledge by which communities define themselves and are defined by others (cf. Anderson 1983; Geary 2002; Pohl 2005). Cultural identities, thus, are never confined or fixed but fragmented and constantly translated.

Identities constitute relations between individuals and social groups. They are constructed within cultural processes of identifying with and differentiating

between others. They work by means of classification and representation – a framework within which people make sense of their experiences by marking their belongings and non-belongings symbolically. Symbolic signs, in turn, have real social effects and play an important role within power relations, as their function is to tell who is part of and who is excluded from a group. Identities, thus, are produced by and through culture (cf. Hall 2004).

Where, then, do we find such processes of cultural formation and translation in the *Vita St. Severini*? Does it tell a story of conflicting cultures – of a Roman culture vs. ‘barbarians,’ as it was predominantly read for a long time, i.e. as one of the most impressive textual sources from the end of the Roman Empire and the decline of Roman culture at its northern frontier, brought about by a clash with the barbarian peoples? Is it a narrative about a sharp contrast between Roman and barbarian populations?<sup>6</sup> In fact, at first glance, the *Vita* provides a wide range of examples that might substantiate these kinds of readings: barbarian raids against remaining towns in Roman Noricum at the end of the fifth century; military and social conflicts in little villages and province towns that seem to prove that a coexistence between ‘Romans’ and ‘barbarians’ in a community was not considered possible. The most prominent and powerful example for this type of interpretation is the narration of the Saint’s announcement of the Roman exodus from Noricum and the actual event, which took place a few years after his death. This example was so powerful because it drew a comparison to the biblical Egyptian captivity of God’s people. Clearly, influential cultural narratives embedded in the Christian imaginary were used for different reasons (and not least to gloss over ‘internal’ conflicts within the community), and they had their effects both on contemporaries and historians (Pohl 2001: 16; Wood “Monastic Frontiers” 2001: 45).

On the other hand, though, the *Vita St. Severini* represents a wide range of ‘alternative’ stories contradicting a grand narrative of clearly defined conflicting ‘cultures’ of Romans and non-Romans (Pohl and Diesenberger 2001): first, there is a variety of differentiated representations of the concept of ‘barbarians,’ which is, in the first place, a linguistic one, used from a Roman perspective to designate people talking in a foreign language – i.e. not in Latin. In the *Vita*, ‘barbarians’ are assessed quite differently, both in terms of their denominations and narrative descriptions (Pohl 2001). We find barbarian robbers and monks of barbarian origin within Severin’s community, just as hostile barbarian groups, whose assaults were expected daily; and barbarian kings, with whom the Saint

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<sup>6</sup> For an overview and detailed discussions of the older research on the topic, see the contributions in Pohl and Diesenberger 2001.

negotiates and who he advises in accordance with the Christian principle of charity.

The category of the ‘true spiritual life’ embodied in and represented by the holy man Severin clearly cuts across the identity categories of ‘Romans’ and ‘barbarians.’ What really counts is not who you are, but what you do. Corresponding to the biblical exhortation to follow Christ without regard to age, gender, origin, or social rank, the *Vita* focuses on ‘social sins’ for which people are punished regardless of their ethnic or cultural categorization. In Eugippius’ account, barbarian raids – just like earthquakes, floods, and famine – serve the ‘function’ of reckoning the misbehavior and the sins of people and, at the same time, illustrate the Saint’s holy deeds. Thus, emerging Christianity clearly seems to have been a powerful means of cultural translation and integration between seemingly different groups (cf. Diesenberger 2001: 87–89; Wood “Monastic Frontiers” 2001: 47), and we should not forget that, in the subtext of his narrative, Eugippius constantly negotiates the theological discourse of his time. Moreover, conflicting cultural practices become manifest at other levels of social life, for example, in negotiations about the ‘right’ way of living – monastic or secular, within or outside communities such as towns or monasteries. Similarly, the interests of individuals and social groups within different communities confront each other and are mediated by Severinus, not to mention ambivalent political interests, partialities, and mostly temporal alliances of different groups, both ‘Roman’ and ‘barbarian,’ that constitute another strand of the narrative.

The Roman Empire had already been a highly differentiated and also ‘internally’ mobile and fragmented society for centuries. Thus, the complex web of interests, conflicts, translations – literal and cultural – and negotiations represented in the *Vita St. Severini* is interwoven with different cultural patterns and role models articulated by often contradictory practices. After all, if ‘culture’ is everywhere in the *Vita St. Severini*, it is articulated differently and according to various contexts, just not as a grand subject of singular opposed identities (cf. Wood “Monastic Frontiers” 2001: 46). One might rather read the text as a contemporary narrative that represents a range of role models transporting, translating, and eventually transforming cultural patterns that had powerful social effects. These patterns, though, do not exist independently of cultural practices; historical facts are inseparably intertwined with how they are discursively shaped. They only ‘make sense’ and become meaningful in relation to discursive models and cultural patterns – whether corresponding to or diverging from them. Cultural models, as part of complex discursive configurations that provide individuals with options to appropriate existing discourses in different

ways, are rearticulated and changed by the cultural practices of people using them.

We are obviously dealing with processes of cultural transformation. This is evident in the multiplicity of contextual appropriations and translations between the author Eugippius' world – Naples at the beginning of the sixth century – and the world of his protagonist Severinus. In the south of Italy, where refugees from all over the Roman Empire came together, Eugippius addresses another highly heterogeneous, multi-ethnic community struggling for new patterns of belonging and identity (see, e.g., Cooper 2001). The *Vita St. Severini* is such a telling source, exactly because it fails to construct one single grand narrative of homogeneity; the text succeeds not by glossing over the heterogeneity of views, values, interests, and practices of its protagonists or of the author's contemporaries but rather by making the tensions and ambiguities of both historical communities visible. The *Vita St. Severini* exhibits textual strategies that prevent the blurring of cultural categories (whether framed in terms of spirituality, community, or ethnicity) and that cut across such categories in multiple ways. It is a good example of how different categories of self-perception and construction of the 'Other' overlap in very complex and often contradictory ways.

Therefore, I would like to advocate a less nominal and monumental use of the term 'culture,' precisely because culture, whether past or present, cannot simply be equated with language, class, or conceptions of 'nation' – nor can it be equated with a 'post-national' concept of space. For even if 'culture' is not construed nationally or within an ethno-linguistic framework, the question still remains whether, perhaps, the construction of a nominal concept of 'Culture with a capital C' itself leads to the idea of cultural entities that can be sharply distinguished from one another. Is it not precisely these constructions that potentially render all the transitions, ambivalences, contradictions, multiplicity of interests, conflicts, negotiations and translations invisible, which are always part of the game? Differentiations between the 'same' and the 'other' are often found within what is called 'one's own culture.' Telling alternative stories about the forms and processes of social communication and cultural translation in specific contexts enables us to take cultural texts as flexible models between representations and practices more seriously and to show the usefulness of a concept of 'culture' that goes beyond its construction as a 'grand subject.'

Thus, I want to advocate a concept of culture that is able to describe contexts, processes, and practices and, at the same time, use them as analytical categories. Taking up one of the volume's basic questions of how the notion of 'translation' benefits our understanding of 'culture,' I consider the metaphor of cultural translation as negotiation to be most fruitful and, to draw on Umberto

Eco again (2004), I do so with all due respect for the specific object of translation and for the often laborious, even tedious research involved in the endeavor. Of course, I do not argue for abandoning comprehensive, global relations and interactions to understand what is going on in our complex world. But I do plead for an approach that acknowledges that not all types of ‘translations’ proceed along the same axis. Literal, semiotic, and cultural translations are always specific to their historical contexts and mostly operate in ambivalent ways. These contexts have to be explored and analyzed comparatively. Such analyses can lead to a better understanding of culture without a capital C – if we accept the limits of a “translational study of culture” and do not stretch the metaphor of translation beyond the limits of our source material, and if we meet the variety and heterogeneity of cultural change with terminological variety and precision (Burke 2000: 36). I, therefore, do not think that *one* practice or *one* set of “transnational” *translational studies* can or should be defined (as that would seem just as strange as claiming one historiography or ethnography). I would rather support equipping a toolbox with which a variety of *studies of culture* can be undertaken that live up to the exigencies of their objects of study, contexts, and the people involved.

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