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Introduction: Transcultural Spaces

Fig.: Walden in Berlin. Installation by Tobias Hauser in Berlin at Potsdamer Platz.

When we initiated our conference on "Transcultural Spaces" at the John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies in October of 2008, a photo of an installation at Potsdamer Platz served as a visual opener. At the time of origin of the photo (autumn of 2002), the area east of Potsdamer Platz in Berlin was still an urban wasteland surrounded by the debris of the death strip which ran through the very heart of this once ideologically and spatially divided city. Hardly noticeable in the stark contrast between the rising postmodern corporate buildings of the Sony Center, Deutsche Bahn, and the Mercedes Benz towers (which appear locked in a newly imposed gridiron structure) and an anti-pastoral 'wilderness,' awaiting the footprints of urban planners and architects, emerges a small architectural installation: a one-to-one replica of the cabin built by the patron saint of the environmentalist movement Henry David Thoreau in the first half of the 19th century at a little pond one and a half mile outside of Concord Massachusetts. This astonishing building from another time and space challenges our perspective on the spaces we inhabit in many ways. Its very presence produces an alternative

space which flouts familiar geographical, topographical, and chronological parameters. With its transgression of time and space, the site activates the cultural imaginary of the American patron saint of nature writing and challenges us to rethink our everyday environment in transcultural terms. At the same time it flouts our conceptions of 'Nature' and 'Urbanity.' The photo asks, in a way, whether both concepts can be conceived of as antithesis or symbiosis – a theme which Lawrence Buell conjugated in his lecture which now serves as an opener to this book.

The image of Thoreau's cabin at the unfinished site of Potsdamer Platz reminds us that modern cities represent transcultural spaces in which the confrontations of urbanity, ecology, and the environment emerge most visibly.[1] Tensions between the creative and destructive aspects of "global cities" (Saskia Sassen) reverberate throughout the humanities. In the wake of the recent politicization of the humanities and especially the 'transnational turn' within the discipline of American Studies, 'environment' and 'culture' have increasingly been conceptualized as hybrid entities. If, indeed, the environment can be seen as "lived space," as Henri Lefebvre has claimed in his important study (36-46), and literature as a form of "cultural ecology," as Hubert Zapf has recently argued, we have to ask further questions regarding the dynamic of cultural interactions in "spaces of control" and "spaces of possibilities" (Ostendorf 3). What is still missing in the current dialogue about the stakes of environmentalism is an interdisciplinary approach that ties together structural as well as experiential components developed in each discipline. The international symposium "Transcultural Spaces: Challenges of Urbanity, Ecology, and the Environment in the New Millennium" at the Kennedy Institute in Berlin provided a forum in which such questions were addressed in a synergetic manner, trespassing the traditional boundaries between literary theory, social anthropology, cultural studies, and environmental planning. How should – and how can – such an interdisciplinary approach react to the post-ecological turn of the 2000s? In this context, international scholars from seventeen different countries explored the strategies of individual groups, i.e., writers, architects, filmmakers, theorists, journalists, and ecological activists, to negotiate the threat of extreme climatic change. Special emphasis was put on the challenges provoked by recent phenomena such as Hurricane Katrina, the floodings in Europe, the climate changes at the poles, and pollution in big cities.

Following Catrin Gersdorf's and Sylvia Mayer's call in *Natur-Kultur-Text* (2007) to bring about a paradigmatic change in methodological approaches to the environmental crises, our interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary volume *Transcultural Spaces* combines interests in literature, film, architecture, history, cultural geography, art history, ecological studies, and sociology. Rather than assembling such approaches eclectically or simply juxtaposing them, we want to bridge the gap between different scholarly perspectives, highlighting differences as well as excavating shared methods and insights, which will push the respective disciplines forward. *Transcultural Spaces* aspires to investigate both the appearances of 'city' and 'nature' as opposites in corporate cultural hegemony and the modes of amalgamation and hybridization by which city and nature are constituted as complementary figures. What contributions have literary and cinematic fiction, the visual arts, and other discourses in Germany, Eastern Europa, China, or the United States made to a dialogue on environmental and technological issues? How are we, as international scholars of American Studies, to deal with the challenges of the ongoing environmental crisis, which, by all means, is also a crisis of technological progress? While discussing the complex interrelationship of city and nature in American literature and culture, we also wanted to engage with the theme of 'transcultural spaces' on a performative level in the "artists' forum." This crucial slot in our conference schedule created an open-minded and open-ended venue to rethink the boundaries between theory and practice and arrive at a moment of dynamic conflation of artistic imagination and academic thought.

The book features five sections which address interventions in ecological and environmental studies, analyze transcultural networks and the functions of different media, explore the links between urbanity, ecology, and the environment, trace transformations in the perception of the environment and offer alternative ways to perceive sights and sounds of Nature in the age of environmental crises. An additional section is dedicated to approaching the theme of transcultural spaces from an artistic perspective. To back this aim, we invited an American photographer and a German pianist to contribute to the anthology.

In his essay "Nature and City: Antithesis or Symbiosis?" Lawrence Buell addresses the challenges of how to conceive *of* and respond *to* the growing development of urbanization from an ecological and environmental standpoint. He calls for an intervention of urban ecological or environmental thinkers in order to explore the potential of conceptual, ethical and aesthetic approaches to environmental challenges. Understanding cities as transcultural spaces both biologically as well as culturally, Buell discusses *en detail* the pros and cons of six metaphorical encapsulations in an ecological discourse. They include city/nature as binary; city as holistic macro-organism; city as fragmentary assemblage; as palimpsest; as network; and as apocalypse. In search of a viable urban ecological order, Buell is interested in exposing the "dependence of urban thought and experience *vis-à-vis* ecological matters upon embedded, often unacknowledged, tropes that function not only as conduits for verbal expression but also often constitute the conceptual structures in terms of which environmental strategies get thought through" (18).

The subsequent essay by Catrin Gersdorf, entitled "Nature in the Grid: American Literature, Urbanism, and Ecocriticism," focuses on gridiron pat-

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[1] Walden in Berlin. Installation by Tobias Hauser in Berlin at Potsdamer Platz. Photo by F. Mehring © 2002.

terns as a starting point to redescribe urban spatiality and reconceptualize the relationship between nature and culture. On the one hand, the grid boasts a reputation of being the most rational and democratic form in the production of space. On the other hand, the concept of the city is often rejected in the American cultural imaginary despite the fact that most of the nation's urban centers are built upon a grid pattern. Gersdorf challenges literary scholars to write a "critique of what Henri Lefebvre has described as the mental production of space in general, and of urban space in particular" (23). In a three-part structure, Gersdorf traces the place and function of the city in American literary culture, offers a close reading of Toni Morrison's novel *Jazz* as an example of how to approach literature as a narrative production of urban space, and positions the text within the discursive context of a new urbanism. Her analysis of *Jazz* sets out to show if and how the invasion of nature into the city grid can be narrated as a non-destructive process. Thereby, ecocritical consciousness could be freed from formulas that often rely on apocalyptic rhetoric or antiurban sentiments.

In her essay, "Somebody's got to get angry...," Leyla Haferkamp discusses the American journalist Carl Hiaasen's dark, satirical, and 'politically incorrect' novels about environmental politics in his native Florida, written in the pre-9/11 idyll of the 'mellow eighties.' Haferkamp's essay focuses on the most controversial figure in Hiaasen's eco-thrillers, Clinton Tyree aka Skink, an idealistic ex-governor turned 'wild' hermit engaging in acts of outright ecoterrorism, which can be traced back to the American strand of 'ecotage philosophy' as propagated in Edward Abbey's *Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975) and enacted in 'real life' by radical organizations such as the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) and the Animal Liberation Front (ALF). Skink, who Hiaasen has called his "moral compass," embodies, like Henry David Thoreau and John Muir, the 'transcultural interzone' between urbanity and 'pristine nature.' His mode of 'civil disobedience,' however, differs from that of Thoreau in that it is, much like that of the Unabomber, an explosive blend of intricate strategy and unbridled violence. Haferkamp's essay asks whether Hiaasen's propagation of ecoterrorism is a viable means of postmodern protest against the relentless commodification of the American landscape.

The next section in the book, "Transcultural Networks and the Media" begins with Gundolf S. Freyermuth's article "Edges & Nodes / Cities & Nets: The History and Theories of Networks and What They Tell Us about Urbanity in the Digital Age." In his essay, Freyermuth explains that the history of culture and urbanity represents largely a history of networks. From a broad historical perspective, Freyermuth confronts the question of how contemporary networks of transportation and communication shaped, changed, and informed both the experience of urban city life and the arts. While he recognizes a continuation of technological and cultural developments from the Renaissance through the Enlightenment into our digital age, he nevertheless makes it clear that the implementation of digital networking technologies is bringing about radical changes in urban life, namely its virtual empowerment and augmentation.

In "Images, Inc.: Visual Domains of the Corporation," Alan Trachtenberg takes a critical look at the visual forms of self-stylization of globally active corporations, including office interiors, cubicles, iconographic branding, and architectural designs. Based on the assumption that images are multivalent, polysemous, and ambiguous, Trachtenberg uncovers a paradoxical function of visual domains of corporations which offers a chance to escape manipulative efforts behind brand equity and idealized corporate images. By reading images of transcultural spaces in the corporate world against the grain, they reveal insights about a company undercutting the very message originally intended to convey. These counter-images, he argues, can serve as a potential weapon since it brings to the forefront what is "concealed in plain view on the surface."

In his article "The Persistence of the Panoramic: Technologies of Vision in American Culture from the 19th to the 21st Century," Alan Wallach turns to the commonplace landscape experience of panoramic vistas in order to explore the complex relation between viewer and viewed, spectator and spectacle. Based on the argument that landscape might be seen as a form of ideology, Wallach follows various examples of a totalizing vision during the last two centuries. Starting with large scale panoramas in late 18th century London, Wallach goes on to examine the vistas enshrined by the artists of the Hudson River School in the United States and arrives at the worldwide perception of Hollywood spectacles in CinemaScope and the IMAX experience. With the advent of global access to satellite photography on the Internet, Wallach argues that the thrill of the panoptic sublime continues a mode of reception that reinforces the viewer to identify with a dominant power.

Rolf Giesen investigates the historical traces in the media of (trick) photography and film in order to address the evolution of synthetic actors and the creation of artificial spaces, thereby creating a nexus between artistic innovations in Germany, the United States, and China. In his article, "Metropolis, City of the Dead," Giesen uses the stop-motion animation of German expressionist film artists as a starting point to ask far-reaching questions about representations in synthetic societies, artificial intelligence, and international challenges in a not too distant future, in which the ideal interface between human and digital environments will have been achieved.

Stefan L. Brandt's essay "Open City, Closed Space: Metropolitan Aesthetics in American Literature from Brown to DeLillo" uses the notion of *openness* *as built fabric* from the work of urban theorist Richard Sennett to put forward an argument regarding the chiastic patterns of urban experience. As Brandt contends, negotiations of city life in U.S. literature have always been marked by a double structure: The modern ideal of the 'Open City' simultaneously restricts the new opportunities it suggests through elements of *textual closure*. On the other side, the image of the 'city as labyrinth' may induce patterns of openness by inviting readers to transform existing boundaries and explore

the potentially *liberating* character of urbanity. As Brandt demonstrates in his readings of works by Brown, Poe, Whitman, and Dos Passos, the concept of the 'Open City' lends itself to a vision of fluctuation which inevitably results in a process of shrinking. In post-9/11 literature (DeLillo, Auster, Foer), the 'shrinking city' is symbolically expanded through what Brandt, borrowing a phrase by Bakhtin, calls urban fiction's "chronotopic imagination," namely, its tendency to overcome the traumatic events of 9/11 by inventing 'temporal spaces' that help the protagonists find a refuge from their state of *anomie*.

Georg Drennig's article "Cities of Desire: Ecotopia and the Mainstreet Cascadia Imaginary" examines the tactics and strategies of constructing an alternative urbanity in Ernst Callenbach's *Ecotopia*, applying these insights to a reading of urban spaces in the Pacific Northwest of the United States and Canada. According to Drennig, the urban model suggested in Callenbach's utopian novel challenges hegemonic notions of order by dissolving the equation of wilderness with anarchy and by renegotiating the concept of urbanity as an ordered space. The essay scrutinizes the strategies of planners and politicians and the tactics of local movements from the perspective of Callenbach's vision of a counter-hegemonic landscape. A main focus in the final part of his essay is placed upon what Drennig calls "the tactical Cascadia, the daily – or extraordinary – practices that re-make or challenge strategic space and its discourses" (156).

The essay by Sonja Georgi, "Ethnic Space and the Commodofication of Urbanity," looks at the intersection of urban space and ethnicity in the novel *Salt Fish Girl* by Chinese-Canadian writer Larissa Lai. In the novel, Georgi argues, poverty, violence, and ecological disasters have contaminated both society and nature, rendering the North American suburb into a company-owned compound. In line with urban dystopias of the 1990s (e.g., Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and Marge Piercy's *He, She and It*), Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* projects current trends of the privatization of public space into the near future and shows how collective cultural histories and individual agencies are re-appropriated by marginalized subjects. Tying in with Donna Haraway's idea of the cyborg as a "disassembled and reassembled postmodern collective and personal self" ("A Cyborg Manifesto" 163), Georgi's essay seeks to examine how Lai discusses a future in which ethnic bodies have become commodities, tracing how marginalized subjects reclaim agency in this dystopian space.

Jean Kempf, in his article "The American Small Town and the Reconstruction of Space," holds that the concept of the 'small town' was developed in the post-Civil-War era as a marker of community and national becoming. Unlike 'international' images such as the 'American Dream,' the 'small town' remained "a purely *domestic* object, one very little shared by the rest of the world" (176). Within this imagery, 'America' could be constructed as a mental, emotional, and memorial space, through which 'American-ness' was constituted and communicated. In Kempf's reading, the fictional 'small town' – to be found in countless works of American literature, film, photography and painting – is not more than a "fantastic fallacy" (188), a hybrid space in which reality and fiction are symbolically entwined.

Frank Mehring, in his opening essay for the fourth section of the book, "Transformations in the Perception of the Environment," combines Richard Rorty's neo-pragmatic model with theories of ecocriticism in order to re-assess the African encounters in the oeuvre of Ernest Hemingway. Following Winfried Fluck's assumption that "physical space has to become mental space or more precisely, imaginary space" (25), Mehring reads authorial silences to uncover "cultural (in)difference" and asks about ethical repercussions. In his essay "Tourism of Doom: In Search of Hemingway's 'Snow' on Kilimanjaro in the New Millennium," Mehring argues that many of Hemingway's protagonists are incurious and inattentive to the environment they have sought to find refuge in. Mehring's close reading of "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" reveals that the protagonist Harry represents an unredeemable city dweller by deconstructing his stated goal of finding salvation in Africa. Mehring suggests a re-contextualization of Hemingway's concept of 'whiteness' in the metaphysical Masai term 'Ngàje Ngài' (House of God) in order to concentrate on its function in a changed discourse on African safaris and the trekking industry at Mount Kilimanjaro in the New Millennium.

Ralph J. Poole's essay "Bastardized History" discusses Elif Shafak's English-language novels *The Saint of Incipient Insanities* and *The Bastard of Istanbul* as postcolonial and global narratives dealing with questions of ethnicity and nationality. At once satiric post-9/11 migration stories and humorous trans-cultural love tales, Shafak's novels address highly charged issues like the interlacing of the personal and the political in the age of globalization. Poole argues that these novels, even though coming across as at times humorous tales of migration, ultimately create rather disturbing and pessimistic vistas on the state of art of transculturation. In Shafak's writings, urban America – as a multicultural and potentially inhospitable 'New World' – serves as backdrop for addressing the topic of the futility of finding a home within an increasingly alienated world. Instead of a globalized understanding of ethnic diversity, Poole claims, the novels precariously negotiate the limited and transitional space of transculturation.

Astrid M. Fellner addresses the issue of transcultural poetics with respect to the work of Afro-Caribbean Canadian poet Dionne Brand. Fellner's essay, "Translating Toronto on a Bicycle," analyzes Brand's works *What We All Long For* and *Thirsty* as documents of transcultural exchange which capture boundary crossings on different levels: national, cultural, ethnic/racial, and sexual. In Brand's works, Toronto becomes a space of cultural translation where the protagonists translate the city's cultural and spatial divisions by creating points of contact. Carla, one of the protagonists in *What We All Long For*, tries to make sense of the totality of the city and longs for a coherent sense of self by exploring different areas of the city on her bicycle, thereby connecting both the different parts of her fractured identity as well as the different fragments of the city. As Fellner shows in her essay, the bicycle here

functions as a vehicle which cuts across multiple 'borderlines,' exposing the city's fragments as areas of discontinuity.

Bernd Herzogenrath's article commences the fifth section of the book, "Sounding Nature - Reading Nature in the Age of Environmental Crises." Entitled "A 'Meteorology of Sound:' Composing Nature in the 20th and 21st Centuries," Herzogenrath's essay investigates the connection between nature, weather, and music in contemporary American culture, paying special attention to the shift from representing subjective effects of weather phenomena in 18th and 19th century music to modes of reproduction of the process and dynamic of weather employed by avant-garde composers of the 20th and 21st centuries. For his transcultural and transmedial approaches, he draws on the wide-ranging oeuvres of Charles Ives, John Cage, and John Luther Adams. Taking his cues from observations by Henry David Thoreau, Herzogenrath reconnects Adams's insistence that nature has no need to be translated or represented with what could ultimately be described as an ecology of music heard and communicated by Thoreau one and a half centuries before.

Michael Sauter's piece "How do I get out?" targets the construction of transcultural places as sanctuary in Philip Roth's novel *The Human Stain*. Utilizing Hubert Zapf's theory of "Literature as Cultural Ecology" as a methodological approach, Sauter looks at the role of literature as cultural-critical metadiscourse, imaginative counterdiscourse, and reintegrative interdiscourse. His analysis of Roth's *The Human Stain* focuses on the two geographical settings of the novel, New York City and its suburbs as well as the area around Athena College and Nathan Zuckerman's rural Berkshire retreat. The essay shows that the interrelationship between inner city, suburb and countryside structures the novel, contributing to a complex social dynamics which can be tied back to the cultural tensions existing between these different locations.

In "Wilderness Woes: Negotiating Discourse and Environment in Early American Captivity Narratives," Alexander Starre demonstrates that historical visions of American nature have often been intricately tied to the concept of 'wilderness.' This concept, Starre claims, has been imported from biblical discourse by the Puritan settlers of New England. In the forced encounter of English captives with the New England environment during the Indian wars at the turn of the 18th century, the imagined 'wilderness' of Puritan discourse is brought, in analogy to a phrase by Thomas Paine, "to the touchstone of nature" (276). With the immensely popular genre of the captivity narrative, the early development of a specifically American concept of nature becomes more and more visible. While reflecting on recent ecocritical work, Starre's essay sheds light on the spatial and ecological constructions of captivity narrative authors such as Mary Rowlandson, John Williams, and John Gyles.

Cheryl Lousley, in her article "Ethics, Nature, and the Stranger: Cosmopolitanism in Dionne Brand's Long Poems *Thirsty* and *Inventory*," argues that a main reason for the prominence of urbanity in debates about globalization lies in the emergence of economically powerful and racially and culturally diverse 'global cities.' The global city is seen as either threatening to undermine the nation-state and its cultural, civic, and welfare protections, or announcing the beginning of a virtuous cosmopolitanism which might supersede nationalist exclusions. Concentrating on the figure of the 'stranger' in Brand's writings (also a key figure in theories of cosmopolitanism), the essay discusses questions of political and ethical consideration as well as grief in the long poems *Thirsty* and *Inventory* – issues which seem to culminate in a cosmopolitan response to global environmental destruction.

The final section of the book, entitled "Artists' Forum," offers an alternative approach to mapping, describing, and understanding spaces as (trans)cultural constructs. The collaboration between German pianist Jens Barnieck and American writer/photographer Wheeler Sparks traces the life of Jewish German émigré poet, pedagogue and professor of the classics Vera Lachmann. Having escaped the Nazi terror regime in 1939 she, after an odyssey of job search, eventually secured a professorship at Brooklyn College in New York City. In 1944, Lachmann established a summer camp for boys in North Carolina, which existed for almost twenty years. This now forgotten site in the woods of the Blue Ridge Mountains influenced a generation of American boys born to Jewish German emigrants. The transatlantic theme led Barnieck and Sparks to visit and write about the former Camp Catawba. In a lyrical way, the account describes their journey to the camp, evoking its transcultural spirit, tracing its innovative pedagogical approach, and revealing its enduring artistic impact. Through impressionistic images and diligent research, including the unearthing of neglected musical scores composed at the camp, the two artists represent a vivid example of how a site can be experienced, translated, and creatively communicated as a transcultural space.

Our theoretical approach to transcultural spaces follows an understanding of American Studies which Winfried Fluck and Thomas Claviez recently defined as a "joint, interdisciplinary academic endeavor to gain systematic knowledge about American society and culture in order to understand the historical and present-day meaning and significance of the United States" (ix). At the same time, we recognize that the challenges of urbanity, ecology, and the environment require us to go beyond the concept of the 'nation state' in order to understand the global dimensions of this nexus. With this volume we hope to contribute to the ongoing debates on the transculturality of 'space' which emerged after the 'transnational turn' as well as to a discourse that, as we believe, could be the starting point for an 'ecological turn.'

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