SPECIAL SECTION ON CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

Introduction: Mobility, Transfers, and Cultural Appropriation

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In his recent “manifesto” for future “mobility studies,” Stephen Greenblatt demands that studies investigating mobility from a cultural perspective should (a) make sure not to ignore mobility in the “literal sense,” that is, the “physical, infrastructural, and institutional conditions of movement,” (b) pay attention to “hidden” as well as “conspicuous” forms of movement, (c) look at the “contact zones” of cultural transfer, (d) consider the “tension between individual agency and structural constraint” in these processes and, finally, (e) not forget the “sensation” of “locality,” and the “allure” of “local cultures.”¹

The investigations into “cultural appropriation” presented in this special section can be considered as a complement, or even a supplementary counterpart to studies of (cultural) mobility, analyzing transformative processes within local cultures as consequences of the movement of things, concepts, institutions, etc.² Studies within the framework of cultural appropriation usually do not take movement as their methodological starting point. Instead, they begin with observations of how cultures make something considered to be culturally alien their own, that is, how they localize mobile things. Indeed, one could even say that by distinguishing between local and foreign objects—that is, by drawing a distinction between “us” and “them,” and by establishing borders between “here” and “there”—cultures first create the possibility of observing movement.

Starting from locality, studies of cultural appropriation look at those actors that facilitate appropriations as well as the structural constraints that determine these; they further examine the contact zones where mobile things enter a culture; they investigate hidden movements that underlie such conspicuous entrances; and finally, they look at the physical, infrastructural, and institutional conditions of travel and transport that enable the movement of things, concepts, and human beings. This special section, then, is about the movement of things and their transfer into new contexts. Most of all, however, it is about the work of cultural appropriation that such processes make necessary and that makes such processes possible.

“Appropriation,” first of all, means to make a thing one’s own. Originally, these “things” were common goods—land, for example—that were turned into private property. In a world where everything always seems to be owned by someone already, cultural appropriation often takes on a negative connotation—that of theft³—or it becomes attributed with some swashbuckling mentality that resists capitalist notions of property.⁴ In any case, cultural appropriation means that things, perceived as belonging to another culture, are now treated as part of one’s own.⁵ For one culture to use another’s things and for such things to be transferred to another culture, however, they have to be mobilized first. The concept of “cultural appropriation,” thus, pays specific attention to national, regional, ethnic, and other cultural borders, to the specific role of actors in crossing such borders and power relations involved in the transfer of goods, technologies, or institutions.

To make an object one’s own means to give meaning and value to the object in question. Value, however, is culture-specific. Because certain people handle certain objects in specific ways, and because they possess, protect, present, withdraw, and represent these, objects are placed upon the “mattering maps”⁶ of cultures. Thus, appropriation becomes a constant and inevitably ongoing process of integrating things into a “culturally constituted world,” a “world of everyday experience in which the phenomenal world presents itself to the senses of the individual, fully shaped and constituted by the beliefs and assumptions of his or her culture.”⁷ Cultural appropriation, thus, deals with objects that are first perceived as being strange, foreign or simply new and then gradually become more familiar. Appropriation, however, does not mean that all former connotations of the object in question have to be erased; rather, the framed foreign appeal can become part of its attraction.

Appropriation can be an act not only of receiving or taking, of making something part (legally or not) of one’s culture, but also of giving, of transforming, of shaping something one owns in order to place it upon the mattering maps of others. The concept of cultural appropriation, therefore, includes also those acts where individuals, companies, or institutions fashion objects in order to “sell” them, either within their own or to another culture.

Studies of cultural appropriation necessarily concentrate on processes of signification. However, it is as important to pay attention to the material basis of things appropriated. Even concepts and institutions do not simply spread or diffuse, as if moved by an invisible hand (progress? civilization?); they are brought—materialized in one form or another, if only in the memory or habitus of an individual—to other places through very mundane and material means of transport. It is essential, therefore, to be attentive to actors who move things and bring them into new contexts,

as well as to what motivates them and to the means of transport they use. It is these constraints of agency and materiality that prefigure the possibilities of signification.

Appropriation is by no means a unidirectional activity, determined by only one group of actors. Often, the few individuals who introduce a thing—which, especially in modern times, is more often than not a globally distributed consumer good—into a new culture are unable or unwilling to determine its meaning or value. The value of an object, consequently, is subject to debate, and struggles over who can define the meaning of an object are subject to power relations. Migrants, multinational corporations or state agencies may all try their best to determine the meaning of a thing within a culture. However, consumers and other users appropriate a new thing according to their particular needs and desires or according to their fears or anxieties. In most cases, the appropriate(d) meaning of a (new) thing within a culture is determined through a reciprocal process of negotiation between those who introduce a thing and those who receive it—and quite often it is yet another group that mediates this process. Sometimes, however, things refuse to accept the meaning the various actors try to attach to them and they develop a life of their own.

Interested in mobility and cultural transfer, all studies presented in this special section stand on the border of various disciplines, combining material-empirical, semantic-hermeneutic and ethnographic studies. The contributors stem from the departments of American studies, history, media studies, and Scandinavian studies, but all are united in a specific interest in the role of actors and the material conditions of transport in processes of cultural appropriation. The aim of this special section is to present mobility as an important factor in such processes of cultural appropriation, and to present appropriation as an important factor in processes of mobility.

Frederike Felcht's "'Constantly in motion': Appropriation and Hans Christian Andersen's Texts" studies the twofold status of literary works as agents and objects of appropriation. Hans Christian Andersen, known to most as the author of famous fairytales like *The Little Mermaid* or *The Ugly Duckling*, is a particularly interesting case of appropriating a globalized world through texts, and of appropriating texts for an international market. Felcht explores how Andersen, on the one hand, used his writing to make the foreign places he visited part of his own culture; on the other hand, we can see how Andersen fashioned his books in ways that facilitated his reception beyond the small borders of his native Denmark. In a way, Andersen's social and geographical personal mobility made possible the mobility of his works—and vice versa. In order to examine this dialectic, Felcht relates specific actions of writers, publishers, and critics to structures of transportation and distribution. She shows how literary works

become contact zones where readers can encounter foreign countries and international authors, but also how mobilized books become agents of cultural appropriation.

Margrit Schulte Beerbühl's "Migration, Transfer and Appropriation: German Pork Butchers in Britain" examines the appropriation of German *Wurst*, a thing produced according to culturally specific knowledge systems, into British culture. The text focuses on those actors who brought their production skills to Britain and the circumstances that led to their migration and settlement, as well as on the networks of travel that these migrants used. In Stephen Greenblatt's almost Marxist terms, Beerbühl reveals the mundane hardships of migrants hidden behind the conspicuous presence of foreign foodstuff on the consumer market. Furthermore, the text explores the contact zones between German producers and British consumers, that is, sites where various actors negotiate questions of value. Similar to Frederike Felcht's analysis of the distribution of Andersen's texts, Schulte-Beerbühl emphasizes the importance of networks that integrate human relations and material-technological connections.

My own contribution to this special section, "Travelling Detectives: Twofold Mobility in the Appropriation of Crime Fiction in Interwar Germany," examines the transfer of American dime novel entertainment to the German market. The text focuses on aspects of mobility within American culture that are highlighted in popular crime fiction to make such fictions attractive to German appropriation. More than steady German police officers, the mobile American detective managed to move German readers. Furthermore, a literal mobility made possible by railroad networks is revealed as a hidden agent in processes of cultural transfer; trains, finally, are presented as specific contact zones between readers and foreign cultures, mediated through the dime novel.

Carsten Schinko's concluding remarks on the mobilization of appropriation, and the political metaphors and cultural transactions this encompasses, reflect at a more abstract level on some recurring theoretical issues that the more empirical case studies only touch upon. What exactly is the relation between property and culture that the term "cultural appropriation" suggests? Who owns culture, and can it be transferred? Is appropriation theft? Is property bound to locality? Within a world of (social) mobility, should all possessions be expropriated?

The contributors to this special section hope that the "reverse perspective" they provide—that is, an emphasis on acts of localization rather than mobilization—offers the reader a fruitful angle to reconsider the often dialectical relations between locality and mobility, between hidden and conspicuous forms of movements, and between the role of individual agency and structural constraints in processes of cultural transfer.

Notes

1. Stephen Greenblatt, "A Mobility Studies Manifesto," in *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 250–253.
2. The foundations for such a concept of cultural appropriation were laid within the DFG-funded research project "Travelling Goods // Travelling Moods: A Transcultural Study of the Acculturation of Consumer Goods, 1918–1939." First results of this project have been published as Stefan Bauernschmidt and Christian Huck, eds., *Travelling Goods, Travelling Moods: Varieties of Cultural Appropriations, 1850–1950* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2012).
3. See Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao, eds., *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997).
4. See Dick Hebdige, "The Meaning of Mod," in *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-war Britain*, ed. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (London: Routledge, 1993 [1976]), 87–98; Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984 [1980]).
5. Whereas Roger Silverstone, Eric Hirsch and David Morley restrict "appropriation" to an initial phase, I understand it to mean the complete process they describe in "Information and Communication Technologies and the Moral Economy of the Household," in *Consuming Technologies: Media and Information in Domestic Spaces*, ed. Roger Silverstone and Eric Hirsch (New York: Routledge, 1992), 15–29; cf. Hans Peter Hahn, "Global Goods and the Process of Appropriation," in *Between Resistance and Expansion*, ed. Peter Probst and Gerd Spittler (Münster: Lit, 2004), 211–230.
6. Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (London: Routledge, 1992), 287.
7. Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 72–73.

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