With this rich and thought-provoking monograph, Chunjie Zhang joins a distinguished group of scholars in postcolonial studies who are both deeply indebted to and constructively critical of Edward Said’s pioneering work on Orientalism. Moving away from a simple binary of empire and Enlightenment, Zhang focuses instead on the complex entanglements that existed between Europeans and non-Europeans in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, entanglements that influenced German cultural production in profound ways. As she writes in her introduction, she aims to produce dialectical readings that uncover “moments in which non-European cultures influence German thinking and co-construct the network of knowledge,” while also acknowledging how these texts contributed to conceptions of “European superiority and colonial fantasies” (pp. 10, 13).

Transculturality and German Discourse is innovative in its conception and ambitious in scope. Taking her cue from colleagues in British and Francophone studies, Zhang rightly reminds us that the imperialism of the late nineteenth century was only just taking shape around 1800, and that the global geopolitical constellation at the time is best understood as polycentric rather than as clearly dominated by Europe. This foundational insight then serves as the basis for readings of a wide range of German texts that engage with the non-European world, from the travel writings of Georg Forster to the plays of the popular dramatist August von Kotzebue to Immanuel Kant’s work on physical geography. In her introductory chapter, Zhang situates her project vis-a-vis the existing scholarship, acknowledging the important work of, among others, Suzanne Zantop (Colonial Fantasies, 1997), Russell Berman (Enlightenment or Empire, 1998), and Sankar Muthu (Enlightenment against Empire, 2003) while also making a convincing case for the inadequacy of the very category of “empire” in this period. In this introduction, Zhang successfully conveys the potential of her approach, which adopts instead the conceptual lens of “transculturality” to generate new insights, especially as regards the impact of non-Europeans on German textual production.

The six individual chapters flesh out this impact on the basis of specific case studies. Zhang’s selection of texts is appealingly interdisciplinary, ranging from travel writing to popular drama to philosophy, and each of the chapters contains a great deal of information on representations of non-Europeans in eighteenth-century Germany as well as valuable insights related to the transcultural contexts out of which these works emerged. While most of them have received some attention in the scholarship, Zhang’s approach frequently offers a fresh perspective on their conditions of production as well as their contents. In the chapters on Forster and Adelbert von Chamisso, for example, she foregrounds the degree to which encounters with the islanders they visit destabilize pre-existing epistemological frameworks, giving rise to new ways of thinking about difference and also to new modes of writing. The chapter on Joachim Heinrich Campe highlights the transcultural genealogy of the Robinsonade as genre and also shows how Campe’s technology-based model of the modern self in Robinson the Younger (1824) depends on a “double-consciousness,” one in which the individual must attempt to inhabit both European and non-European subjectivities simulta-
neously. In her discussion of a series of Kotzebue’s plays, Zhang demonstrates that non-European characters and intercultural conflicts play a key structural role in the unfolding of the plot. These characters and conflicts, she explains, should not be dismissed as exotic ornamentation; rather, they create the very conditions of possibility for the happy endings for which Kotzebue is so well known. The final two chapters, which deal with philosophical texts, describe the epistemological challenges posed by confrontations with non-European knowledges to the European intellectual tradition. In her chapter on Johann Gottfried Herder, Zhang reveals the limits of Herder’s relativism, showing how his insistence on cultural uniqueness is framed by a developmental conception of history that casts the East as the locus of humankind’s immaturity. In addition, she makes the case that we need to see the tensions that fracture his work not in terms of a colonialist imaginary but as an uneasy response—a kind of reaction formation—to the challenge posed by a powerful non-European world. Her final, brief chapter on Kant presents the intriguing possibility of reading Kant’s published lectures on physical geography as a “multi-authored” text, one reflecting a complex “transcultural consciousness” which, Zhang asserts, “cannot be properly incorporated in systematic thinking” (p. 170).

There is much to admire in Zhang’s analysis. On a macro level, perhaps her most significant contribution is to increase dramatically the visibility of non-European contributions to eighteenth-century German texts. An awareness of the depth and breadth of the transcultural character of these texts is not as widespread as it should be among German studies scholars, and Zhang’s book is likely to generate a good deal of additional research in this area. Her overarching thesis regarding the need to move away from a model of “empire” when dealing with eighteenth-century Germany is also compelling. In terms of the analyses contained in the individual chapters, Zhang is especially good at producing multifaceted and multilayered interpretations of the entanglements of European and non-European elements in the texts she considers. She moves beyond a simple interrogation of how non-Europeans are represented to consider influence and impact on a structural level. Some of Zhang’s most suggestive moments come when she points to rhetorical and generic transformations that stem from encounter with a non-European Other, as when she describes Chamisso’s shift from “the genre of scientific travel writing ... to a mixed genre of autobiography and travelogue” (p. 48). This intriguing line of argumentation appears in virtually all the chapters and leads to some striking insights.

A few aspects of the argument, however, may give even an enthusiastic reader pause. At times I found myself wondering about Zhang’s claims regarding the novelty of her intervention. Does Transculturality and German Discourse incorporate the insights of earlier postcolonial theory while transcending its limitations to open up genuinely new perspectives on the representation of non-Europeans in the eighteenth century? Or does it hearken back to earlier criticisms of postcolonial interpretations for their one-sided readings of the Enlightenment? The universalizing orientation of the European Enlightenment does, after all, provide ample conceptual resources for stressing “emotional commonality” across cultures (p. 39) and “universal fraternity” (p. 114). In her chapter on Forster, Zhang writes: “Forster’s empathy, provoked by various encounters with the South Pacific Islanders, complicates the unidirectional application of Enlightenment ideology of civilization and historical teleology” (p. 42). Enlightenment ideology, however, is multifaceted and also includes a belief in a set of universally shared human cognitive and emotional capacities, including empathy (think of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s theory of Mitleid or sympathy), so it is not self-evident that Forster’s reaction is a direct consequence of his actual encounter with non-Europeans.

One can certainly argue that this Enlightenment ideology is always already shaped by the encounter with non-European peoples. This point is important, but it has been made by others in some detail. Already in 1935, Paul Hazard wrote in The Crisis of the European Mind of the enormous impact of global travel on the evolution of European thought in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. More recently, and in more direct proximity to the older paradigm of postcolonial theory that Zhang seeks to build upon and transcend, Russell Berman argued for a nuanced understanding of the encounter between European travelers and indigenous populations. His assertion is worth quoting at length:

For all the power and violence we may associate with the notion of colonization, colonialism surely also always necessarily entails the encounter—or confrontation or transmission or competition or infusion—between different social systems and cultural paradigms. We may first ask how the metropolitan voyager, for example, the traveler from Germany, understands the space of geography, but once that traveler reaches the foreign land, the colonial territory, or for that matter, any other territory, we have at
least to wonder whether that encounter with new material, new people, new ideas, leaves any trace. Does experience matter? Or should we imagine every traveler to be always caught up fully in the codes and models of the metropolis? Are tourists just “programmed” by their presuppositions or can they assimilate something new and different? Some versions of discourse theory and accounts of “Orientalism” tend to emphasize the power of overriding paradigms for epistemes, which structure the possibilities of consciousness in advance.[1]

Zhang is of course aware of Berman and mentions him in the introduction to her study. Her own unique contribution, as she defines it, is to recover and focus on the moments of “non-European agency” that leave traces in the texts she considers. She rightly wants to move away from readings in which “non-Europeans are mourned merely as the passive and the exploited colonized” (p. 7). The question that readers must ask after reading Zhang’s book is whether her insistence on “non-European agency” (p. 7) and the “impact of non-European knowledge” (p. 14) constitutes a truly new and more productive way of approaching these encounters. It seems reasonable for Nicolas Thomas, whom Zhang cites, to want to emphasize the agency of the Oceanic Islanders in the material exchanges with Europeans, but to claim that Chamisso’s travel memoir is “co-written by the islanders” (p. 43) seems like a leap into the metaphorical, and some readers may wonder whether it is a leap worth making. With regard to “non-European knowledge,” Zhang is at her most persuasive when she adduces specific examples of non-European technologies, techniques, or theories that influence European representations, as in the case of Kadu’s boat or his contributions to Chamisso’s linguistic work. At other points in her analysis, the specific referents of the phrase “non-European knowledge”—and the reasons why she thinks “knowledge” is the best term for capturing the phenomena described—need to be more fully fleshed out. Does the utopian humanity embodied by the Peruvian character Rolla in Die Sonnenjungfrau (1816) really reflect Kotzebue’s incorporation of non-European knowledge? Even if we bracket the possible objection that this character is simply a projection screen for quintessentially European ideals, we can still ask whether other categories, such as discourse or cultural norms, might be better suited to describe the mechanisms of transference here.

In the final analysis, however, a certain indeterminacy in Zhang’s application of her conceptual categories can be seen as a strength of her study, since it forces the reader to wrestle with the complexity of the encounters she eloquently describes, a complexity that at times seems to transcend the bounds of her own conceptual framework. For this reason, and in light of its other strengths, Transculturality and German Discourse is a book that deserves a wide readership. It will likely serve as a touchstone for further research in German postcolonial studies in years to come.

Note

[1]. Russell Berman, Enlightenment or Empire: Colonial Discourse in German Culture (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 4.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-tgs


URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=53125

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.