

Stephen Greenblatt, ed. *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Print. 271 pp.

ERJA VETTENRANTA,
THE GRADUATE CENTER – CUNY

Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto is a collection of essays edited by Stephen Greenblatt in an effort to modify conventional ways of thinking of and analyzing cultural change. Greenblatt's introduction addresses some of the problems with traditional models of cultural mobility at a time when contemporary reality seems to contradict not only older, nationalist ideals of cultural autochthony but also newer, post-nationalist notions of multicultural and hybrid identities. The book consists of six chapters by scholars looking into specific cases of physical and cultural movement, contamination, adaptation, or appropriation, vis-à-vis the tenacity of particular local, ethnic, religious, and other group identities. Uniting all these "microhistories of 'displaced' things and persons" (17) is the authors' interest in the vital but unpredictable interaction between cultural persistence and change. This dialectic, then, forms the core idea of the five-point "A mobility studies manifesto," a set of basic principles that Greenblatt outlines at the end of the book in order to orient new inquiries in literary and cultural studies.

The preoccupation that Greenblatt, together with the contributing scholars, expresses towards existing cultural paradigms is not in itself new. The rapid technological developments of the past two decades have radically reshaped our reality in ways that have everywhere challenged traditional ideas of national and cultural identities. However, as the editor notes at the beginning of his introduction, identity politics have proven to be far from obsolete despite the global economy and the increasingly free movement of objects, people, and practices. Old and new nation states coexist today with transnational or transcultural groupings based on religious, economic or other personal interests in a world that is becoming peculiarly global and local at the same time.

Why this condition should be so often ignored, or only mentioned in passing, in literary and historical scholarship is one of the questions that the volume raises. Greenblatt's introduction effectively argues for a need in today's Academia to move beyond assumptions of the originary stability of cultures: "The reality . . . is more about nomads than natives" (6). Yet the editor underlines that there is more to the story than incessant change and variation. To prove his point, he gives examples of two traditional models of cultural change: *Translatio imperii*—the idea of "translation" of power over subsequent empires—and the concept of *figura*—the claim of emerging cultural forms to bring about the fulfillment of earlier ones, such as Christianity's actualization of various figures and storylines of the Hebrew Scriptures. Greenblatt demonstrates how neither process involves a simple overhaul of outdated cultural forms but rather a complex intertwining of destruction and persistence of the older structures. In similar fashion, each of the book's chapters highlights at once the undetermined, contingent nature of cultural transformation and the convenient "illusion that mobility in one particular direction or another is predestined" (16).

Although Greenblatt and the other authors largely avoid using specific terminology, the project laid out by *Cultural Mobility* has much in common with the general idea in the

humanities and social sciences of an emerging era of Transmodernity. Rosa María Rodríguez Magda has described this new cultural model as a way to overcome the nihilistic relativism and endless fragmentation of postmodern thinking. In order to comprehend the characteristics of the present moment, one must acknowledge the tendency to cling to tradition and reason, the “useful fiction” of modernity that operates simultaneously with the constant transformation and increasing transnationalization of economic and social structures (6, “Transmodernidad: un nuevo paradigma.” *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* 1:1 (2011), my translation). This new model represents an amalgam of Modernity’s progressive objectives and Postmodernity’s ironic irreverence, but without the latter’s “innocent rupture” (6).

Along similar dialectical dynamics, the chapters of *Cultural Mobility* attempt to account for the interplay between forces of cultural diffusion and the various constraints they meet in different historical and socio-political contexts, all the while taking notice of the paradoxical sense of rootedness that underlies the way cultures are essentially experienced. These analyses are not, as Greenblatt emphasizes, an attempt to construct an abstract theoretical or methodological system, nor can they “be adequately summed up by the simple contrast between optimistic and pessimistic visions of cultural mobility” (18). Rather, they examine specific moments and locations of mobility in order to call attention to some of the mechanisms at work when people, products and practices move through time or space—their simultaneous “places and their [more or less conspicuous] out-of-placeness” (19). It might also be observed that the group of investigators participating in the volume reflects the new transnational reality that calls for new academic approaches: among them are a Croatian who studies the Portuguese Goa, a Hungarian who examines Chinese overseas migration, a German who investigates the American slavery, and an American who works on Shakespeare.

In contrast to the effort of the transmodern paradigm to consider the specificity of contemporary reality, these case studies foreground the fact that cultural mobility is nothing new, nor is it characteristic to particular economic conditions: “world culture does not depend on recent events or on a transient wave of American triumphalism or on recent technological innovations” (5). To illustrate this, the topics of the essays range from sixteenth-century colonial experiences to early modern and contemporary rewritings of a particularly mobile story, from eighteenth-century ideas on world literature to twentieth-century re-readings of culturally mobile slave narratives, and from struggles for cultural agency in present-day communist China to the processes of transcultural exchange in Middle Eastern performance and storytelling.

The ancient origins of global cultural exchange become clear to the reader in Greenblatt’s introductory examples of *translatio imperii* and *figura* models as well as in the two opening chapters of the book. In the first one, Ines G. Zupanov explores the reactions of two Portuguese authors in sixteenth-century Goa to the colony’s “fantastically dynamic and disturbingly transitive . . . order” (32). While both of these texts demonstrate the need to provide a sense of belonging and stability to counterweight the permanent mobility of the expatriate experience, they nonetheless disagree widely as to the causes, symptoms and cures for the ills of the tropics. The first—written by a physician, pharmacist and botanist—represents a defense of mobility and the use of local medicines and remedies to help acclimatize the body against the physical challenges of the new environment. The second—by a theologian and archbishop—prescribes the fixity of the evangelical law to counter the evils of the fleshly and moral corruption and to guarantee the peaceful immobility of the soul

within the deterritorialized body. These contradictory assumptions provide evidence of the lack of divinely destined or legitimized outcomes in cultural transformations that seem to result more from chance encounters.

In the second chapter, Greenblatt's starting point is Shakespeare's practice of Renaissance *imitatio*, the "open-ended appropriation, adaptation, and transformation" (76) of diverse classical and early modern sources. Following in these footsteps, Greenblatt and the American playwright Charles Mee adapt for the twenty-first century audiences an eighteenth century version of Shakespeare's lost play *Cardenio*, itself a reworking of a story dispersed within Miguel de Cervantes' novel *Don Quixote*. Greenblatt then commissions various more theater companies around the world to do the same. The emerging productions all confirm the writer's own conclusion that the new work quite magically materializes from an unforeseeable "interplay of freedom and constraint" (89) in the meeting of the early seventeenth-century material with our own particular sensibilities and values. As the examples of the article demonstrate, the achievement of movement by Shakespeare or any other playwright does not lie solely in the mobilization of earlier stories, but also in the vital openness of the adaptations that lends these to further reinterpretation and metamorphosis.

Each of the following chapters brings these kinds of unexpected connections between people and cultural objects and practices closer to our own historical moment. While chapters three and four focus on the mobility of nineteenth century European and American fiction, chapters five and six move away from the Western world to examine more contemporary cultural phenomena in China and the Middle East. What makes this chronological ordering of the various studies interesting is the way in which they almost seem to form one narrative whole by building upon one another's conclusions despite the diversity of their authors and the range of their articles' subject matter. For instance, Županov's closing note about the endlessly repeated cultural task of turning nomadic and conquering elements and people into native ones is further developed in the chapters on Shakespeare's adaptations and on Goethe's notion of a "world literature" in dialogue with various national literatures. Similarly, Greenblatt's suggestion about cultural mobility as a (deliberate) misunderstanding plays out in subsequent articles, especially the one on the (mis)readings of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* at various historical junctures in Germany.

The fourth and fifth chapters present an interesting pair where the first seems to pave the way and provide the method of investigation for the latter. Reinhard Meyer-Kalkus starts with an examination of Goethe's concept of "world literature" (*Weltliteratur*) in order to draw conclusions about the task of today's literary and cultural critics. In contrast to the excessively provincial focus of the Romantics, Goethe saw the local, regional and national literature in relation to and emerging from its interactions with other literary traditions. Through translation and the consequent reciprocal recognition across political and linguistic borders, one could arrive at an "altered self-understanding" (105), a prerequisite in Goethe's view for less parochial national literatures. Without these, argued Goethe, a truly cosmopolitan *Weltliteratur* was also unimaginable. By the same token, Meyer-Kalkus outlines a concept of new transnational literary scholarship that should assess the scope of cultural mobility "by keeping its [local] counterweights in view" (117).

This is precisely what Heike Paul achieves in her chapter on the transatlantic mobility of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and other American slave narratives. As if following her colleague's plan of study, Paul analyzes readings of these novels in Germany by placing them in the specific historical and social milieus where they were received. In such a way, she is able to bring out, as Meyer-Kalkus suggests, literature's ability to function as a meaningful system of cultural

interpretation. The essay clearly demonstrates, once again, the “highly selective, volatile, and unpredictable process” (157) of cultural exchange where new meanings are added while others might be erased, silenced, or simply misunderstood. For instance, the reader may be surprised to find out that even the anti-slavery rhetoric of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel may not be taken for granted, as the implications drawn from mobile narratives depend to a great extent on the “ideological underpinnings of such transfers and the contexts in which they occur” (125).

The last two chapters of the *Cultural Mobility* continue to explore the ways in which cultural objects and dominant national discourses tend to downplay the transformations that shape them, hiding the absences, biases and limitations that sometimes characterize mobility. Pál Nyíri’s study on Chinese citizens’ struggle for subjectivity focuses on the paradox between the increasing pressure for the Chinese to travel both within and outside modern China, and the official efforts to regulate this potentially transformative movement and its interpretation. On the one hand, this control is carried out by nationally oriented representations of minority cultures inside the carefully staged domestic “scenic spots.” On the other, various Chinese overseas bureaus, associations, and media outlets seek to contain migrant experiences within a uniquely ethnic concept of “globally mobile Chineseness” (191). Although braving free of these constraints may not be easy, Nyíri sees the role of independent leisure travel as “significant in shaping Chinese views of the world” (205). This increasingly popular pastime is gradually putting in motion—as in other instances examined in this volume—the unpredictable mechanisms of transcultural exchange both within and beyond Chinese national borders.

Friederike Pannewick’s final chapter traces the subtle borrowings and adaptations of Western theatrical elements that revived Middle Eastern performative traditions between the 1960s and 1980s. This experiment, as Pannewick argues, “was meant to foster both authenticity and modernity at the same time” (218), demonstrating, once again, the intriguing interplay of persistence and change in cultural mobility. The borrowed storytelling techniques of Brechtian political theater were themselves of Eastern origin, making their incorporation less conspicuous for a performative tradition whose very purpose has been to tap into the audiences’ experience of collective memory. Therefore, contemporary Arab performative art highlights the fact that even those cultural forms that are perceived as stable and expected to be autochthonous may, in fact, undergo hidden processes of transcultural interaction. This last example beautifully expresses what the previous chapters have already sketched out, namely that the experience of traditions and cultures is at once “firmly rooted, variously enacted, and syncretically extended” (245).

In conclusion, *Cultural Mobility* presents an attempt to revitalize and contemporize the field of literary and cultural studies in order to better account for the transcultural and transregional reality that is becoming more and more evident everywhere. As the range of topics studied in the volume clearly demonstrates, this condition, however, is not characteristic of our times alone, but may be seen at work in any historical context where people have taken their cultural objects and practices on the move. The Manifesto at the end of the book introduces the basic principles of this type of inquiry, centering on the peculiar dialectic between cultural change and persistence, a tension that Greenblatt emphasizes “cannot be resolved in any abstract theoretical way” (251). Therefore, *Cultural Mobility* does not represent an overarching theory or method of study, but rather an attempt to register singular moments of cultural transfer in order to highlight the contingent, nonlinear, and even hidden nature of cultural contact and change. While useful for the contextualization of culturally mobile objects and practices in any historical period, the relevance of these case

studies should only grow as literary works and other cultural products increasingly manifest the odd placelessness and mobility of their authors.